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Emma Dollar November 18, 2022

Modern Devotion

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An abstract of

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Abstract

Modern Devotion

by Emma Dollar

A lonely fisherman attracts drowned corpses. A town is overtaken with bugs that give people dreams. A group of children find a dead body. Love, grief, family, and nature intertwine over the course of this short story collection as the characters discover what it means to submit to the process of mourning their loved ones and who they themselves used to be.

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“I think instead that one mourns when one accepts the fact that the loss one undergoes will be one which changes you, changes you possibly forever, and that mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation, the full result of which you cannot know in advance.”

—Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics”

Human Tradition

The children found Tommy Hardy floating facedown in the pond on a foggy Sunday morning in March. The pond was cupped in the shallow valley behind the town high school, where after a particularly rainy season years before, the soccer team had emerged from the locker room to find their field had succumbed to a shallow layer of murky water. The local landscaping company had tried to suck the pond dry with their special high-powered vacuum, but once it had established itself the water refused to leave; it boiled down from the sky, seeped out of the ground, condensed from morning dew. The children liked to visit after the rainstorms because the clouds always picked up something new to drop in the pond: tadpoles, crayfish, even once a small alligator from the south. The night before they found Tommy Hardy, a sweet rain had washed the encroaching forest in fresh swathes of green and brown, and now dragonflies gilded the pond's surface, worms lathered the soil, and bullfrogs crooned out, "I love you, I love you, I love you," from behind the cattail stalks.

There were three children crouched on the egg-shaped rocks gathered along the pond banks, their church clothes pushed up around their knees and elbows. They splashed and scooped handfuls of mud into their mothers' washed-out mason jars as they hunted for salamanders in the reeds. It was one of these children, having just caught a wriggling, golden-eyed newt between his fingers, who suddenly pointed and called, "Hey, what's that in the water?"

The children dispersed along the outskirts of the forest in search of a stick long enough to drag the dark, bloated mass he'd seen bobbing in a tangle of branches onto the bank. After a few minutes, two of them stumbled back with the hulking arm of a fallen maple tree. They balanced and pinwheeled on the rocks as the tallest, a Cub Scout, stretched onto his tiptoes to snag the

branch on the black lump's clothes. A head and legs and arms condensed out of the water as they dragged the form to the shore. Tiny fish whirled around the body's distended stomach and sucked at its pale skin and wrinkled purple lips.

"Tommy?" one of the children mused nervously. He was a distant relative on Tommy's mother's side. Even dark and deformed with pond water, he could recognize the teen's signature shaggy haircut and Metallica t-shirt.

Dead Tommy did not respond. Brown liquid frothed around his swollen lips.

"What's wrong with him?" another child, the girl, asked. All three of them stared at the body. Tommy's right arm was twisted at an awkward angle from his shoulder, and the distant relative leaned forward to move it into a more natural position before he backed away again.

Only one child, the Cub Scout, knew with terrible certainty that Tommy Hardy was dead. His father's face had had that same glazed, empty look when he'd collapsed on their kitchen floor two years before. The heart attack had come on so fast that he hadn't even had a moment to close his eyes, or turn the oven burner off, and the pancakes they'd been making had charred into ash by the time the paramedics came.

The kitchen air had been bitter with the smell of burning pancake batter. Even after the doctors arrived, after they zipped the Cub Scout's father into one of those black bags they used for trash, after his mother guided him into the shower, the smell lingered. In his armpits, in his hair. In Tommy Hardy's swollen body.

"Do you think he's dead?" the distant relative asked.

"He's probably just knocked out," the girl said. They both glanced over to the Cub Scout for confirmation, but he was silent, his gaze fixed on the milky bruise of Tommy's face.

"He must've fallen in," the girl continued. "The water is really cold in this time of year. We have to heat him up again."

"We should get him warm," the distant relative agreed, nodding at her.

"We should c-call an adult," the Cub Scout said.

"My daddy's cabin is close to here, and he's got a phone," the girl offered. "We can call him there. He'll know what to do."

The girl's father hunted deer in the forest behind the high school during the summers, and he'd built a cabin there for overnight trips. There, they could light a fire to keep Tommy warm until the adults came. The Cub Scout wondered if the other children would notice how cold the teenager's body was. How when they squeezed his wrists to drag him over the ground, it felt like his skin would pop in their hands. He flexed his tongue over his teeth to work out his stutter and directed them each to take an arm.

In the kitchen, the Cub Scout's hands had fluttered uncertainly over his father's motionless chest as he willed his muscles to remember the steps to the CPR certification he'd learned in Scouts the month before. He clasped his fingers together and pressed them down. "One, two, three, four," he chanted. "Ah, ah, ah, ah, stayin' alive, stayin' alive," he panted, tears leaking down his cheeks and into his mouth as he lost count again. "One, two, three, four," he sobbed, tilting his father's head back and breathing into his open, surprised mouth.

His mother's footsteps thudded down the stairs and suddenly she was there, gasping, "What happened? What happened?"

"H-h-he just—just—just—c-c-collapsed-d," the Cub Scout said.

"Did you call 911?" his mother screamed. "Why didn't you call 911? Oh God, oh God."

When the adults came to the cabin, they would spare them the truth. They would say that the children had done the best they could. That Tommy was doomed from the start. “I’m sorry for yelling at you before, baby,” the Cub Scout’s mother had said as she held him later that night. “It wasn’t your fault. There was nothing you could do.”

“Do you think we’re hurting him?” the deer hunter’s daughter asked as Tommy’s body hitched over upturned rocks and tree roots.

“I don’t think so,” the Cub Scout answered.

“He’s out cold,” added the distant relative.

The cabin was only a five-minute walk from the pond, but it took the children nearly half an hour to drag Tommy’s body through the forest. The teenager’s pubescent growth spurt had stretched his body into a lanky mass of arms and legs, but now his belly was bloated and heavy like a pregnant woman’s baby bump. Wherever his skin wasn’t caked with mud, it was wrinkled as a child’s fingers after spending too long in the bath. Blood oozed out of the tiny cuts from where they’d pulled him over thorns and rocks and sticks with sharp edges. At the cabin, the children leaned against the walls to catch their breath before the deer hunter’s daughter groped around beneath the front step and pulled out a spare key. The children dragged Tommy Hardy over the step and into the main room, where they laid him in a slowly expanding pool of mud and water in front of the fireplace.

“I can build a fire,” the Cub Scout said, biting down on each of the words to keep his voice from breaking. “But I need sticks.” He waited for one of the other children to volunteer their help so that he did not have to go alone. Maybe he should’ve volunteered to stay with Tommy to spare the others, but his body itched to run, to get far away from the memory of sitting on the linoleum tiles holding one of his father’s cool, dry hands in his own as they waited

for the ambulances to arrive. He had found himself rubbing his fingers over a scab on his father's palm, expecting him to flinch and smack his hand away. But his father just kept staring up with that same look of shock, like he was surprised that his heart had given out on him at forty-one and that they'd never scraped off the popcorn ceiling and that his son's stomach was gurgling with hunger at a time like this.

"My dad's on his way," the deer hunter's daughter said, hanging up the landline in the corner of the room. "We should put him in warm clothes, too. My dad keeps his extras in the closet over there." She began to work Tommy's soaked, muddy Nikes off his feet.

"I'll change him," the distant relative offered. "But you have to leave. He's gonna be naked."

"Ew," she said, dropping Tommy's foot. "I'll go with you to get the sticks, then."

The distant relative peeled and yanked the soaked clothes off Tommy Hardy's cold, wrinkled skin. Secretly, he was glad that the deer hunter's daughter wasn't there to admire Tommy's lean, muscled arms and the long legs his own mother always promised the relative he would inherit. He balanced the teen's arms on his knees so they wouldn't flop down as he pulled the shirt over Tommy's head, but they kept thudding to the ground. Over and over again. A sick, sinking feeling pooled in the child's stomach, and his insides squeezed with a sudden urge to either vomit or piss himself. Instead, he layered three blankets over his distant cousin's body and wrapped himself in his own arms to disperse the cold touch of Tommy's wet skin.

The only other living creature in the cabin was the salamander the distant relative had caught just before he spotted Tommy's floating body. The salamander pressed against the glass of the mason jar. His eyes were intelligent and molten gold. The children had forgotten to poke holes in the lid of the jar, and with each panicked breath the salamander drew closer to

suffocation. Like the Cub Scout, he too knew that Tommy Hardy was dead. He had seen him die. The salamander had watched as Tommy, sixteen and so full of sex and alcohol and anger, so full of everything, stumbled down from the high school football game towards the pond. Tommy was so full he thought he might die. He had just lost his virginity to the sweet girl from his math class behind the sports equipment shed. His head was spinning and he needed to cool down. He needed to go into the pond. His other drunk friends didn't notice that he'd left even after the game ended and the spotlights went down and the victorious spectators dispersed to their respective celebrations. He, Tommy, needed to go into the pond. He went. His hot and heavy lungs filled with a rush of cool water. At first, he sank. The salamander had watched Tommy's eyes fade into pale brown, and he knew that he was doomed to the same fate as he drew the last of the oxygen from the mason jar.

The two other children returned with their handfuls of sticks and branches, and the Cub Scout balanced them into a tepee around shreds of newspaper from the cabin. There were matches on the mantle, and he held one up to the fragile structure until it began to burn.

"There," the Cub Scout said without enthusiasm. "He'll warm up in no time."

"My dad should be here soon," the deer hunter's daughter asked.

"We should try to wake him up," the distant relative said. He shook Tommy's shoulder. "Tommy? Wake up Tommy!"

Tommy's mouth fell open and let out a long, airy belch. Water dribbled out of the corner of his raisin lips.

"Tommy?" the Cub Scout said, his heart thumping with sudden doubt.

“Tommy,” Tommy repeated. His voice was deeper than the children remembered, almost baritone. Musical. He sounded out the syllables of his name like he was learning them again for the first time. “Tom-my.” His eyes were still not open.

“A-are you awake?” the Cub Scout asked. His voice cracked and stumbled over the question.

“I am awake,” Tommy said. “I am a-wake. Help me up,” he said. “Open my eyes.”

The children pushed him upright and leaned him against the slowly warming stones of the fireplace. The distant relative peeled his eyelids back. He knew Tommy’s eyes should be brown like his own, but now they were cloudy and stared at nothing. Like coffee with too much milk in it.

“Ah, that’s better.”

“Tommy, why were you in the pond?” asked the deer hunter’s daughter.

“I am not Tommy,” he said. His head lolled on his shoulders, and she propped it back up against the fireplace. “But I am Tommy,” he corrected himself.

“Which is it then?” the Cub Scout demanded defensively. He was about to tell the other children they should go back outside to wait for the adults when Tommy spoke again.

“You shall call me Toad,” he said. He let out another burp, then farted.

“Eww,” the deer hunter’s daughter complained.

“That’s stupid,” the distant relative argued. “You’re Tommy. We’ll call you Tommy.”

Stop playing a joke on us, the Cub Scout wanted to say, and he practiced the words over and over in his head so they would come out whole, unbroken. It’s not funny anymore.

“Maybe being in the pond for so long made him go crazy,” the deer hunter’s daughter whispered to them.

Tommy's mouth fell open as though his jaw had been unhinged. The children could see that his teeth were tinged an unnatural pink. They peered inside the teenager's mouth and saw a pair of blinking gold eyes staring back at them, nestled just behind Tommy's swollen purple tongue. "Toad," he said again, and burped.

"Tommy has a frog in his mouth!" the distant relative screamed.

"Don't be afraid," the toad said, not unkindly. Tommy blinked. It seemed like it took him an entire minute to slide his eyelids back and forth. He opened and closed his mouth again. "It's good that I'm here now. It's good that you've pulled me out of the water and warmed me up again. I will be like brand new."

"M-maybe we—we should leave," the Cub Scout managed to get out. He smoothed the ten badges on the neatly pressed uniform he wore nearly everywhere. It was not because he had few other clothes. He was only three badges away from becoming a Boy Scout, which meant he was smarter and older than the other children. Which meant he should not stutter.

"We should call Tommy's mom and dad," the deer hunter's daughter said nervously.

"No need, no need," said the toad. Tommy flopped one arm up and then the other, like a puppet on marionette strings. "I'm getting the hang of this now, see. Just let me wake up, warm up a bit more."

And it was true—the children saw that Tommy's skin was a bit less purple, his eyes less cloudy, his belly less bloated. He looked more like the Tommy Hardy they knew, and less like a dead body floating facedown in the pond. The children relaxed a bit. Maybe the eyes in Tommy's mouth were just a trick of the light. Maybe Tommy was trying to scare them out of telling his parents on him. They had almost convinced themselves of this when Tommy's tongue

flicked out and snatched a fly from the air, rolled it around in his mouth for a moment, and swallowed.

"I'm scared," the deer hunter's daughter whimpered.

The toad himself was only just adjusting to Tommy Hardy's unfamiliar body. He had been a tadpole many summers ago, and a toad for much longer, but he had yet to leave the pond behind the high school. Every Sunday morning, he watched the children bike down to the pond to hunt for water creatures. He kicked his own legs in imitation of their hops and jumps between the rocks on the bank. He grew to love the children's movements, the swings of their arms and the swaying of their bodies. So when Tommy Hardy stumbled down to the pond that fateful night, the toad could not help but love him too. Love the way he burned delirious with alcohol as he lurched into the water. Love the way he kicked and twisted and splashed until he finally lay still. The toad sat on top of the island of the teen's body and sang to him, "I love you, I love you, I love you." Then he crawled inside Tommy Hardy's open, surprised mouth. As the children dragged Tommy out of the pond and warmed him beside the fire, the toad felt new and delicious parts of his body begin to thaw and gain feeling again. This toad could love Tommy Hardy, each and every part of him, so intimately, like he had never been loved before.

The children should not be afraid. He was Toad, who they had listened to so many times before in the muddy pond. He was Tommy, who they had played with at neighborhood baseball games and barbecues.

"I'm starting to get the hang of this," he said again, heaving one leg up and then another so his knees were bent in front of his chest. As the fire dried the pond out of his wrinkled skin and bloated limbs, Tommy found his balance on his long, gangly legs and rose far above his former toad height. The children suddenly became ants in his eyes. "Ah, here we go."

"Are you okay?" the distant relative asked meekly.

"Just dandy," Tommy said. "Look at me go!" He spun on one leg, did a little jig, hopped up and down in the air. He no longer looked dead at all. His purple skin had faded into a soft peach pink, and his eyes darkened back into brown. His stomach deflated and even his hair dried blond and shaggy, like it always did.

The children looked at each other uncertainly, each wondering if they had just imagined the toad sitting in the back of Tommy's mouth after all. "I guess we can go back to the pond, then," the Cub Scout said finally, remembering his father jerking on the kitchen floor. Remembering the look on Tommy's face when they dragged him out of the water. Remembering how in the months after his father died, Mrs. Hardy had brought them a frozen lasagna every week until their freezer was completely packed full of her foil-wrapped dishes. If Tommy died, the Cub Scout thought, his mother would have to cook lasagnas every week to repay her. He didn't know if she had it in her.

"Are you sure," the distant relative paused, looking the Cub Scout directly in his eyes as he lowered his voice. "Are you sure Tommy is *okay*?" he said meaningfully.

Tommy was alive. So what if there was a frog in his mouth? The Cub Scout had had one stuck in his throat, swallowing his words, spitting up letters, stumbling and stuttering, for over a year now. More than anything, he wished there had been a toad to bring his father back to life, to tell him, "I love you, I love you, I love you," every night before bed.

"The adults will know what to do," the Cub Scout said instead.

At that moment, the cabin door slammed open and the deer hunter himself rushed in. His daughter yelled, "Daddy!" and ran to him in relief. Here was the adult who could explain. Who could understand strange, cold Tommy and the toad in his mouth.

"What's going on here?" the deer hunter demanded, glaring at each of the children individually. "Thomas, are you alright?"

Tommy nodded solemnly. "Yes, sir."

"I heard your skin was purple and your lips blue," the deer hunter said suspiciously. "What were you doing in that pond in the first place?"

The toad considered all the answers he had: the alcohol, the sweat, the girl that all lived inside Tommy. That now lived inside the toad as well. Instead he said, "I don't know, sir. I wanted to go for a swim, and the water was just so cold—" he paused for a moment and blushed. He thought about all the phrases he'd learned from listening to visitors at the pond. "Well, thank God they found me when they did."

"There was a frog in Tommy's mouth, Daddy," the little girl said.

"No there's not," Tommy argued instantly. "You were just seeing things."

"He's right," the Cub Scout said, stepping forward. He had a sudden, terrible notion that if he did not say anything, Tommy Hardy would drop dead to the floor right at that moment, and a toad would crawl out of his mouth and hop away. "That's Tommy. Just Tommy."

Tommy nodded at him, a pleased smile twisting his pink, human lips, and the deer hunter relented. "Alright," he said. "I'll drive you kids home."

The Cub Scout wondered: how was it that after lying so perfectly still among the leaves that they did not even twitch, after sighting a deer through the lens of his rifle and pressing his finger to the trigger, after stripping the animal down to the barest elements of life, to blood, flesh, and bone, then cooking, chewing, and shitting it out into the soil where the deer's sons would graze its nutrient-fed plants, how was it that after all that, the deer hunter could not see Tommy had changed? No, after learning the rules of life that way, the deer hunter would never

understand how they could be upended. The Cub Scout looked at the salamander, curled up at the bottom of the mason jar as though it were merely asleep. The adult did not know what to do, he thought. The adult did not know anything at all.

The deer hunter gripped the Cub Scout on the shoulder. “Good work keeping everyone calm, son,” he said, then walked ahead to where his daughter waited by the open cabin door.

The Cub Scout imagined that he too could choose to become something new; he could let go of the CPR badge he’d torn from his uniform, his stutter, the smell of burned pancakes. He could fold himself into a toad’s mouth and swim in lazy circles around the pond for the rest of his life. The toad would soon regret his decision to become Tommy Hardy, he thought. Toads probably didn’t have to worry about whether or not they had killed their father or who they would become without him.

“Tommy,” the Cub Scout whispered. The older boy turned to look at him. “Do toads have fathers?”

Tommy shook his head. “No,” he said. “What’s that?”

“You don’t know?” the Cub Scout said. “I’m sorry.” And he was, because his father had been the one who taught him how to build a fire, helped him practice knots for his badge test, read him bedtime stories at night, showed him how to place chocolate chips in the shape of dinosaurs on his pancakes, even though they almost always burned because the Cub Scout took so long to lay them out. His father had made him a cardboard badge for pancake design expertise and pinned it to his uniform so that all the other Cub Scouts would be jealous of the skill that only he and his father shared. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “Maybe Tommy’s father will teach you how to make pancakes.”

“Pan-cakes,” Tommy said.

The Cub Scout nodded and smiled at him. As they walked out of the cabin, he noticed the fog had lifted. The trees hung low with Spanish moss, and the damp forest underbelly of leaves and twigs softened beneath his feet. A lone goose honked and called from the surface of the now-still pond. The Cub Scout breathed in the moist air and saw it all from new heights.

Meat Factory, Colorized

I found Charlie in a box down by the river the summer after eighth grade, the day of my brother Mateo's seventeenth birthday. It was a river where people dumped lost things. My friends and I went there sometimes to search for bicycle gears and old men's watches among the rusting junk. That June, the Florida air was so heavy that the cardboard boxes piled along the bank softened and sagged beneath its weight. The heat plastered my baseball jersey to my back and chafed pink lines along where my belt had become a strip of wet rawhide.

This time, Mama had taken me down to the river to look for a puppy. The inner-city strays, with their bellies hanging low enough to scrape the concrete, often gave birth in the boxes of molding blankets and moth-eaten clothes. Most of them had already been emptied by the homeless guys who walked along Main Street shaking flea-ridden puppies at passing cars. "Only ten dollars," they would shout.

"Why don't we just go to the intersection to get a puppy?" I asked Mama as I cleaved my foot through another soggy, empty box. I was already dreaming of excuses to knock on the door to my friend Ronny's white stucco mansion, where his mom kept the air conditioning set to a cool sixty-nine degrees through all ten rooms of the house. At home we only had fans that swirled the hot air around like a thick, sticky soup.

"Those are dirty dogs," she said, bending to rustle through the contents of another box. Her back bowed like the limp tongues of the palm tree fronds that drooped over the city streets. I knew better than to mention that the dogs we were looking for were the same as the ones on Main Street. Mama didn't want to be seen two blocks down from her hospital, still in her loose pink scrubs, buying a skinny mutt right in front of the storefronts advertising perfectly groomed

chihuahuas and poodles. I bet those stores have AC, I thought bitterly, and imagined sticking my head in our freezer as soon as we got home.

"All empty," Mama mumbled to herself, rubbing her forehead. "The Molinas had a litter last month. Where are those dogs?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of the boxes farther down the river shuffle and twitch. I slid down the muddy bank closer to the water, where the alligators left teeth marks in discarded beer cans. "Valentine," she called out after me.

"Be right back," I yelled. Mud squelched into my baseball cleats and I wished, not for the first time, that I had changed after practice. The box shifted again and began to squeal.

"Mama," I shouted. "I found a baby pig!"

And there he was. His name came to me as if in a dream: Charlie, like Charlie Gehringer, the Mechanical Man hall-of-famer who'd been Papa's favorite pitcher in the league. He was smaller than any pig I'd seen before. I could count his ribs even through the mud crusted in his coarse pink skin. At first he cowered in the back of the box, but as I gently pet his head and worked the dried dirt out of his hair, he slowly nuzzled into my touch. He huffed out a breath of hot, moist air into my palm.

"That's a runt," Mama said, coming up behind me. "He wouldn't even make a good sausage."

"He's going to die if we leave him here," I said, thinking of the alligators with their sharp, glittering ropes of teeth slinking out of the river, always hungry. Charlie looked up at us with his bottomless black eyes, his snout twitching as he sniffed at the air. "Look at him! Please, Mama? I swear I'll take care of him."

"He's supposed to be Mateo's dog," she said, raising an eyebrow at me.

Mateo didn't really want just any dog, I knew. What he wanted was a pitbull, or a rottweiler, or a bulldog. Something with sharp teeth and anger to match his own. Something that would make him feel powerful.

"I know," I said, lifting Charlie out of the box and cuddling him to my chest. He was already small, made smaller by days without food, and he reeked of the polluted river stench that saturated the neighborhood on hot summer days. Mateo would hate him.

"A *pig*?" he shouted as Charlie shuffled across our living room, mapping it out by smells and crumbs. He paused to sniff the red stain by the couch where I'd spilled Gatorade last week. "I wanted a dog, Mama!"

"A pig is easier than a dog, hijo," Mama pleaded. "We can feed it the scraps. We don't have to buy it a bed or food or toys." She pushed my gift for him, a used copy of the new Call of Duty game clumsily wrapped in Christmas paper, across the table towards him. "Look what your brother gave you. Maybe you two could play together."

Mateo's face flushed a deep pink as he shook his head, breathing in deeply to stop the tears trembling at the corners of his eyes. "You and Papa never loved me," he hissed at her. "You would've gotten *him* a dog." He thrust an accusing finger towards where I squatted on the floor with Charlie.

"Dude, chill. It's not Mama's fault," I said, standing up and crossing my arms.

"Mateo—" she started.

"I'm going out," he said, turning away from her. "And you better not get too attached to that pig either, gordito. When it's big enough I'm going to sell it to the butcher to make bacon." He licked his lips and smirked at me.

"Shut the fuck up, Mateo," I said.

"Valentine!"

"He always swears, Mama," I argued, still staring at my brother. He held eye contact for another moment, daring me to break first, before he slapped the kitchen counter and laughed.

"Alright, Val," he said. "Let's go out to the field. It's my birthday."

The baseball field was a thin, scraggly piece of brown lawn looped in chain-link fence at the end of our road, behind Mrs. Engel's old house. A thin strip of mangrove trees spread from the outfield and sank into the river, which wound between our neighborhood and the rest of Miami. The summer rain that came like clockwork at three nearly every day had washed some of the heat out of the air, and now the older boys gathered drinking Budweisers and tossing a ball around the beaten red diamond. Ronny, whose older brother hung out with Mateo, peeled himself off the fence and ran over to me.

"Did those college recruiters come back for him yet?" he asked as Mateo walked out onto the field. The other boys cheered him on as he got down on one knee and shotgunned a beer.

"Not yet," I said, watching the boys split into teams and arrange themselves around the diamond. Ronny's brother stood listlessly in right outfield, kicking at a tuft of grass. Mateo lifted the bat like it was an extension of himself, twirled it through his fingers as though it weighed nothing. Crouched.

"Hey, did you hear I have a pig now?" I asked.

"Really?" Ronny said, impressed. "How big is it?"

"He's small now, but he's gonna be huge," I bragged. "We found him down by the river."

The ball cracked against the bat like a gunshot, and our eyes followed as it arced over the field and into the trees beyond. Mateo turned to us, the grin on his face sharp like a rottweiler's. "Go get it, little piggies," he taunted.

Ronny and I jumped off the fence and ran into the woods. I watched Mateo circle the bases, his arms outstretched to coerce cheers from an invisible crowd.

"Your brother's insane," Ronny said beside me.

"Yeah," I agreed, puffing my chest out proudly. When Papa played with us, Mateo would always bat first because he was older. He'd swing until he missed. He'd swing until I cried to Mama that it was my turn and she made Papa switch us out. In a few years, I could be just like him: the star hitter, .310 batting average, D1 college prospect. Not Ronny. Not his brother. No matter how many baseball camps and travel teams their mom paid for, they couldn't replicate the natural Sanchez talent Papa always boasted about.

"I found the ball," Ronny called, waving it towards me. In the game, the next batter had already struck out. It wasn't fair to be so harsh to Ronny, I reminded myself. He gave me his extra Marlins hat for my birthday. He hit three more homeruns than I had this season.

"Wanna try to steal some beers?" I asked him.

"Hell yeah," Ronny said, his grin splitting his freckles wide. Another ball smacked off the bat behind us and crashed into the leaves next to my foot. I heard Mateo laugh, pictured him balancing on the balls of his feet as he prepared for another pitch. Ronny and I traded sour sips of beer and pinch-hit for the older boys until they were out of drinks and everyone dispersed for dinner a few hours later. Then it was just me and Mateo left, tossing balls back and forth through the dark, humid air.

"You'll like Charlie," I said, aiming a fastball at Mateo's face. He raised his arm and folded it into the glove like it was nothing. "He's so cute."

"What are you, five?" Mateo shook his head. "I don't want to talk about fucking Charlie."

"I picked him out, you know," I said. "Not Mama." The next ball whizzed past my face, nearly catching on my cheekbone.

"Then you're just as much of a dumbass as her," Mateo said.

"Asshole," I spat.

"At least I'm an asshole who's good at baseball," he snapped back. He leaned down and picked up another ball, gave me an easy toss into the glove. "Just shut up sometimes, okay, Valentine? You never know when to shut up."

I bit my lip to keep the angry tears burning my eyes at bay. Mateo and I both got the habit from Mama, who always cried when she yelled at Papa. I bounced the baseball in my hand and imagined it smacking right into his mouth, right into that taunting little smirk, as I said, "No, *you* shut up, Mateo."

But the ball sank right back into his glove, like it knew it belonged there.

"You're holding your elbow all wrong when you throw," he said finally after a few more tosses in silence. "You'll get a lot more speed if you do it like this. I can show you."

I accepted his apology with a nod and mimicked his arm motion as he talked me through the throw. When he wasn't at bat Mateo played centerfield, and he was legendary for yanking balls out of midair and sling-shotting them back to the basemen. "That's good," he said, and I felt a smile inadvertently dissipate the remains of my anger. "Do it again."

After a few more minutes, Mateo asked, "You think Mama made empanadas for my birthday?"

"Maybe," I shrugged as nonchalantly as I could. We met each other's eyes, stared for a moment, and then took off running back towards the house.

Mateo beat me by a few seconds, crashing in through the front door and heading for the kitchen. Charlie, who had been circling Mama's ankles as she flipped the empanadas out of the pan, waddled after Mateo and wheezed at him until he brushed a piece of fried dough onto the floor.

"I saw that," I said smugly as Charlie inhaled the crumb and nudged Mateo's ankle for more. "You like him."

Mateo glared at me and loaded another empanada onto his plate. "Hey! Leave some for me!" I protested.

"Mateo, there's three for you and two for your brother," Mama said.

"I'm bigger, so I need more food," Mateo argued. He kept four on his plate and went to his room, slamming the door behind him.

"That's so not fair," I said, walking over to the counter and scooping the last empanada onto my plate. It was still warm and shiny from the oil. "Has Charlie had anything else to eat?"

Mama shook her head, staring at Mateo's closed door. "There aren't any scraps tonight, mijo."

"He'll never get big if he doesn't eat," I muttered as my own stomach shifted and gurgled. What if *I* never got bigger because I didn't eat? I tore off a piece of empanada and crouched down next to Charlie, letting him sniff it out of my hand. He ate the scrap and licked my palm for more. "That's all, buddy," I cooed at him, scratching behind his floppy ears. "Oh, no. You're so hungry. Okay." I ripped off another piece and watched him chew. Already the impression of his ribs seemed less pronounced, the flesh fuller. He won't be a runt, I thought proudly, letting him nose another piece of food out of my hand. Tomorrow I'd go to Ronny's

house for lunch. Ronny's mom always made huge lunches, more than he and his brother could ever eat on their own.

"Mateo's such a jerk," I said, standing up and filling my mouth with food. "If I had two empanadas, I could give a whole one to Charlie."

Mama didn't respond. Her eyes were watery and distant as she leaned against the counter. Papa would never have let Mateo get away with taking my share, I thought resentfully. Mateo would never have dared try.

The kitchen lights deepened the wrinkles lining Mama's cheeks and mouth, which I had always assumed were from laughing. Now they just made her seem old. She looked, I realized, like Papa had at the end, when his skin had shriveled tight around his skull like a raisin.

"Hey, Mama, I got this," I said, forcing my voice to sound casual. I leaned over to turn off the burner where the oil still hummed in its pan. "You can go to bed early if you want."

"No, no," she said, finally turning to face me. "I'll help you, chiquito."

"Please, Mama," I pleaded, failing to keep the high-pitched tremble out of my words. "Just go to bed."

She nodded and kissed me goodnight, her lips like paper against my cheek. I wiped down the counters, poured the oil into a bowl to cool, washed the pan, wiped down the counter and washed the pan again so that Mama wouldn't get up to do it over. When the crack of light under her door finally went dark, I picked up Charlie and my baseball mitt and walked quietly to my room.

On the other side of the wall, Mateo was laughing and playing Call of Duty with his friends on the headset of his old Xbox. I closed my eyes and listened to my stomach gurgling with hunger, Charlie sniffing around my room, the soft *whirr* of the fan stirring the air. Before

Papa got sick, it would've been me in the room with Mateo competing to rack up the most kills. After the diagnosis there was no more time. Mateo couldn't play videogames with me because he had to practice for the next big game. Mateo couldn't toss the ball with me because he had to get five more hits with Papa before he could eat dinner. Mateo couldn't hang out with me because he needed to be good enough to be a star, to get signed to a major league team, to pay for Papa's chemo treatments.

Even when the doctors said only a few months left, and Mama's nurse friends brought me consolatory chocolate puddings from the cafeteria every visit, all Papa cared about was Mateo's baseball. "Papa wanted me to practice my wind up before bed," Mateo said when I held out an Xbox controller to him one night.

"He's staying late at the hospital tonight," I pleaded, already loading the game into the console. "Just one?"

We were still playing when Mama pushed Papa into the house a few hours later. Curled up in his wheelchair, he looked like a shrunken, oversized baby. "Mateo," he wheezed. "Why aren't you practicing?"

"I did, earlier," Mateo said, glancing at me.

"Show me," he said.

"Papa, come on," Mateo said, throwing the controller on his bed. "It's almost midnight. I'm tired."

"Not tired enough for videogames," Papa said. "Do you want your body to rot away? Like mine? Look at me, Mateo."

"Now's not the time, Luis," Mama whispered.

"Look at me," Papa said.

Mateo's cheeks were wet with tears when he finally met Papa's eyes. They had the same ones, but now Papa's had darkened into black in the pits of his sunken face.

"Now let's see that wind up," he said.

"That's enough," Mama interrupted, dragging the wheelchair back out of the room. Their furious whispers trailed them into the kitchen until I got off the bed and closed the door.

"You shouldn't have put on the game," Mateo said finally, his cheeks pink from scrubbing out the tears.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, climbing into bed next to him.

"Don't be," he said, turning away from me and reaching up to shut off the lights. Now when I closed my eyes, I could pretend Charlie's body heat was my brother lying next to me like he used to. I slept dreaming of the Mechanical Man striking Mateo out with every effortless pitch.

Mateo had a baseball game later that week, an official one, on the nice high school field with green turf and a crimson diamond that they locked at night. The girls would scream when he ran out onto the field, all white and shining in his newly pressed uniform. The recruiters in the stands would nod their heads in approval as he smacked homerun after homerun out of the park. I stayed home with Charlie to teach him tricks. *Jurassic Park* was on TV in the background, and even though he cowered in fear every time the dinosaurs roared, I kept it on so that he'd learn to get tougher.

"Charlie, roll over," I commanded, holding a slimy piece of lettuce over his head. I'd guided him through the move a couple times before, but he seemed to only understand that he should throw his body around on the floor and threaten the coffee table's precarious arrangement

of dirty cups. Even though it'd barely been a week since we found him as a scraggly runt, Charlie had unfolded to a height nearly as tall and twice as thick as my thighs.

"Charlie, twirl," I said. He careened in a circle and then stared expectantly at the lettuce wilting in my hand. That trick had already won us free food at two vendors in the city, and I was certain that roll over would yield even more. They'd be dragging out their carts and raising their blue and yellow striped umbrellas when Charlie and I walked through Main Street before baseball practice, and if they were in a good mood, they'd exchange a snack for a trick. Charlie's lettuce had been scavenged from the hamburger stand outside the fifty-cent laundromat. As he chewed it, he stood a little taller.

Mateo barged in as the T-rex attacked on screen, red dirt smeared over his uniform like blood. "Get out of here, piggies," he sneered when he saw us. "You know what? I need twenty bucks. Give me twenty bucks."

"Shut up, Mateo," I said, feeding Charlie a piece of dog food I stole from Ronny's house. "I can't hear the movie."

His eyes darkened and he moved closer, towering over us. At this distance his face really did look bloody, like it had been torn open. Maybe it had. He'd hit the ground particularly hard going in for a save, caught what would've been a homerun ball and won the game. Or maybe it was after the game in the parking lot outside, his face pressed against the gravelly pavement. He'd hit the most homeruns, after all. He'd blocked every ball in centerfield. The boys on the other team, jealous boys, huddled around him and laughed as he squirmed.

"You can't do anything to me or I'll tell Mama," I said, wishing my voice didn't crack. Ignoring the blood that trickled down his nose and into his teeth. His breath was hot and

dangerous against my cheek when he leaned in close. He had not saved the homerun ball and won the game.

Our eyes met for only a moment and then Mateo lunged. I caught his arms in my hands, straining against his weight as he shoved into me. I hooked my knee around his back and tried to twist on top of him, but he wriggled out of the hold. We'd done this so many times when we were younger that my muscles remembered the moves almost without thinking. I wrestled his head back under my arm and crawled over his back, pinning him with my body weight.

"Okay, Val, let me go," Mateo gasped.

"I won," I crowed, pressing him into the ground as he twisted beneath me. "Now you owe me twenty bucks."

"Val," Mateo wheezed.

"Are you…crying?" I asked, squinting down at the red wetness lining his eyes. I released his head and leaned away so he could scramble to his feet, his chest heaving.

His kick was hard and fast. I felt the breath whoosh out of me as I slammed into the ground, Mateo's foot in my side. "Ow," I gasped, my mouth opening and closing uselessly as I tried to suck in air. His leg smashed into my chest again and a star of pain whited out my vision. "Mateo, stop! That hurts!"

"Chill, Val, it wasn't even that hard," Mateo said, wiping at his eyes. I reached up and covered my face as I wheezed and gasped for breath, but only sobs came out.

"I was just joking," Mateo said again, sagging back into the couch. I laid on my back and stared upside-down at the front door as I willed myself not to vomit. Open the door, Mama, I thought, narrowing my eyes as it blurred in and out of focus. Please come home. Please open the door.

Charlie nuzzled into my chest, his heart thumping hard and fast against mine. I closed my eyes and imagined Mama holding me instead, one hand tracing circles on my forehead, the other pressing the freezer-burned bag of peas that Mateo and I had dubbed "Pain Peas" when we were little against my side. She'd stay home from work like she did when I had the stomach bug and we'd watch TV on the couch all day: Spongebob in the morning, telenovelas in the afternoon, ESPN at night when Papa came home.

"Do you want the Pain Peas?" Mateo asked finally.

"Fuck…you," I wheezed. I wobbled to my feet, my stomach rolling with nausea as I stretched my side to stand up. In my room, Charlie and I inspected my skin in the mirror. It was still pink from where he'd hit me, but it would be purple soon. Maybe even green.

The pain was worse when I stood, so I turned the lights off and crawled into bed with Charlie. "I can't believe he really hit me," I whispered to myself, testing the words in my mouth. Mateo hit me. "I won't play with him anymore. That's it. I'm done with him."

Charlie huffed, licking the remains of a tear track from my cheek. "Get off," I ordered, pulling the covers over my head even as he nudged and pushed at me to let him in. "Just leave me alone, Charlie."

"I won't cry, I won't cry, I won't cry," I chanted, holding my breath to force the hiccups down. "He'll be sorry. He'll be sorry when we're so much better than him, Charlie." I lifted the covers and let him squirm into position against my chest. When he stretched out next to me, his torso was almost as long as mine. Charlie might get so big that I could sit on his back, I thought. We would ride to county fairs across the country and win all their prizes. Mateo would beg for forgiveness when he saw how great we were. We would be so big and powerful and untouchable that he could never hit us again.

Mateo cracked open my door and leaned against the frame, the kitchen light framing him in blurred shadow through my eyelashes. “I’m sorry, Val,” he said. “I didn’t mean to hit you so hard.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to smooth my breathing into the slow, steady movements of pretend sleep.

“We can play a game after practice tomorrow,” he continued. I shushed the excited heartbeat that kicked up in response. “Just don’t tell Mama, okay? It wasn’t that hard. Yeah. We lost the game tonight, by the way. Sleep well.”

The next day, the bruise stretched from my left armpit to the side of my stomach. The skin began as a deep purple color veined with red, like a rotting eggplant. Coach made me do ten suicide runs across the field when I couldn’t explain why I didn’t want to play. “Let’s give you a reason, then,” he said. He let me stop after the fifth lap, when I leaned over and vomited into the grass. I watched the older boys practice from the dugout for the next week. I watched Mateo. He was big and strong and knocked pitch after flawless pitch out of the park with that same hard, fast swing he hit me with.

By the end of July, Charlie was so big that he barely fit in the house anymore. I cleared him a space in our tiny, crowded backyard next to our molding plastic playhouse and slept curled against his side every dry summer night. Mama had to start hanging the laundry in the neighbor’s yard so that he wouldn’t chew our clothes. The people in town loved to watch us walk together, the skinny Sanchez boy and his giant pig. All the vendors that sold to the tourists on Main Street fed us hot dogs and churros and tacos to compete for whose food Charlie liked best.

"That pig is getting fat," Mateo said, licking his lips. We were sitting in the backyard in the shade of Charlie's body, the spoils of our walk through the city spread out on the grass before us. "It's almost time to take him down to the butcher."

I ignored him, ripping another piece of falafel to feed Charlie. The halal vendor liked him especially. He would pat Charlie's wide pink flank and say, "This is the king of all pigs. The king of all pigs right here in Miami!"

"Or maybe I'll just do it myself," Mateo continued, biting into a fried plantain. "That's what a man would do. Open him right from the belly to the head."

"Mama, tell him to stop," I complained. Oblivious, Charlie licked at the butterflies resting on his snout.

"Mateo, stop bothering your brother," she called from inside the house.

"Remember when you used to throw up when you saw blood?" I taunted, smirking at him. "I'm sure you'd make a great butcher."

Mateo's eyes narrowed and he pulled his fist back like he was about to swing at me. I flinched away, but then he paused and his gaze flicked towards Charlie, towering over us, and then to me again. His smile slipped back on just as easily as it first disappeared. "Let's go to the baseball field," he said. "We can teach Charlie how to play catch."

I stared at him, waiting for the fist to fall, but he just turned to go inside. He returned a moment later with our mitts, a bat, and the baseball Papa had given him years before. "Come on, beasts," Mateo said, slapping Charlie's side.

"Let's go, Charlie," I said, petting his head. He heaved out of the body-shaped depression he'd formed in the only part of the yard where our neighbor's palm tree shaded the wilting brown grass. When he squeezed through the narrow space between our house and the fence, the

wood on either side groaned and bowed outwards. By the time I pushed him out into the street, Mateo was already a few feet ahead of us and hadn't stopped to check if we were following.

After a few minutes of trudging in silence, he finally said, "You know, Georgia Tech offered me a full ride next year. For baseball."

My stomach sank. "I thought you wanted to go to University of Florida."

"Georgia Tech's better. Those guys get signed right out of college."

"You'll be far away," I said.

Mateo laughed bitterly. "You won't miss me. Mama won't either." He kicked a rock down the street. "I have to get out of this stupid fucking town or I'll die."

"I'll miss you," I argued, but even as I said it, I wasn't sure I believed myself. I thought of the bruise that had stained my side a sickly green for weeks. I thought of him stealing Charlie away to the local butcher. I thought of how I might eat four empanadas instead of one when he was gone. I hated myself for wanting it. Mateo glanced back at me, and I saw in his eyes that he didn't believe me either.

"Well, I'll come visit you then," I said.

"I don't want you anywhere near me," Mateo said. He looked away towards the baseball field, hidden by the rows of sagging one-story houses that lined the outskirts of the city. "Every time I look at you, I see this place. I see Papa."

"What'd Papa ever do to you that was so bad anyways?" I snapped. "He didn't hit you. He didn't do anything but make you better at baseball."

"What, are you jealous?" Mateo taunted, glaring at me. "You should be grateful that you're never gonna be as good as me. That you don't have to run laps around the block and get a hundred hits before you can eat dinner." He shook his head. "You're just a dumbass kid."

"Wow. I remind you of Papa?" I said, my side seething with the memory of its bruise. Papa's dark hair curled around Mateo's temples. His brown eyes set into my brother's. His dimple in his cheeks. Good riddance, I thought. Let them both live out their baseball dreams at Georgia Tech. "Look in a fucking mirror."

"Listen to you, Val," Mateo said, laughing to himself. "You're not so different from us either."

At the field ahead, Ronny and his brother were already practicing their swings. I watched Ronny smack a ball across the outfield, over the chain-link fence, and into the woods beyond. Even from far away, I could make out his brother's excited, "Homerun!" as he clapped him on the back. You made me this way, I wanted to say to Mateo. We could have been like that before.

"Hey, Val!" Ronny shouted. "Look at that beast! He's huge!"

I smiled proudly. "Right? He's almost as big as my house."

Charlie knelt down in the scraggly grass of the left outfield and began to chew at the dandelion puffs, always hungry. I watched Mateo walk over to Ronny's brother and dap him up.

"Could you pitch me something easy?" I asked Ronny.

"Sure, dude," he said. "Do you wanna go to the plate?"

"No, here is fine," I said, angling myself toward my brother. With a direct pitch I could smack the ball right down the field, right into Mateo's cocky, self-assured smirk. Ronny gave me a low ball and I sent it into my brother's thigh instead.

"Ow! Fuck, Val!" Mateo shouted, hopping on one foot as he clutched his leg. "What the hell?"

"You did that on purpose?" Ronny asked, raising his eyebrows.

"He deserved it," I muttered, bending down to pet Charlie so that he wouldn't see the pink shame in my cheeks. Ronny said something else to me, but I couldn't hear. I was watching Mateo turn towards us, winding up for a swing. The air *whoosh*ed past as the ball went wide and bounced in the grass by Charlie's head.

"Mateo!" I yelled.

"Aww, did I scare the piggie?" Mateo asked mockingly, miming tears as Ronny's brother laughed behind him. Next to me, Charlie grunted and started chewing Mateo's baseball.

"Hey!" Mateo's smirk dropped instantly. Papa had given him that ball when he'd first started playing, and since then the white leather had stained brown with dust and Mama had replaced the red stitching twice. Papa had signed it in big, looping Sharpie, "Luis Sanchez," and below that, "Mateo Sanchez," in my brother's five-year-old chicken scratch.

"Stupid pig. That's my ball!" Mateo started running towards us, swinging the bat in his hands.

"Leave him alone, asshole," I said, crouching in front of Charlie and tugging at the drool-soaked ball locked in his jaw. Charlie continued to chew unperturbed.

"Get the fuck away, Valentine," Mateo ordered, holding the bat in a practiced stance. Left hand under right. The violence of the swing sang to be released.

"No," I said.

"Fine," Mateo shrugged. The bat smashed into Charlie's side before I even registered its path through the air. Ronny and I shouted, but Charlie's shriek drowned us both out. The chewed ball rolled out of his mouth as he gnashed his thick teeth together. Already purple began to gather in a line across his flank where my brother had hit him. Mateo faltered midway through

raising the bat for another swing, cringing at Charlie's incessant, high-pitched squeals. In that split second Charlie lunged for his arm.

Mateo screamed and smacked his fist against Charlie's snout, but he refused to let go. I imagined the bones cracking. Pig's teeth were strong and Charlie was hungry. I imagined Mateo tasted good. Delicious, even, compared to grass and baseballs.

"Valentine!" Mateo screamed. "Fucking help me!"

That bruise on my side had simmered there for weeks, and with every day it had gotten hungrier. Ripples of purple ebbed in and out over my ribs, under my armpit, through the fleshy part of my stomach, consuming the skin and craving more. Now it wanted to see Mateo on his knees, helpless, like I had been so many times before. I hesitated for a moment too long before Ronny yelled, "Val!"

I knelt next to my brother, who was slumped over in pain as Charlie slowly worked his jaw over his arm. The bat lay discarded on the ground where Mateo had dropped it when Charlie first bit him. Up close, I had to breathe through my mouth so that I wouldn't gag at the iron smell of Mateo's torn wet flesh. "Charlie," I soothed, petting his snout. "Hey, buddy. It's okay. I'm here. You can let go now."

Charlie's beady eyes swiveled wildly before they finally locked in on me, and I nodded encouragingly. "If you'll let go, I'll give you a treat," I said, keeping my eyes focused on his so that they wouldn't drift downwards, into the puddle of blood leaking from Charlie's teeth. "Treat? You want a treat, Charlie? C'mon, let go."

"I'm sorry," Mateo sobbed, his face glazed with tears. "I'm sorry, Charlie. Please let go. I'm sorry Val. Make it stop."

"Bad boy, Charlie," I said sternly. "Bad boy! Let go! Drop it!"

He stared back at me with an unfocused, blank look. He needed a vet, but who would treat him now? Ronny and his brother hung back, shifting nervously, like at any moment they might need to run from him. From Charlie, who chased butterflies around our yard and hid from the Fourth of July fireworks. I leaned my forehead against the side of his and whispered, "I'm so sorry we did this to you. I love you."

Charlie slowly released Mateo's arm from his jaw, and my brother collapsed on his knees. He looked at his torn arm, gagged, and then retched into the dead grass. His breath was a staccato of short, heavy gasps.

"He needs to go to the hospital," I said numbly.

Mateo murmured something under his breath. As I leaned closer, I barely made out what he was saying: "I'm sorry. Please, just make it stop. I'm going to die. I'm going to die, Val."

"You're gonna be okay, Mateo," I promised, pulling off my jersey and tying it around his arm. Blood blossomed from the strips of shredded muscle within seconds, and I tried to keep my voice even as I squeezed the fabric tighter. "You'll be okay," I said.

Mateo looked up at me, his blown-out pupils turning his eyes nearly the same black as Charlie's. You'll be okay is what the doctors said to Papa when they found the first tumor in his lung. What the uncles and aunts said to us when we couldn't stop crying at his funeral. I understood why Mateo wouldn't believe me, but it had to be true. Me and him were all I could remember, at Little League games, sharing ice creams, playing catch, picking dandelions for Mama, wrestling over who got to be first player on the Xbox, sleepovers, skipping rock competitions, biking to school, trips to the bodega to buy ices with our chore money in the summers. We were going to the major leagues together. We were going to be stars.

"It hurts," Mateo whimpered.

"I know," I said.

"I can drive him to the ER," Ronny's brother offered. He eyed Charlie, who was nosing at the torn ball a few steps away from us, with a nervous look. "Can he stand?"

Together we pulled from under Mateo's armpits and dragged him upright. Ronny's brother looped Mateo's good arm around his neck, and Ronny helped carry him towards the Jeep parked on the other side of the road.

Charlie nudged at my side for attention, nosing a red imprint into my t-shirt. His jaw was wet and dark with my brother's blood. I looked down at my hands. They were covered in it. Across the street, Mateo screamed and sobbed as they tried to lift him into the passenger seat. I knew Mateo was not crying only from the pain, although it must have been agonizing. That was his right arm. His throwing arm. His batting arm.

"Val! Are you coming?" Ronny shouted from the backseat as his brother started the Jeep.

Charlie had wandered over to the lawn bordering the field and was pulling at tiger lily stems. His side was swollen and purple, laced with red starbursts where the blood vessels had broken beneath the skin. "I have to take Charlie home," I called back. "I'll tell my mom and we'll come meet you!"

The car ripped out of its spot and skidded down the road. I scrubbed at the puddle of blood with my foot, trying in vain to make it sink into the ground and disappear. Ronny and his brother were eyewitnesses, though. There was no denying what Charlie had done. No one would understand that he wasn't the monster. I leaned down and pet him, whispering sweet, calming words as he slobbered over the lily petals.

"Come on, buddy," I said. "I'll fix you up and then we can go get food from town."

Whenever we won our Little League games, Papa would take us to the bodega on the corner of Main Street and Fourth that sold sandwiches with two pickles instead of one. Papa would get a Cuban, Mateo would get a BLT with mayo on rye, and I would get a ham and swiss with lettuce, but no tomatoes. Then we would trade our pickles to bet on which team would score a run as we watched the game on the tiny TV hoisted up in the far right corner of the store. There, Mateo was smiling, unhurt. I was happy. All that rage between us, the torn arm and the bruise and the insults, was then just two pickles that we traded back and forth as we argued over players and at-bats. My stomach growled at the memory. Whatever had filled that void inside of me was gone now, and I was empty again. Charlie and I turned back down the road and walked towards home. Me and the beast were hungry.

Regenesis

The first time Aaron watched his brother fall, it was so dark that he hadn't understood the border between the ground and sky. The stars had dipped slightly too far then, he remembered, so far that Abel's feet nearly walked a path of constellations. How high up were they? They had raced to the peak of the dune, dragging each other down in sloughs of sand whenever one got ahead. By the time they reached the top, the dune might've already changed shape; by the time Abel fell, the height could've shifted beneath their feet until it was low enough that he wouldn't have broken in quite the way he did. They were laughing and shoving and then Abel took a step back and he was gone. Aaron listened to the desert breathe around him. He listened for his brother's breaths. He shouted, "You good?" They'd fallen before. They'd all fallen before.

When they were little, the brothers used to steal their mother's baking trays from the kitchen and slide down the dunes as many times as they could before the metal began to scald their skin. That night, Aaron had skidded to the bottom of the dune with a whoop of joy, circling towards where his brother had fallen so he could laugh as Abel stuck his tongue out and tried to scrape the sand from his mouth. The sand at the base of the dune looked like the night sky had spilled out in a dark, crumpled heap. The shadow could've been a clump of dwarf mimosas, or a vulture huddled over a mongoose, or a puddle cupped in the belly of the desert. It couldn't have been his brother. It had rained the night before.

"Abel?" Aaron said.

It wasn't the first time someone he knew had died. When Aaron was in fifth grade, his classmate Gregory's father had backed his car out of their driveway and over his son, who was kneeling in the gravel to collect pebbles. Aaron had held his mother's hand at the funeral as she

tried to keep her shoulders from shaking as she sobbed so that she wouldn't wake Abel, who slept on her chest. And when he was in eighth grade, his parents had packed him and Abel into their Suzuki Alto to drive three towns over to their grandfather's house, where they gathered around his bed as he gasped into a respirator. His face was so wrinkled that his features disappeared into the folds of his skin, and Aaron could only tell where his mouth and nose were from the tubes that sank down into the soft brown creases. When his father told him to, Aaron kissed his grandfather quickly on the cheek in fear that his mouth might get swallowed up into the crags, and who knew what else had settled down there over time: flatbread crumbs, fish bones, dried smears of mustard. But his grandfather's skin had tasted sweet, like lemons and vanilla. Two days later he too was dead.

The counselor at school, Dr. Maryam, said it didn't matter that Aaron couldn't remember whether or not he pushed Abel off the sand dune. Either way, it was an accident. "This is a common symptom of grief in people who have just suffered the loss of a loved one. Survivor's guilt. You have to stop punishing yourself for something you're not even sure really happened."

The morning after Abel's death, Aaron disassembled each of his brother's Lego sets. He picked apart the fighter jet and sorted each piece by color and shape and size. He opened and closed the gates to each stall in the animal barn, wound his fingers through the hidden cabins of the navy destroyer, broke open the spaceship's sealed cockpit. The Lego inhabitants were all gone. No pilots, no farmers, no captains or astronauts or remnants of his little brother's dreams. Aaron dug through the pockets of the shorts scattered on the bedroom floor, the jackets that hung untouched in the closet, because it was summer, and even the jeans folded neatly in Abel's dresser. But there was nothing.

In his brother's bed, his feet dangling off the end, Aaron wondered how Abel had had his own distinct smell even though their mother washed all their laundry together. Like sandalwood shavings. Now that he had noticed it, the scent reinserted itself into even the memories where it couldn't have been: holding hands on the bus to Cairo, feeding Abel the vegetables from his own plate when their parents weren't looking, reaching for his baby fat rolls to see if he'd cry when Aaron pinched them. Aaron turned his face deeper into his brother's pillow and saw them then. Four little Lego lined up on the windowsill, looking down at him. Of course, Abel had always refused to put them in their fighter jets and farms and navy destroyers and spaceships because he liked to think that they would protect him if they were close. The morning of Abel's tenth birthday, when Aaron had helped him assemble the plane, they'd wrestled over the pilot because Abel wouldn't put him inside the cockpit. Abel had clutched the Lego so tightly in his hand that it left dark purple lines on his palms when their mother returned home and he finally uncurled his fingers two hours later.

Aaron collected the Lego people in his hands and examined them one by one, rubbing the places that his brother had touched so frequently that the paint had begun to wear away. The astronaut's helmet popped and sucked when he tried to pull it off to reveal the face beneath, but the plastic wouldn't release. He tucked the Legos into the pocket of the funeral suit jacket his mother had laid out over Abel's bed and left the mess of clothes and Lego pieces tangled together on the floor. Then, before his mother could wake up and see, he painstakingly separated out the fighter jet pieces from the spaceship, the barn from the navy defender, and reassembled each one with the instructions Abel still kept neatly folded in his desk.

Dr. Maryam always scheduled their meetings during Aaron's art class. She said it was so that he didn't miss his academic subjects, but Studio Art was actually the only class that Aaron

had an A in. No matter. It was better that she pulled him from art anyways, because that way they could talk about the bowl.

The bowl was not a healthy coping mechanism, Dr. Maryam said, which Aaron was sure she had gotten from his mother. The bowl was indulging his unrealistic dreams of his brother's forgiveness, when in reality the only person who could forgive him was himself. The bowl was preventing him from confronting his grief. It was allowing him to wallow in his guilt. It was stunting his emotions.

What the bowl was, actually, was the trunk of a date tree. Their father had chopped down the one that had leaned precariously against their house for the beginning years of Aaron's childhood, and he had brought a slice of the great base inside. Together, he, Aaron, and Abel had scooped out the insides, stripped away the rough diamonds of its bark, sanded and polished the grain until they could pick out each individual whorl from the next. They each carved their initials into the base—Aaron and Abel had argued over who had to include their middle initial so their names were distinct, and Abel was the one to eventually give in—and they gifted the bowl to their mother. Each night for a week after that, she would carefully remove her rings one by one from each finger, saving her wedding ring for last, and then she'd dig her hands into the bowl. She mixed the dough together, let it rise, punched it down and let it rise again, and then braided it with chopped dates from the fallen tree. There was so much date bread that Aaron and Abel went around to each house in their neighborhood with the offering of a loaf. Abel insisted that the food made in their bowl tasted better than anything else, as though their love had given the bowl its own special spice. Or maybe, their mother teased, he just liked sweet things.

What Dr. Maryam knew about the bowl was that every night for the past thirty-nine nights since Abel died, Aaron had taken it out to the sand dune where his brother fell and waited.

Around him the sand whispered with the footsteps of lizards slipping through the dunes, crickets warbled in the brittlebush, and the moon once again counted through the seconds to the moment that Abel died. It was 12:31 in the morning and the air was temporarily bloodless. Then a figure wavered at the precipice of the sand dune, and Aaron closed his eyes, and the body fell. 12:32 passed. The sounds of the desert resumed; the sky began to turn again. There was no sign that his brother was ever there.

When Aaron had turned fifteen, he'd insisted that he get his own room to sleep in. Every night he'd drag Abel's mattress out into the living room, only for his father to cuff him on the ear and make him put it back. Abel would stare at him from the doorway as Aaron remade his bed, not saying anything, just watching, just waiting until he could climb back under the covers. Those nights, turned to face the wall instead of his brother, Aaron could hear Abel's choked little sniffles from the other side of the room. And the four Lego men, staring down at him in eternal, unblinking disappointment, waiting for an apology that never came.

Now he found himself slowly resuming that ritual as his mother expelled all traces of Abel from their room, packing his Lego sets, his Pokémon cards, his books, his t-shirt with the "Find x" math joke on it, his malformed pinch pot from sixth grade, his worn purple stuffed dog, his Star Wars posters, his notebooks where he drew strange, alien monsters, his EpiPen for his peanut allergy, his plastic gold participation trophies from swim team, his little fake spiders he'd put in Aaron's bed to scare him, his reading light, his ratty baby blanket, his Walkman with only Bon Jovi songs loaded on it, his prayer rug, his collection of every "Happy Birthday" card he'd ever received, Aaron's included, all loaded into what seemed like too few boxes for how much life he had. Already Aaron was making lists of the moments that weren't in those boxes, like the movie ticket stubs from when they'd gone to see Indiana Jones together, or the pictures of them

like tiny, indistinguishable ants in front of the great pyramids, or the matching bracelets they'd gotten at some tourist shop in Cairo and worn for six years each before they fell off. Aaron tore the room apart looking for them, but they too were gone. Suddenly he couldn't stand to sleep in his bed without Abel there beside him. He left every night and went outside to watch Abel fall, over and over, but at least from a distance where he didn't have to see whether he was pushed.

"You're overextending yourself, Aaron," Dr. Maryam said. "Everyone needs sleep. With time, once you start processing your emotions, the dreams of you pushing him will go away."

"But what if I did?" Aaron choked out through the tears lodged in his throat. "What if I killed him? It's not fair. Out of everyone, he didn't deserve it. It should've been me."

Dr. Maryam shook her head and tapped her clipboard with her pen. "Circles, Aaron," he imagined her saying. "We're going in circles."

The thirty-ninth night since Abel's death, Aaron went outside to watch his brother fall again. His skin strained over his knuckles as he clutched the bowl and stood in the sand beneath the ever-shifting precipice of the dune. He inched closer, closer. Just close enough so that he would catch Abel if he fell. Just close enough so that the bowl would call out to his brother with the memory of the date bread, the love spice, their mother's rings in the sunlight, the firmness of their father's shoulders as he hacked down the tree, and Abel would think, yes, this is home, in my brother's arms, and I will come to it, I will come back to you.

Aaron moved up the sand dune as if in a dream, watching himself thirty-nine nights before scramble up after Abel and pull his brother's ankle so he slid down in a cascade of sand. He flinched as his brother fell, but Abel caught himself, laughed, and ran back up the dune. They were nearly at the top now. Still Aaron followed. They wrestled over who got to slide down on the baking tray first, shoving, shouting, and then he reached for Abel, but his brother was already

gone. Aaron had still been laughing as he fell. “You good?” He heard himself say. They’d all fallen before.

Aaron tasted the tears before he felt them; they were, after all, a taste that had grown so familiar over the past few weeks of lying listlessly on his side, unable to move even when he thought he might choke on all the salt gathering in his mouth. For the first time in thirty-nine nights, the moon opened up and cried into the sand along with him. The date palms spread to meet the rain like so many eager tongues. Aaron’s mother had once told him that he was born with his arms clenched tightly around his chest, as though to let go would be to come apart entirely. Now he held himself again as he collapsed into the sand and the bowl gathered him and all his tears in its arms.

The next morning, the seed was at the bottom of the bowl.

Aaron recognized the date seed from the fruits his mother brought home from the market every Saturday. He thought at first maybe his parents had thrown it in by accident, but its wrinkles glistened with the fresh silver rivulets of last night’s rain. He cradled it in his hands, cracked and worn from thirty-nine nights of waiting, and he went outside to bury his brother.

A few months later, the roots began to grow. They snaked across the sand outside Aaron’s house and curled out in search of water. At night, their reaching tongues tapped at Aaron’s bedroom window, just like how Abel used to when he knew his brother was scared of the dark. Aaron dreamed of Abel’s fingers tapping his shoulder, and every time he turned over his brother would tap his other side. Tap, tap, tap. Until one morning his mother shook him awake and asked, “What’s that growing outside?”

At the library, all the desert botany books Aaron could find reported that the date palm should take two years before it developed roots. Five years before it even had one foot of wooden trunk. Eight years before it grew fruits.

Aaron sat with the tree for the first thirty-nine nights after they discovered its roots. He used Abel's bowl to lightly water the loamy soil and spent long hours wrapping the buds in thin strips of cloth so the bugs wouldn't eat through the leaves. Within months, the tree stretched and cracked its neck out into layers of the sky that Aaron had never touched before. Overnight frills curled and unfolded, dipping their tall stalks into pools of moonlight. Spines sliced across the sky, the underbelly of the universe, its ribs hollow and exposed. Aaron held out his bowl and waited for something to fall in it.

The first dates were small, cocooned by large, waxy leaves that splayed out in thousands of thin slices. Panicles of pale-yellow flowers dripped from the crest of the tree and swelled into clumps of fruits that basked in the sun like jaundiced babies. Aaron held one in his hand and thought, *this is what God gave me of my brother.* When they used to go into town with their mother, Abel would climb the date palms lining the street and shake the fruits down into the basket Aaron made with his t-shirt. Abel had always loved sweet things; their father had taken him to get his cavities fixed so many times that the back of his mouth looked like he had filled it with pennies and dimes. Every time he ate the dates, he'd lick his sweet, sticky fingers and go, "Mmmm," after each one. Their mother would shake her head and tell him to stop, but she'd always say it with a smile.

Now, Aaron picked a date off the tree and chewed. The fruit was soft and warm from the desert sun, and it collapsed into his mouth after only a few moments. This sweetness was the taste of Saturday mornings huddled behind the stucco buildings in town, sharing stolen fruits

with Abel while their parents bought groceries. It was his mother's freshly baked bread on a cold night as they huddled beneath a pillow fort and recited comic books by memory back to each other. It was bribing Abel with the promise of ara'eesh agwa cookies so that he would wake up for the bus ride to school. Aaron smiled and tasted salt in his mouth from the tears. He picked another date off the tree and buried it in the sand below.

Over the next few years, Aaron farmed the date tree. He sliced strips of bark and peeled away gummy fibers to sell to the glue factories down in Cairo. He dried seeds in the hot sun, harvested dates from the branches, and kneaded dough for loaves of bread. His newlywed wife, Sabra, negotiated them a stand at the village market and spent her weekends selling Aaron's products to their neighbors. The palms lining the streets in the town had been there for Aaron's entire life, and possibly for long before that. Within years his date tree outgrew them all.

"Isn't this enough, Aaron?" his new therapist, Dr. Raya, said to him during one of their monthly meetings. "Haven't you already been forgiven?"

"You have your own life now, Aaron," his mother said. She gestured to his childhood bedroom, where he'd pushed his and Abel's old twin beds together to form a single large one that he and Sabra shared. "You can't live here forever. It's time to move on."

"I want a baby," Sabra said to him one night, lying on her side facing away from him as he braided oil into her hair. "Have you thought about it at all? Starting our own family?"

"I've thought about it," he said, running his fingers through her long, dark hair. "I want a son. I want to name him Abel."

"After the brother you never want to look at? Never want to talk about?"

For days and weeks, they pressed into each other and shaped the space between their bodies into a child. The nights were so dark that Aaron couldn't tell if his eyes were open or

closed, where his panting breath ended and hers began, whose skin he touched when he ran his hands through the soft valleys of flesh between them. Every month, their efforts collapsed and unraveled into ropes of blood and tears.

"Yes, that brother."

"You love him so much, and you only knew him for fourteen years."

"You would understand if he was yours."

Aaron sat beneath the date tree and ran his hands against the peeling diamonds of its bark, its feathery petals, its leaves, dates, seeds. Sabra had held him through the nights where he slept soundly but for the impression of a dune, body, bowl beneath his eyelids. She had supported him when he quit his job as a carpenter to commit himself full time to the date tree. It's because I love you, she said, that when they married she moved into his dead brother's room and took buses over dirt roads to the town for work every morning. It's because I love you, she said, that she didn't press him about Dr. Raya or the box of photo frames in their closet. Now it was because he loved her that he picked a date off the tree, rolled it between his fingers, and served it to her that night in a bowl of steaming porridge.

Eight months later, Sabra was taking the bus to town with her body in one seat and her belly in the other. Abel had always loved babies, Aaron thought. Whenever they visited their aunt's house, his brother would spend hours lying on his stomach and dangling toys over their baby cousin's grabby hands. Now his own son would grow and outgrow the photos of Abel, filling out his brother's skinny preteen frame into a body that swelled with the memory of climbing date trees and sand dunes.

The baby was born the next month—a boy—named Ata after Aaron's grandfather. Aaron looked into the baby's deep brown eyes, so much like his brother's, and his shriveled brown

skin, so much like a date's. When would they build their first Lego fighter jet together, take the bus into Cairo, climb a sand dune and slide back down? When would Ata have his own brother to carve wooden bowls and bake ara'eesh agwa and wrestle with over stupid arguments, like who got to put the pilot in his cockpit seat? Aaron sat awake for thirty-nine nights to watch over Ata just as he had with his brother's tree, and he watched as the baby's limbs curled and unfurled, the spines and dates swelled with life.

After the first few months of his life, it became apparent that Ata's only love was the date tree. Once he learned to crawl, they would find him huddled in the hollows of its roots, scratching at the trunk to try to climb higher. Sabra forced down dozens of dates every night because it was the only way he would drink her milk. "I can't stand that tree," she would say over and over again. "This taste makes me sick."

The doctor worried that the baby wasn't getting enough of the right nutrients, and she sent them home with a prescription for bottles of vitamins and supplements. Aaron and Sabra's nights filled with screaming as they tried to force the medicines down Ata's throat, but all he wanted were the dates. Aaron remembered his brother's sticky grin after he'd shove handfuls of the fruit into his mouth at a time, his teeth pasted together with the brown flesh. For weeks when Abel was little, he went through a phase where he refused to eat anything that wasn't sweet, so their mother would mush dates into whatever meal they had for dinner: rice, grape leaves, lentils, shawarma. Now Aaron did the same for his own son. He blended them, boiled them, suckled any drop of juice he could out of their wrinkled skins. Eventually, they barely tasted any flavor besides the overwhelming sweetness of the fruit.

"I don't like how obsessed he is with that tree," Sabra said. "It's dangerous. He shouldn't be climbing that high—remember your brother?"

Remember the dune, the night sky that stretched over infinity, the moon that kissed the sand and the spot where Abel fell? Remember the bowl, the first drops of rain, the tiny seed that sprouted out of nothing? Remember your brother?

Aaron said, “The tree stays.”

Modern Devotion

Now that the sun has risen, Wendy can more clearly see the gnarled plastic of the driver's side bumper on the Honda Odyssey parked in the far corner of the gas station lot. From inside the station itself, she watches the car windows for a passing black shadow, one of her sons stirring out of the sleep she'd spent so long coaxing him back into, pinching his brother, a bruise she'd have to kiss to make it better again. But there are no shadows. No boys awake. The car is still and quiet through the translucent prism of the flyers papered over the gas station windows. Wendy's pack of strawberry Pop Tarts begins to slowly slide out from the crook of her elbow.

"They're going to freeze a sample. As if Noah would ever, ever want kids," the woman in front of Wendy chatters into her phone. With one hand she balances armfuls of those recyclable Whole Foods bags stuffed with half the gas station's mini mart, and with the other she holds her phone to her cheek so tightly that Wendy can already pick out a faint pink rectangle impressed on her skin. Ahead of them, a wrinkled man in frayed overalls lethargically counts out exact change for his pack of Camels. *You'll get cancer if you smoke those,* Wendy wants to say, but instead she turns and squints through the windows towards the Honda again. Her own mother prefers American Spirits.

"Can I get this back in ones, hunny," the man drawls, handing the cashier a ten.

"I wasn't even surprised when he got the diagnosis, honestly," the woman ahead of Wendy lowers her voice to a stage whisper. "God is punishing."

"Sure," the cashier says.

Wendy shakes her head and shifts her elbow around the Pop Tarts again. Her left hand crawls with pins and needles from the weight of its Corona six-pack, and her right clutches a

watery, rapidly cooling paper cup of coffee. The dried blood crusted in her hairline itches. *God is punishing*. The pastor from her mother's church had said something similar as he wailed at them from his pulpit last Sunday. Her mother had swayed to the rhythm of his voice, her eyes closed as though she was waiting for the rapture itself. In each wrinkled, spotted hand, she clutched the wrists of Wendy's two sons.

God is punishing. Only a few hours before she'd found this gas station off the side of the highway, the steering wheel had slipped out of Wendy's sweaty hands as her head jerked forward and wedged itself against the hard plastic, unsure if she had been falling asleep or waking up. The Honda was diagonal across the two yellow lines. Michael had been adamant that they had to have this car for the boys—it doesn't matter how good of a driver you are, Wendy, you never know when there's some stupid, tired, drunk, reckless fool on the same road as you—and the Honda could handle an earthquake, if it came down to that. Michael would be the first to notice the ruined bumper; only aesthetic damage, but he would insist on taking the car to the mechanic anyway. She pressed her foot deeper into the brake pedal, checked for headlights coming from either direction, then reversed and inched back to the side of the road.

"Guys? You okay back there?" Wendy asked, twisting in her seat and patting over her sons' soft, unbroken little boy legs. "You didn't hit anything, did you? Does it hurt anywhere?"

The chime of the cigarette man leaving the store blinks Wendy back into the present, and she dutifully shuffles forward as the woman in front of her moves up to the cash register. "Oh, I don't mean it!" the woman laughs. "It's only stage two. They caught it early. The worst that'll happen is they'll chop his balls off or something."

The light from the mini mart's LEDs throbs against the headache forming behind Wendy's bruised forehead. When she first arrived at the gas station, she'd managed to get most

of the blood off in the bathroom, wiping brown flakes from her hair until the sink drain clogged and she had to scrub the rest off with those coarse public restroom paper towels. The blood felt like the sloppy wet kisses her mother used to give her before bed, the ones that air-dried her cheeks into stiff, taut skin that cracked when she smiled. Before they'd left to drive back to Chicago, her mother had poured them each a generous glass of scotch, kissed her on both cheeks, and said, "It's stage four ovarian cancer, Wendy. Will you stay for a few more weeks? I don't want to be alone."

All she had been able to think was that her mother was already losing her hair. It was loose and spotty from years of dying it a chemical shade of red when she worked in real estate. When she was a kid, Wendy used to scoop her mother's hair from the tub drain and shape it into patterns on the bathroom wall while she showered. The chemo wouldn't make much of a difference, she thought. Was that a punishment?

In the gas station, the woman ahead of Wendy says, "I'm on my way to see him right now. He thinks he's going to die, you know. I guess for him losing his balls is the same thing." Her voice pitches into a shrill, high note at the end of her words, like she's about to laugh or cry.

"I'm sorry," Wendy interrupts, her head pulsing in time with the rhythmic beep of the scanner as the cashier rings up each of the woman's items. "Could you please be a bit quieter? I have a headache. Sorry."

"Excuse me," the woman says into her phone, turning around and squinting at Wendy. Under the fluorescent lights, her wrinkles track the downturned curves of her face from her furrowed eyebrows to her thin-lipped frown. Her makeup overlaps her features into one another, black mascara smeared into her dark circles, pink lipstick lined around her mouth, blush fanned out from her cheekbones like a sunburn. Last night's leftovers, it must be, because it's too early

now for her face to look so worn. A blue vein pulses in the woman's temple. She turns away again, and Wendy instead stares at the blotchy tattoo on the back of her neck. "Anyways, Noah would've been a terrible father. He always had more daddy issues than the rest of us."

"Your card is declining, miss," the cashier says, clicking her nails against the counter.

Wendy's phone vibrates in her back pocket, but she can't shift to reach it without losing her battle with the Pop Tarts. Maybe it's her mother, calling to beg her forgiveness for her childhood, *if you'll just stay a few more days, please, Wendy.* It might be Michael, fresh out of his secretary's sheets, calling to let her know she lost the custody case after the police somehow found out about the car accident. Or maybe it's Noah, calling to tell her that he has ball cancer and his bitch of a sister is on her way to cut the family jewels right off.

"Oh? Oh, I'll try it again," the woman says, thrusting her card back into the chip reader.

On the side of the road just a few hours before, Wendy's head throbbed from where it hit the steering wheel. She ran her tongue along the inside of her teeth to check if any of them were loose. When she opened her driver's side door, a high, human-like sob wheezed from the deer's throat as its body peeled away from the car. Wendy knelt down to run her fingers through its hair, just like her mother used to do for her when she was hurt or sick, just like she did now to lull her sons to sleep at night. Just like she might have massaged her mother's soft scalp as it withered away into her skull, if she had stayed with her.

"Fuck," Wendy whispered. The deer's pitiful whimpers were so much like her sons' cries after a nightmare that she kept glancing back towards the car, listening for their voices. "I'm so sorry. Fuck, I'm so sorry."

A fly buzzed by her ear and landed on the deer's exposed eye. It tried to blink, but its eyelashes were too congealed with blood to move. Wendy brushed the fly away as the deer choked and gasped wetly. Its brown eyes were the same color as her mother's.

"Mommy?" Sean whispered, peeking his head out of the open door. "Is the deer okay?"

"Just fine, sweetie," she answered, blinking at the tears in her eyes. They'd watched *Bambi* just before leaving for her mother's house, and now here she was, the huntsman, the cruel killer. Wendy turned on her phone flashlight and scanned the woods for another set of reflective eyes that might indicate a baby deer waiting for its mother to return from crossing the road. "I'll be back in a minute."

Wendy cupped her hands around the deer's warm, blood-soaked neck. Its pulse throbbed against her fingertips, speeding up as she tightened her grip. "It's okay, baby," she whispered, closing her eyes. Michael would go hunting on the weekends sometimes. He and a few other guys from the office would pack up a truck and drive the hour out from Chicago to middle-of-nowhere, Illinois. They'd fought once over whether he could take Matty with him when their son turned eight. Now Wendy imagined that her hands were Michael's, hands that could shoot a deer and calmly break its neck and go out for a beer afterwards, have a flirt with the bartender who was just a little less middle-aged than Wendy herself. She imagined the sound of the snap. Michael would do what needed to be done. After the past two years of them forgetting who was supposed to pick the boys up from school, arguing over mixing the lights and darks in the laundry, and ignoring the emails he sent his secretary from their shared address, he had been the one to finally break the game of chicken and file for divorce. Wendy sighed and released her hold on the deer's neck. "I'll stay with you until you die," she promised.

The deer's eyes rolled in its head and its front legs kicked in circles. More flies hummed around its body, but when Wendy fanned them away, they pivoted around her own bloody forehead instead. It all began to overwhelm her: the buzzing, the ache in her skull, the choked whimpers so much like her own after an argument with her mother. The sickly-sweet smell that she recognized instinctively from her father's funeral even so many years later. The deer whined when she stood up and backed away towards her car, whispering, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," even as she shut the door, scrubbed her hands with sanitizer, and started the ignition.

"Mommy, the deer is okay, right?" Sean asked again.

Wendy tried not to look at the dark, twitching body cupped in the side mirror. She counted her breaths until they began to slow down. "Yeah, baby," she said. "Go back to sleep."

"They'll try to fix him," the woman in front of her at the gas station says now. "But Noah has no business being anyone's father. At least not now."

Wendy clenched the steering wheel until her skin stretched white and translucent over her knuckles as she drove away from the deer, mouthing the prayer her mother said at funerals over and over into the endless dark veins of the road ahead.

Now, Wendy slides past the woman as she regathers her bags from the counter and walks away with her phone wedged between her cheek and shoulder. "Well, he has his first chemo treatment this morning, so we'll see if that gives him an attitude adjustment," the woman says as the door chimes behind her. The cashier offers Wendy a thin smile.

"What a bitch, right," Wendy comments as the girl begins to scan her items. She's younger than Wendy, maybe in her early thirties, with tired eyes and manicured nails that she must've driven an hour out of these shithole cornfields to find a salon for. Just the kind of girl Michael would flirt with when he thought she wasn't listening.

The cashier just gives her that same pitiful smile and says, “Your total is $15.81.”

By the time she pays, Wendy’s coffee is lukewarm and bitter against the cut on her lip. She throws it in the trashcan as the mini mart door shuts behind her. Ahead, the woman is still lugging her grocery bags towards the small white Kia on the other side of the parking lot.

“He’s just afraid that without me, nobody will notice he’s dead until he starts to smell!” The woman shrieks out a laugh. “Stop, stop! I’m joking!”

Stay with me until I die, Wendy. Their big, brown eyes stare at her accusingly. Her mother had given her that same look when Wendy told her she was pregnant with Matty before she married Michael, when she told her she had to go back to Chicago to settle the divorce. “Wendy,” she’d say. “There’s no reason to treat me like this. I am the person who loves you most in the world.” Wendy chews at the cut on her lip until she tastes metal.

“I love you,” her mother said. “I live for you.”

“I love him,” the woman says. “Noah’s my little brother. I just wish someone had kicked him in the balls a little earlier.”

Wendy pulls her phone from her back pocket with her free hand and checks the call history, certain now that her mother was the one to call and apologize for all her wrongdoing, beg her to come back home. The missed call is labeled in red: SPAM RISK. A laugh, high and hysterical, bubbles out of Wendy’s lips. Of course she had thought someone wanted her. Not her dying mother, not her ex-husband, not even Noah, telling her that he understood why she had to leave the deer to die alone on the side of the road.

“Excuse me?” the woman asks, lowering her phone for the first time since Wendy had walked into the gas station. She turns around and Wendy sees her own monstrous reflection distorted in the sunglasses perched on the woman’s head. “Are you alright?”

"You're a fucking bitch," Wendy laughs, her voice high-pitched with hysteria.

"Excuse me?" she says again, her eyes wide. Brown, like the deer's. Accusing. Like her mother after an argument. Rage surges up in Wendy's stomach and carries her feet across the parking lot towards the woman.

"How dare you look at me like that!" Wendy shouts. "All that shit you're saying about your brother! You think he's the one God is punishing, you psycho? At least I'm sorry that my mother is dying!"

"This is none of your business," the woman says coldly, backing away. "You need to calm down, or I'm calling the police."

"God, you took so fucking long in line," Wendy gasps out, unsure now if she is still laughing or just trying to inhale. She thinks of Noah, drinking a glass of scotch at night to ease the ache of the cancer and wondering if all his bad decisions meant he really deserved to die alone. Her mother would pour herself another glass just to be generous; after all, she's eating for two now, for the tumor sitting in her belly like another baby that she had never wanted. "You don't actually want him to live, do you? You want him to die as fast as possible, so you don't have to feel guilty for leaving—"

"I'm calling the police," the woman shouts, waving her phone threateningly.

Wendy can already picture Michael's smug lawyer's grin as he reads to the court, "The defendant recklessly exposed her children to the danger of an injured wild animal, and then proceeded to rightfully confront a crazy bitch about her blatant disregard for her brother's life, but because this court does not care who was right or wrong or who cheated on who we will still request full custody of Matthew and Sean Davis…"

Before Wendy can register her own movement, her arm swings the case of Coronas towards the phone clenched in the woman's hand. The bottles clink and crack upon impact, spraying a glittery shower of glass and beer over the asphalt. The woman screams as she drops her bags and clutches her hand, bent at an odd angle and leaking blood from her palm.

"What the fuck!" she yells. "Help! Help! Help me!"

Wendy drops the fractured beers, her hands shaking. She touches her cut lip and feels her mother, full of scotch and thirty years younger, touch it with her. "I'm so sorry, baby," she would say. "Let's put some ice on that."

Then she'd comb through Wendy's hair until each strand nearly floated around her head. For every harsh stroke, there were a hundred tender ones. Like a dog Wendy would sit at her feet and let her mother brush her hair in time with the pulsing ache of her bruise. Like a dog she would wag, stay, sit, and beg for her mother's love.

The woman seems to have forgotten to run, paralyzed in shock in front of Wendy. *A deer in the headlights,* she thinks to herself, and then laughs as she turns to walk away.

"Mom?" Matty shouts from the car window. "Are you okay?"

"Just fine, sweetie," she calls back over the woman's heaving, trembling sobs for help. She wipes tracks of moisture away from her eyes as she walks. "I got your Pop Tarts!"

"I'll take a picture of your license plate," the woman screams from behind her. "You're not gonna get away with this, you bitch! That cashier lady already called the police—"

Wendy slides into the driver's seat and slams the door shut, closing her eyes and leaning her pounding head against the steering wheel to block out the woman's shrieks.

"Mommy, what happened?" Sean asks, staring at the woman still leaking blood onto the ground by the gas pumps. She has to leave. She will lose her sons if the police come.

"Nothing, baby," Wendy mumbles, breathing in and out and in again. She twists to face the boys in the backseat. "You know when you see bullies at school? Some mean old fifth grader teasing someone else behind their back, or pushing them into the lockers, or making them cry for no good reason? Have you ever seen that? Well, you know how you guys sometimes fight over sharing your Legos and you say mean things and hit each other? That woman was doing that to her own brother. She was a bully, and sometimes we have to stand up to bullies. That's what happened, okay? Your mom stood up to a bully. That's all. Not even worth mentioning to your dad, right? Let's just keep this between us."

The words come naturally to her. She'd heard them so often as a child that she almost doesn't recognize her mother's voice merging with her own, promising her lollipops in exchange for her silence. Matty and Sean nod at her, although their eyes flutter nervously between her face and the woman still sobbing in the parking lot. Now the cashier has come out of the store and stands with a phone in her hand, staring at the parked Honda.

"I need to call your grandma," Wendy says abruptly.

"Grandma's not gonna be awake this early," Matty protests, but she had already connected her phone to the car's Bluetooth and begun to dial.

"She's awake," Wendy says.

The phone continues to ring as she reverses out of the parking spot and crunches over the glass from the broken beer bottles. It rings, and rings, and rings. The gas station certainly had security cameras. There was a credit card trail. It would follow her through rest stops, hotels, and drive-thrus until they reached her Chicago apartment, where the boys would repack their duffels with what they needed for a week at Michael's, and out of respect, the police would wait until after they were gone before they knocked on her door. What would it be: aggravated assault,

battery, reckless endangerment? *Arrest my mom instead,* Wendy wants to scream. *She's the one who gave me these genes. I would never hurt my kids. I love them more than anything else in the world.* The phone goes to voicemail, and Wendy presses call again. *Tell me what to do, Mom,* she begs. *Help me, please, help me.* Tears track their way down her cheeks as the sun streams into the hot, sweaty car; she opens her window and wipes them away. She imagines they can hear the ringing of the unanswered phone all the way along I-40, from Chicago to Phoenix, where her mother watches the caller ID flash and Noah clenches his fist for the IV needle and flies scatter away from the deer's body as they listen to her pray.

Forgottonness

This morning Abraham caught a child's doll bumping gently against his salt-eaten dingy, and he knew the rest of the girl would follow soon. In the next few days, when he should have been filling his coolers with sea bass and mackerel, he might find himself instead with the torn sleeve of a dress or a small black shoe. When the bodies came, they always gave him fair warning. She was close.

Abe and the doll studied each other as he rowed back to shore. She wore a faded pink dress and blue button eyes chosen, he imagined, to match her owner's. Her yellow yarn hair had been so carefully braided into pigtails that the ties were only just beginning to loosen even after a few days at sea. His own hair had grown in gray, wiry curls down to his chest and obscured the bottom half of his face in a grizzled beard. Now that the doll was watching him, he couldn't remember the last time he'd shaved. He combed his fingers through his beard self-consciously. On second thought, he turned the doll to face away from him.

"What's your name?" he wondered aloud. "Where'd you come from?"

Saltwater dripped and dripped out of the doll's cloth body and tracked down the spine of the boat towards Abraham's feet. When he had pulled bodies out of the ocean in the past, their waterlogged skin had leaked in the same rhythm. Abe had begun to time his strokes with the thud of the droplets against the wooden floor. As they rowed closer to shore, he leaned into one side and pulled the oars without checking over his shoulder for the maze of craggy rocks that had begun to rise out of the water. He'd been his own lookout for so long now that the turns were second nature for his muscles, which bulged around his shoulders and favored his right side after nearly thirty-six years tracking the same path. The doll would've seen his large, distended arms

before he turned her away. They'd never bothered him before, but now he wondered if she was scared of the wild man who'd fished her out of the ocean.

Even as he'd grown wrinkled and white, the people from town gossiped that Abe was half-giant from the way he towered over their crowded markets. He rowed out far past the other fishermen, who only had so much strength before their arms gave out on the way home. Maybe that's why, they said, that Abraham was the only one who the corpses found. Or maybe, they said, he was just cursed.

"Don't be afraid," Abraham told the doll. "I have a son who's probably just around your age. Eleven? Twelve? Maybe you've seen him?"

The doll didn't answer. Behind him, he heard the fish shifting around in their cooler, attempting to suck water from the melting ice. "Isaac would tell me the most interesting things when he came out with me," he said. "He knew how deep a sperm whale can dive, what species of fish have the most mercury in them off the Massachusetts coast, and the statistical chance of a shark attack. What twelve-year-old boy knows that? He was so bright."

The doll watched the coast form around them as Abe pulled them in towards his dock. Out of the tiny platform nailed into the base of the cliffs, rickety wooden steps rose in a zigzag up to the wind-beaten house on the precipice. Abraham released the oars for a moment to turn the doll back to face him. "You're the youngest person I've met out here yet," he said. "But don't worry. My wife will take good care of you."

Eleanor waited for him every afternoon in her rocking chair on their porch overlooking the ocean. Before his son died, he and Isaac would place bets on what she'd made them for dinner until each discovered that the other had secretly been asking her about her meal plans for the day. In the months after Isaac disappeared, she'd spent hours there stitching and re-stitching

his baby clothes for the women in town. “But Anna Townsend is pregnant,” she’d murmur when Abraham returned home and gently pulled her tender, pricked fingers away from the needle. Even long after Anna gave birth, Eleanor continued to sew herself into the rocking chair until eventually she hardly ever got up again. As she slowly wilted into old age, Abe sponged her down with warm, soapy washcloths and helped her guide spoonfuls of chowder into her mouth. Now, as he climbed the haphazard steps from the docks to their cottage, she looked down at him with a small, pleasant smile.

“What have you brought me today?” Eleanor asked.

Abe carefully laid the doll in his wife’s emaciated arms. “Oh, a little girl,” she breathed out, her eyes glassy with tears. She rocked the doll just as delicately as she had done with their son years before, as Abraham kneaded his fingers through her thin, windswept hair.

“Do you like her?” he asked, weaving her hair into twin braids to match the doll’s. “She looks just like you.”

“I love her,” Eleanor said, kissing the smooth fabric of the doll’s pale forehead.

“I’m so glad,” Abraham said. He watched her run her hands over the red stitches of the doll’s smiling mouth, the three black lines each for her eyelashes, the half-crescent of her nose. “Eleanor,” he said, but she had already drifted away from him, brushing a trembling finger through the doll’s yellow yarn hair.

“It matches mine,” she whispered to herself. “Just like Isaac’s.”

His wife was still rocking with the doll as Abe made his way to his son’s bedroom and curled into the bed, his legs dangling over the frame. It’d been so long since anyone had lived in this room that the furniture was all caked in a layer of dust except for Isaac’s bed, which Abraham had slept in every night since his son disappeared. The tattered pillow hadn’t smelled

like his son for over a decade now, but Abraham still buried his face in the fabric as though he was holding him again.

He wasn't sure whether to feel frustrated or relieved that this next dead body, his seventy-third in the past fifteen years, still wasn't Isaac's. Of course, by now the waves would've long since worn his son into an assembly of smooth white bones. But somehow Abraham still felt himself drawn out to the far reaches of the ocean, where instead of the bountiful fish of the other men, the waves brought him corpses—drawn, perhaps, in the same way Eleanor continued to convince herself that the pictures and shoes and watches he found in the water with the dead bodies were remnants of children that she could love back into existence.

What if, for a brief moment, he too imagined it was true? If he closed his eyes and woke the next morning to Eleanor standing in the kitchen for the first time in years, the wisps of her white hair floating in a dreamy halo around her head? When she turned to face him, he'd see her stomach had swollen beneath her yellowed, fraying nightgown. "A baby?" he'd whisper. And she'd smile and nod, her myopic eyes runny with tears.

They lived too far from the hospital to make it without a car, so the birth would be at home, Abraham thought. He'd shake the dust out of their marriage bed so the baby wouldn't cough on her first breath. He'd catch her as she slipped out into his hands, which fit around her so perfectly it was as though that were the only purpose they had ever been made for. Their miracle girl. Their second chance. The vision of her learning to crawl, then walk, then run played out in front of him like a film he'd already seen in reverse.

They would go to town together as a family. Abe would shave his beard to a respectable trim so that people wouldn't step to the other side of the street when they saw him. While he sold his fish, Eleanor would take their little girl to the market stalls and buy bolts of pink fabric to sew

into dresses. She'd have Eleanor's blond hair, just like her brother, and when she spun it would swing out from her like a pale canopy of fire, just like it had when Abraham had first watched his wife dance in town. He'd press cool towels to her forehead on nights when she sweat with fever. He'd tear boards off the unused rooms of their house and nail them to the foot of her bed when she began to outgrow its length. He'd hold Eleanor as he'd meant to all those years before when he walked back into the house without their son and went to Isaac's room, where he stayed until his son's scent and all that remained had been dried up and replaced with dust.

The next morning, Abraham woke with tearstains tracked down his cheeks and into his beard. He moved around the house as if still in his dream, forgetting now where he and Isaac had played hide-and-seek, where he had spun his little girl around in a circle, where he had kissed Eleanor's swollen stomach—and which time? Abe gently pulled the doll from his sleeping wife's arms and began his descent down to the docks. He propped her against the cooler in his boat to watch as he picked knots from his fishing lines and cast them out again.

"See here," he told the doll, reeling in a flapping cod on one of his lines. "Now I'll use these pliers to remove the hook. You grasp under the head, like this."

"Did you know female cod can lay up to five million eggs," Abraham heard Isaac say back to him. "Did you know that humans are the cod's only natural predators?"

He'd taught his son to fish like this twenty years ago. Together they had spooled lines and baited hooks and listened for where the fish gathered beneath the dark ocean waves. Sometimes Isaac would stretch after hours of baking in the high noon sun and swim out in circles around the boat. Abraham would watch him close his eyes as he floated on his back, the water baptizing his face of worry and fear until he was fresh and new. Then one day Abe had turned around to reel in a line, and his son was gone.

"Isaac?" he'd shouted. He waited two beats, listening for a tap on the underside of the boat that meant his son was trying to scare him again. He waited for two more just to be safe. He waited, and then screamed, "Isaac!" as he dove into the water and cut circles around the boat until bubbles foamed up from his mouth and he surfaced, gasping for air. Salt stung at his eyes as he swam under again, and again and again and again. It was hours later that he drifted back home to find Eleanor still waiting up for them in the cool moonlight of the porch.

"You two must've had a long day," she'd said, kissing him on the cheek and peering behind him for their son. "Where's Isaac?" Abraham opened his mouth to tell her, but the salt from the ocean lodged in his throat. It dried his tear ducts out. It carried his feet past her and into his son's bedroom.

"Abraham?" She'd called after him. "Where is he?"

He locked himself inside the room and curled up on the bed, inhaling the smell of earth and orange peels from his son's pillow. Eleanor pounded at the door behind him, sobbing, screaming his name. He should go to her, he thought. But instead he went to his son, who still floated serenely in water that lapped at his cheeks like a kiss.

Now Abe rocked the doll in his arms as he squinted out at the horizon towards the cliffs where his wife waited for them to return. One of the fishing lines shook, and he set her down carefully to watch him.

"You reel in like this," Abraham explained as the drag stopped buzzing. He lifted the tip of the rod skywards and watched it bend back down as the fish struggled for the bottom. "Now you reel and lower back to forty-five degrees," he told the doll, smiling at her. "On Isaac's first try, he tipped the rod overboard. Can you believe it? A boy who knows so much about fish."

After that Abraham had guided him through the motions again until Isaac caught his first wriggling sunfish all on his own.

"Remember what I told you about removing the hook?" he asked, leaning down to pull the fish out of the water and jerking back when he saw the milky spill of a drowned body's skin instead. Oh, God. It was so small. "Isaac?" he whispered.

No. Her pink dress had faded into a light peach after days in the saltwater, and her hair snaked out in thin, lackluster tendrils. Her beautiful blue button eyes were closed, so that if her skin wasn't so pale and bloated, she could have just been floating serenely next to his boat like his son used to.

"Isaac," Abraham moaned, collapsing to his knees. "No, no, no. Where are you?"

"A dead body can stay intact for months in saltwater," Isaac said matter-of-factly in his ear. "Who's to say it couldn't last for years? That is, if the sharks and the squid and the fish and the crabs haven't gotten to me yet. Don't you remember how scared I was of giant squid?"

Shaking, Abraham cradled the doll in the crook of his elbow and tried to rock himself back into his dream. The dead little girl floated calmly by his side as he swayed back and forth.

"I'm sorry, Isaac," he gasped out. "I should've done more. I should've stayed out here until I found you again. I should've laid you to rest. Laid us all to rest. Look at what I've done to us. All because I couldn't hold your mother after I lost you. All because I couldn't admit that you were really gone. For fifteen years. Fifteen years. I'm so sorry."

Abraham set the doll down and dragged the dead girl's body out of the water. "I'm so sorry," he said again, gripping the side of the dingy so tightly he thought it might crack apart in his hands. "I'm so sorry."

Abe's arms ached by the time he had rowed back to shore and moored the boat at the docks. He picked up the little girl's body and laid her down gently onto the wood, grateful that in the end she didn't look anything like he had imagined at all. Soon he'd return to tuck her into the cliffs with the rest of the bodies, where the eager, gooey worms wriggled in anticipation for a body sweet with love and longing.

Abraham took the doll in one hand and made his way up to the porch. His wife reached out with both hands for the toy, the pleasant smile on her face a mirror of the one from the day before. "Oh, a little girl," she was already saying.

"No, Eleanor," Abraham said, dropping the doll to the floor with a wet *thunk*. "No, she's not real."

Eleanor's face crumpled, her wrinkles drawing her features into exaggerated, cartoonish lines. "She was a dream," she said slowly.

Abe nodded and sank to his knees before her. Even kneeling, he was taller than her shrunken, emaciated body. He pulled her hands into his own.

"Abraham," she said, looking at him, really looking, for the first time without that cloudy, faraway glaze over her eyes. "Where…is Isaac?"

He tasted the tears in his mouth now. They were left over from so long ago that he thought they should've been stale, but they slipped out just as easily as they would have fifteen years before. In his tears was everything he'd forced himself to forget: the taste of soapy baby hair in his mouth, the smell of orange peels, the daily fish fact they would read from Isaac's underwater encyclopedia every night before bed, the color of his son's eyes in the sunlight, the whole of Isaac's life unraveling from his eyes.

"Oh, Abe," Eleanor murmured, cupping his bristly cheek with her bony, spotted hand.

He gathered her in his arms and held her curled up like a child in his lap. He was careful not to grip her too hard, lest her frail, hollow bones crack apart in his hands. “Eleanor,” he said. Then again: “Eleanor,” as Isaac’s life spooled away from him, faster and faster, like a line carried out to the ocean. And he felt a light squeeze on his wrist where her hand encircled his, holding him there, keeping him from following.

Operation Wandering Soul

In my dream Teddy's father was still alive. I crouched in the red dust of the clearing behind our village, spreading my arms wide over our fragile half-rectangle of sticks as he and Teddy passed the soccer ball back and forth, ducking it in between their legs and balancing it on their shins as they got closer to my goal. The gold filling in the back of Teddy's mouth winked at me as he tilted his head back and laughed.

"Theo," my mother said, "Theo. Wake up. The Americans are here."

"Already?" I mumbled into my arm. Teddy's smile lingered beneath my closed eyelids, his right molar shining like he had licked the sun. He was the only person in our village who had a filling at all; his father had carried him all the way to Saigon for it.

"Commander stepped on a mine," my mother said. "They're waiting for a new one."

Before he'd left, Teddy's father had taken us around the clearing where we played soccer and showed us each of the small lumps, like pimples in the ground, where he had buried the mines. "Dap loi," he said. "Toe poppers. And you will need all your toes if you still want to play soccer after the war." He had made them himself by tearing scraps of metal away from their hut, bit by bit, until the tokay geckos began to crawl through the holes and bury themselves in their rice. I wondered now if he had made the mine that killed the American commander.

I opened my eyes and shifted onto my side to watch my mother. She leaned over a pail of water and twisted her reflection's long, thick hair into a bun. She smoothed a tube of red gloss that a soldier had given her over her lips and pressed them together, sharing a smile with herself.

"You look pretty," I said, scratching at the bug bite on my thigh. When I itched it, the dream slipped back into the room around me. Teddy's father stood in the corner of my vision,

but as always when I looked at him, he faded into shadow. The carcass of a dream bug collapsed with a sigh beneath my foot as I stood; its blue shell was barely a wisp anymore now that it had expelled its contents into my sleep.

The Americans had first come to our village two summers ago, singing their arrival through the jungle by the clashes of metal tins and machetes. With them came the dream bugs. Like a river they had crawled through our village, each tributary directed into one of the huts. At night they burrowed into our cots and waited to exchange our blood with dreams that would itch at the inside of our skulls and linger at the edges of our vision every day until they were fulfilled. I had figured out that the bugs were the ones that gave us the dreams when I scratched at my bites and the compulsion to play soccer or eat a mango whole or pull a monkey's tail or kiss Teddy—but only a brief kiss because the urge was, of course, only a dream and he went along with it, of course, only because we had been friends since birth—became too intense to bear.

"Don't scratch, Theo," my mother said sharply. "Are you ready to go? Teddy and Lincoln are waiting outside."

"I'm going," I sighed, gathering my pants and hat together. Teddy, Lincoln. Theo. Our American names slid back on like a second skin when the soldiers returned. Vietnamese was too difficult for many of the soldiers to remember, so they had renamed us after their presidents. Teddy and I were both Theodore Roosevelt, and our friend Chi was Lincoln, as in Abraham.

Outside, Teddy leaned against our hut, picking at the blood lining his nails from where he'd itched at his own bug bite. "What'd you dream about?" I whispered as we joined the winding trail of mothers and children walking down to the ocean.

"Same old, same old," Teddy said, fixing his eyes on the girls ahead of us. "You know," he said, and grinned at me. That summer his arms and legs and torso had unfolded until he was

nearly a full head taller than me, and with his glossy hair and dark, gold-flecked eyes, all the girls in our village and the next over were in love with him.

"Liar," I rolled my eyes and shoved into his shoulder. I rubbed at my own bug bite through my pant leg and was suddenly glad that I'd covered it so that I wouldn't have to tell Teddy I'd dreamed about his father again. "You'll tell me later."

"Tell you what?" Lincoln asked, pushing into line beside us. In one hand he clutched his baby sister's arm as she waddled to keep up with him. "Can you believe they're back already? We were supposed to have another two weeks."

"Their commander died," I said, and looked at Teddy when I added, "He stepped on a mine." Teddy kept his eyes focused ahead on the beach, where the American soldiers waited for us glazed in sunlight.

Even out here on the coast, we'd heard there was going to be a war. Night by night, fathers slipped away into the shadows until one day none of them were left. Even Teddy's. But when the Americans finally got here, they shed their noisy packs, their layers of clothes, their long guns with lines of bullets like sharp golden teeth, and they plunged into the sea. And they had been doing so—emerging from the jungle, passing their gear to us, and diving into the water only to reemerge, redress, and reappear a few weeks later—ever since. Now, one man handed me his gun, a cleaning kit, and a tin of c-rations as soon as I stepped onto the sand.

"You sure they're not gonna fuckin' kill us?" the soldier next to him asked, clutching his gun to his chest while Teddy waited expectantly for him to hand it over. His hair was still buzzed to a dark shadow over his skull, his fingernails clean of dirt. He'd probably only been in Vietnam for a few days. Maybe the commander was the first person he had seen die.

"They would have no idea how," the man who'd given me his gun said. The rookie soldier nodded hesitantly and placed his gun, cleaning kit, and two American dollars in Teddy's arms before they walked away together.

"Idiots," Teddy whispered to me as we made our way over to where Lincoln and his sister waited for us in the shade, already unpacking his kit. "Am I supposed to eat their money?"

"Quieter," I said under my breath as we settled beneath the palm trees that lined the beach. I ran my hands along the thick ridge where the rifle would rest on the American's shoulder, the narrow cone that he would cup in his hands to steady the shot. By now, I was an expert at cleaning guns. I was so good that even in my dreams my hands remembered how to release the magazine without spilling the bullets, how to thread the snake through the gun's gaping mouth. I didn't have to watch my work like the other boys. Instead I watched the Americans lounge in the sand, their white backs glistening like stars. My mother bent over a soldier and tipped her pail of cool water into his mouth, pouring her reflection down his throat. She cupped one hand beneath his chin to catch the escaping droplets like he was her own son. My hands took apart the hot gray steel and pieced it back together. The next bullets the gun fired would slice through their targets like butter.

"Is it worth it?" Teddy's father murmured in my ear. "A can of oatmeal for your mother's virtue? For my life?"

I jerked to the side to catch him before he disappeared, but he was already gone. It was like he was never even there. Teddy's father was always too fast for us; he could dribble around our defenses and smash the ball through our goal of sticks as though he wasn't twice our age. That's how I knew that the Viet Cong soldier had lied when he crept into our village two months ago and told Teddy that his father was dead. The man said that an American had found him

planting a mine along one of their supply routes to Saigon, shot him once in the back of the head, and left him there to die as tanks and Jeeps and soldiers rolled by, burying him in the dust.

When Teddy said this to me, his eyelashes thick with tears, I knew it couldn't be true because his father was always too quick. I told myself a story. Yes, the American had caught Teddy's father with a mine. But he had already heard the rhythmic pulse of the soldier's footsteps approaching. He knew he didn't have time to get away. He was clever, though. He'd made the dap loi himself, without any instruction or blueprint or explosive materials. When the soldier's gun clicked into position behind Teddy's father, he activated the mine and rolled to safety. So the body that the Viet Cong soldier had seen lying on the side of the road, smothered in dust so red it could have been dried blood, was actually that of the American. But why would the VC lie? Teddy asked when I told him. Because then if the soldiers question us, we won't know anything, I said. He's like a secret agent now, faking his own death.

Teddy didn't believe me. He said his father would never put us through so much pain, but I knew my story was the right one. I knew because I had dreamed of his father, and the bug dreams always came true.

"Tell me what you dreamed about," I said. Teddy and I laid next to each other in the soft grass beneath the mango grove behind our village, looking up into the leaves that stirred with sunlight. Teddy's skin glowed where the light dappled over his upturned face; it smoothed out the lines that recent stress had creased into his forehead and flushed his cheeks with pink. The color of the unripe mangoes clustered above us like swaying tongues. This tree, the one with roots that formed two perfect cups for our heads, had been our meeting place for as long as I could remember. We came here every afternoon to escape the beach's sucking heat, the blisters

on our hands, the sounds of men shouting and mothers giggling indulgently. Here, the grass was cool and all I could hear were Teddy's slow, even breaths and the whisper of the breeze through the leaves.

"You have to promise not to tell anyone, Bien," he said, opening his eyes and shifting onto his side to face me. At the sound of my real name, I turned to meet his gaze and my mouth dried at the intensity in his eyes.

"I promise," I said after a moment. "Is it really that bad?"

"I mean it," Teddy insisted. "Promise you won't say anything, not even to Lincoln. Promise you'll help me."

"Okay, I promise," I said again, thinking through a list of subjects that could possibly be so secretive. I hoped it wasn't really about a girl. Who would he dream about? Minh, with her sea-green eyes and wide hips that Lincoln always swore about? "Just tell me."

"I dreamed that I killed an American," Teddy whispered.

"You're lying," I said.

"I dreamed that I killed the soldier who murdered my father," Teddy said. "It's been eating at me all day. I couldn't stop searching for his face at the beach. Curly blond hair, blue eyes, and a mole on his left cheek. That's what he looked like. I didn't see him today, but I know he's there. Why else would I have had the dream?"

"You can't kill an American," I said. I told myself a story. In my head Teddy laid on the ground in the mango grove, blood unraveling from his body, worms burrowed into his eyes and nose and ears. Above him stood the soldier with curly blond hair, blue eyes, and a mole on his left cheek, the dark mouth of his gun pressed into the back of Teddy's head. "They'll kill you first."

"I saw it," Teddy said, his eyes fixed just beyond mine as they replayed his dream. "I had him on his knees begging for mercy. He'd pissed himself like a fucking coward. They act the big man, but without their guns, they're worse than the oldest Vietnamese grandfather. I had his M16 in my hands, and I lined it up with the back of his head so he wouldn't know when it was coming, and I shot him."

Teddy spoke with the same reverence that the pastor who visited our village every Sunday used when he described nail by nail the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Each wound that ran with so much blood that it rained red for days after. See here, even these red dirt roads are the veins of the Lord, and your fathers are the traitor communist Vietnamese bastards that have made your country bleed. I never went to listen when he came to the village, but Teddy would always go outside, sit at his feet, and say, "That's interesting," before he went back into his hut.

"You don't even know for sure that your father is dead," I said. "I've dreamed—dreamed that he was alive." Behind me, I felt him put an invisible hand on my shoulder.

"The soldier said—he said what happened," Teddy argued. "You could've just had a dream."

"So could you," I retorted.

"It's different," Teddy said. "I know the bugs showed this to me. I'm itching out of my mind. It's the truth, Bien, I swear. I have to get justice for my father. You know. You love him too."

He was my father just as much as Teddy's, I wanted to say. He was the only one I had ever known after my blood father left before I was born. He was the one who taught me how to fish, who held me during rainstorms and who practiced soccer with me even after he'd been out in the shrimp ponds all day. My first real memory was of the time he brought us ice creams all

the way from Saigon. He'd kept them wrapped in clear frozen blocks that were so cold they burned my fingertips. I'd never known anything could be so cold. And then he unwrapped the ice creams. I squeezed the plastic cup until the top of the treat came up and over the rim, melted across my tongue, and down into my thirsting mouth. It was the only time I ever tasted chocolate. Teddy's was strawberry flavor, and when we exchanged cups the ice creams entwined together like a kiss. The taste of ice cream was something that only the two of us knew, and from then on it was like no one could fully understand us but each other.

Teddy's wide, crooked nose was the same as his father's, and so was the single curl of hair that fell over their foreheads no matter how many times they brushed it back. I'd always wanted that curl. Tried to separate it out and twist my hair around my finger so it'd coil to match theirs, but it never stayed. "You love him too," Teddy said, and I felt him reach out and loop my hair to mirror his. My heartbeat pulsed through my body so quickly that I hoped he couldn't feel my skin vibrating with it when he touched me.

"Okay," I said, breathing in and out to soothe the nausea rolling in my belly. "Okay, I'll help you."

When Teddy smiled, the sun filled his mouth with light from his golden tooth. "We should do it soon," he said. "Their new commander could come at any time."

"Okay," I said again. "But we can't do it like in your dream. It has to be an accident."

"The mines," Teddy offered.

"We'll kick the soccer ball into one of the mines to trigger it," I said. As though both of our feet could make the shot together, as though we both didn't know that I was the one with better aim, as though that wasn't the reason why he'd agreed to tell me about the dream in the first place. When he'd first heard about his father's death, Teddy had flirted with self-destruction

for weeks. He cleaned the Americans' guns with his spit and tried to run away to join the VC twice before the dawn dragged him back. He hadn't asked me to come either time. I knew he'd left, though, when the next morning he was lying next to me on my cot, a wet tearstain spreading around his head like a halo.

It would be so easy to misguide an American. Just two weeks ago, one had exploded in a shower of white sand and clam shells as a Bouncing Betty shook itself loose from the ground. Teddy and I had gone to collect the opened clams from the beach after they took the body away. We knew every root and tree and bush and branch around the American camp. It would be like we were never even there.

"What're you two doing here?" a man's voice said in English. Teddy's face went dark just as a shadow blocked the sun from his skin. "You boys a coupla fags?"

Teddy and I jerked upright to face the soldier, who held his gun lazily across his chest, one finger flicking lightly at the trigger. He smacked his lips together as he rolled something around in his mouth, and when he smiled, his teeth were yellow and pasted with brown flecks. "What? Too busy staring into each other's eyes to think of something to say?"

I watched Teddy's knuckles clench so hard they turned white.

"How about, 'Yes, sir,'" the American said mockingly.

"Yes, sir," I repeated, staring at the ground so I wouldn't have to see Teddy's disgust at my obedience. My mother had taught me how to agree and apologize in English. "If they keep speaking to you, just say it over and over until they let you go," she said. I prepared the words in my mouth again, feeling them out on my tongue so that they might come out easier this time.

"Good boy," the soldier said, his eyes hard. My cheeks flushed pink. "And what about your little friend here? He can't speak?"

I glanced up at Teddy, who kept his lips pressed together so tightly they nearly disappeared. “I’m sorry, sir,” I said, unable to look at either of them.

“Just get out,” the soldier said. “Don’t let the new commander see any of this shit when he gets here.” He stood blocking the path towards our village, so I walked in the opposite direction without stopping to check if Teddy followed.

“Theo, wait,” Teddy said. I heard the leaves snap beneath his feet as he ran to catch me. “Wait, I’m sorry. I should’ve said something.”

“If you want to do this, we have to kill him tomorrow,” I said. “That soldier said their new commander is coming soon.” Now I imagined the soldier who Teddy dreamed of didn’t have curly blond hair and blue eyes and a mole on his cheek, but a brown buzzcut, yellow teeth, and eyes so dark they were almost black. I imagined his smirk as he said that bad word I didn’t know, and what it would look like once it had been torn away by a landmine.

“Okay,” Teddy said, walking backwards to try to meet my eyes. “I’m sorry, Theo.”

Ahead of us, my mother crouched on the ground next to the well in the center of our village, washing rice. She poured the muddy water into the red dirt and it spread away from her like streams of blood as she washed, poured, and washed again, until the whole clearing was soaked in crimson. Her hair draped around her face now, and the gloss on her lips had been smeared off. The rice glittered like teeth in her basket. Washed away, my mother did not look new and pearly white like her rice. She just looked old.

“If you kill the American, she won’t have to live like this anymore,” Teddy’s father whispered in my ear. “I could come home. I could help you.”

“Tomorrow,” I said to Teddy, walking over to help my mother carry the rice. “Tomorrow we’ll do it.”

That night, I stared up at the moonlight pooled in the metal curves of the roof. The earth pressed into my back and cradled me like I imagine my father would've held me as a child, in one large, cracked hand. Beside me, the pale crescent of Teddy's back curved away into the darkness. I listened to the whine of mortar shells, the chirp of the geckos in the elephant grass, the slow sucking of the waves at the shore. A fat blue bug glowed in the moonlight as it hovered around Teddy's head, slipping visions into his ears. I imagined the twitching of his hands was really his fingers cocked around a gun. I knew he was dreaming of killing the American. If we didn't carry out our plans tomorrow, he would dream of it every night until it was done.

And I would dream of our soccer field and the sun on our skin and the time when red dirt was just red dirt. Teddy's father was the first to teach me how to play. He'd packed cloth rags into a lumpy, tight wad and secured them together with old fishing lines before he got us a real soccer ball from the city. We'd spend hours kicking it past the three sticks outlining Teddy's poorly guarded goal. Eventually Teddy would get tired of our victory cheers and wander away to find something else to do, but we kept on dribbling and dodging and scoring until he returned with news of dinner. Teddy's father would describe in hushed tones the time he visited My Dinh stadium with its vast green stretch of grass, soaring lights, its rows of gleaming metal bleachers. He'd almost played semi-pro before Teddy was born. Before the war. *You* could go all the way, he said as we shook red dust from our ball and scattered the goal sticks. The agility! The offense! I would be a star in no time.

Since Teddy's father left, there had been no news of the national soccer team. Maybe they too were buried beneath six feet of rubble, suffocated inside Viet Cong tunnels, target practice for the very guns I was so good at cleaning. Now our old soccer clearing was a minefield. Now, I dreamed of using a hand grenade for a ball. I dreamed of a Bouncing Betty

hopping between us like a hot potato, waiting for the right kick to set it off. Into the soldiers' foxholes they went. Goal after goal after goal.

The next morning, my mother knotted her hair into a bun and kissed red gloss onto her lips. I scratched at the new bug bite rising out of my left arm. Lincoln met us in the line of mothers marching down to the sea, dragging his little sister by one hand. She sucked at a bread crust lathered in red bean paste. A soldier handed me a gun. I handed it back, cleaner. Teddy's eyes moved between the Americans, squinting to distinguish a mole or blue eye from the smear of peach skin that the sun blurred them into. I itched at the bug bite on my arm so hard that it tracked a line of blood all the way down to the tip of my pinky finger. As I watched my mother sit in the soldiers' laps and smile without creases around her eyes, the dream pricked at the inside of my skull, filled the shadows with the bodies of dying Americans.

"Do you know what you have to do when the soldiers come?" Teddy's father had asked us one night, back when he still had to crouch down to look in our eyes. We shook our heads. "You have to listen to what they say. Listen to your mothers. Don't try to follow me. I will come get you when it's time."

"What if they hurt us?" Teddy asked, chewing at his nails. Minh's father had left the night before, and Lincoln's the night before that. My blood father hadn't needed the war as an excuse to leave, and now when we woke up in the morning, my real one would be gone too.

"Then I'll hurt them back," Teddy's father said, smiling at us. He wore thick-rimmed glasses that were taped on one side and his back was permanently curved a little from bending over fishing nets. He didn't look like the kind of man who would make bombs until his fingers bled, bellycrawl through mud, even hold a gun. He didn't look like he could hurt anyone.

"What if they hurt you?" I said.

He smiled again. "Well, you don't have to worry about me, do you? I'm quicker than anyone else out there. I seem to remember scoring three goals on you last time we played."

Now Teddy and I practiced kicking the soccer ball through the mango grove, aiming it at the rotten fruits that clustered beneath the trees and watching them burst open with flies and gray flesh that sloughed away from the stone inside. We couldn't go home or else our mothers wouldn't let us leave again that night, so we ate the mangoes with sticky fingers in the trees until their shadows stretched into and over the sky.

Mosquitoes frothed in the air around us as we crept toward the American camp and settled into the high grass just beyond the outskirts of their tents. I clutched the soccer ball to my chest, rubbing my fingers over the faded plastic where me, Teddy, and his father had written our names. Le Bien, Duong Chien, Duong Hai. Soon these too would become another casualty of war, and all that remained of us would be Theo and Teddy Roosevelt.

"How do we know he'll come out here?" I whispered after we'd waited for a few minutes, periodically slapping at the mosquitoes on our arms and shooing dream bugs away.

"He'll come," Teddy said, his eyes fixed ahead at the trees.

"And when he comes, will you be ready to do what needs to be done?" Teddy's father whispered from behind me. I yanked around to face him, and there he was, with his glasses cracked now on the left lens and his hunchback still giving him the impression of leaning forward, as though he was about to offer me a hug. He smiled, and his dimples pressed into his cheeks like twin thumbprints in dough. "Ba," I breathed out, blinking the tears out of my eyes so I wouldn't lose sight of him in the blurriness.

"My son," he said. "Con trai. You've missed me, haven't you."

I glanced over at Teddy, but he was still squinting towards the American camp. This time I let the tears gather in my eyes. “I miss you,” I said. “But you’re just a dream.”

“I’m real, though,” he said. “I’m alive, and I’m waiting for you. Every night I pray to hold you again. I only think of how much I love you. I wish that you were my blood son so that I could have loved you from the moment of your birth. Oh, I still remember the first day I met you. You cried and kicked me in the chest. I knew you’d be a soccer player then. I knew you were destined for so much more than this. And look, look how far you’ve come. Can the national team say they have done so much to serve their country? With one shot, you could save so many men from my fate.”

“But you’re not dead,” I said.

“Theo, wake up. The American is here,” Teddy whispered.

I looked up from where I’d been tracing the shapes of our names across the surface of the ball. A man was standing a few trees over from us, but it was so dark that I couldn’t tell if his hair was blond or his eyes blue or his cheek spotted with moles. He unzipped his pants and began to hum to himself.

“Is he standing next to a mine?” I mouthed at Teddy.

He pointed to the lump in the ground next to the man’s foot, so slight that it could’ve been an anthill if not for the thin slice of moonlight that gleamed in the exposed metal. Now that my eyes had adjusted to the darkness, I could see that the soldier’s hair was still cropped close to his temples. Maybe he’d only been in Vietnam for a few weeks. Not even enough time for his hair to grow out. Certainly not enough time to kill Teddy’s father, who had been dead for two months.

“Teddy, I don’t think this is the right one,” I whispered.

"What are you talking about?" he whispered furiously, gesturing towards the man. "It was my dream! I saw him! I know."

"I can't do it," I said. I cringed at the look on Teddy's face, his eyebrows creased, his eyes dark like that American's. My insides squeezed like I suddenly needed to take a piss.

"That's not what this is about, is it," Teddy said lowly. "You fucking flake. You still don't believe that my father is dead."

"That's not true," I said, my voice cracking over the words.

"Well, it doesn't matter whether or not you believe it," Teddy spat. "He was my father, not yours. I get to decide."

"Hey," the American called. "Who's there?"

"Oh shit," Teddy whispered. "Shit, shit, shit."

"Show yourselves!" the soldier shouted, his voice pitched up at the end as though he were still mid-hum. He sounded almost like he was afraid. Afraid men would blindly spray bullets at any leaf that rustled, monkey that squeaked, boy that hid in the bushes. He wouldn't even know he'd hit us. We'd rot there in the grass and our mothers would hope that we'd run away to help the Viet Cong and that we'd return after the war, and when the war ended and we did not return they'd hope that we'd found ourselves wives and settled down somewhere, and they would dream of us always whispering over their shoulders, just beyond reach.

My foot planned the arc of the ball's path as it had for every other shot I'd taken. Lock the ankle. Turn the planter foot, brace it. Kick the ball with the inside of my foot. I watched it spin towards the lump in the ground that waited to be popped, and like a bug bite scratched until it bled, surge upwards in an explosion of dirt and shrapnel. The ball glanced off the mine and rolled away. The soldier took a step towards it, the metal clicked into place, and before I could

blink the earth had swallowed him. The boom shook through the trees and into my ears, slamming against my skull like a hammer ringing against metal.

"You did it," Teddy breathed out. "You fucking did it."

Teddy's father did this. This was no toe popper; it was a bomb, a real bomb that he had planted, that he had tended and watered and loved so that it had bloomed into a bouquet of fire and metal. I crawled out into the clearing towards the dark lump huddled on the ground. The shoe that he'd stepped on the mine with had blown off and lay nearby, still attached to his leg. "Oh, God," I heard Teddy say behind me, and then he retched into the grass.

Any moment now, the Americans would burst into the clearing guns akimbo, ready to mow down the two boys who had really been Viet Cong agents all along. At least, that's what they would write in their reports. Our mothers would never know what happened to us until the soldiers raided the village, tore their boy children out of their beds, even Lincoln, and shot them down with the same guns we had prepared so precisely for this exact moment.

"Please, Theo, we have to get out of here," Teddy moaned, shaking my shoulders. I couldn't pull my eyes away from the dead man. Now that I was by his side, I saw that his smile had climbed down into his throat and lined the open ridges of his torn skin. In the moonlight his teeth shone like small stars. He'd had good teeth. I told myself a story. As a kid, his mom had always insisted that he brush them twice a day, and he'd never had a cavity, not even once, unlike the rest of the Americans with their mouths full of gold. He could win a girl over with just a smile. That was how he'd wooed his fiancée, who he'd promised to marry as soon as he returned from the war. And he'd smiled to get her to agree. Now his teeth were just constellations in his throat.

"Theo, please, please Theo, what's wrong?" Teddy pleaded, clutching my arm in his bloodstained hands. "We did what we had to do. They'll never know it was us if we leave now."

The soldier's arms and legs twisted awkwardly around his body as though he had been thrown to the ground mid-dance. His limbs were thin and hard, like they had just begun to form muscle. His hair was laid out in bloody strips over his skull, and the skin of his cheeks had been torn away so thoroughly that it was impossible to tell whether he had a mole. The redness pooled beneath where his nose had been knocked aside on his face. Once Teddy's father had returned from Saigon with a Mr. Potato Head all the way from America, and we had spent hours screwing his features on wrong. We had exchanged arms for legs, mouths and eyes for noses and mustaches and for eyebrows and eyes again. We had built our very own dead American soldier, with his very own drooping blue eyes and sideways nose and gaping, toothless mouth.

I tried not to look below the man's waist, where his penis still hung out curled into a wrinkled, fleshy imitation of a seashell, or a millipede. A dark stain spread out from his crotch. All his fellow soldiers would remember him as the man who died with his dick out. They would laugh. They would laugh, but secretly they would dread every time they felt their bladder filling or their dick hardening. They would hold it in until their organs pressed and strained at their skin, and even then they would wait until they were completely, utterly alone before release. The rustle of elephant grass or bleep of a tokay gecko would be enough to make their hearts race in terror. And they would come to avoid even the simplest of pleasures, like drinking and women, for fear of death in a moment of vulnerability. Then they would not laugh. They would remember the soldier's askew nose and wilted penis and his teeth like stars in his throat.

"I can't leave without you," Teddy said, leaning his forehead against my temple.

A few moments later, "C'mon, please. Just say something."

And I would have, I would have, but my teeth were in my throat and my mind was on my unborn son thousands of miles away in California, and I was thinking that I would never dance with my fiancée again. I was thinking that there would be no one to take my dog on walks anymore because my fiancée would be busy with the baby, so he would grow fat and old staring out the window and waiting for me to climb the stairs to the front door. In my story that house, with the glass windows and oak floors and three bedrooms for the future kids, would slowly be chewed into dust by the rats and termites. And the big green backyard with the soccer goals at either end would grow into a forest of gnarled weeds.

"Only a few more minutes, Theo, then we really gotta go," Teddy whispered. "They could be coming anytime now." Beads of sweat glistened on his cheekbones, even though it was cooler now in the dark. His eyes moved from my face to the dead man's and then back in the direction of the American camp.

Already bugs had begun to descend on the soldier. Gnats circled his mouth and mosquitoes filled their bottles on the blood cooling now at the base of his neck and throat. A dream bug floated over to his ear, which was torn ever so slightly at the lobe, and began to suck. In the darkness, his skin stitched itself into the familiar curves and lines of Teddy's father's face. This is what I had been dreaming all along. I had killed him yet again, only this time his son would not have anyone to teach him to keep his teeth so perfectly clean or to fill his cavities with gold when he could not.

"Theo," Teddy sobbed. "He stepped on a mine. That's all. He stepped on a mine."

"Oh, what have you done, little one?" Teddy's father said, reaching out to brush away my tears. "It's alright. I forgive you. We all do these things for the ones we love."

I leaned over and closed the dead man's eyes with two fingers. I wiped the bugs from his eyes and patted his hair down over the exposed slashes of his skull. Teddy watched me, his breath coming in rapid bursts, his feet turned in the direction of the forest. But whether he ran and I stayed, or we ran together, it wouldn't matter. I had walked the long path of my life and his life and his father's before him and found that what waited at the end was all the same.

"Please, Bien," Teddy said, grabbing my face and pressing our foreheads together so I had to stare into his eyes. Into the deep, dark brown of the chocolate ice cream, so sweet and cool on that hot day when we learned the secret flavor that out of everyone in the entire world, only we knew. Ever since then I had wanted for just one more taste of what hid beneath Teddy's eyes.

"I'm so sorry I did this to you," Teddy said. "I love you."

"Okay," I said, my voice hoarse and scratchy like I had swallowed the shrapnel from the mine. I reached forward to wipe the sweat and tears away from Teddy's cheeks and felt them dimple beneath my fingers as he smiled. "Okay. I'm coming with you."

Empty Nest Syndrome

The cherries had gone up in price again. $4.98 per pound instead of $4.59, another thirty-nine cents of his state-issued welfare disappearing into the insatiable maw of pandemic prices. Yes, of course Renard knew that cherries were more expensive because there were fewer workers going out into the orchards to pick the fruit, fertilize the trees, spray the pesticides. He knew that there were fewer workers because the main demographic of cherry-pickers were men over the age of forty-two: men who were now bedridden, their bodies ravaged with aches and chills, fevers and coughs, the virus taking even the taste of the cherries they worked so hard to pick.

This was one of the main reasons Renard wore his mask so diligently clamped over his nose and mouth. Ever since his doctor prescribed him bifocal lenses, and his wife filed for divorce, his sight and touch had become unreliable senses; taste and smell were two of the only ones he had left.

The cherries left in the H-E-B produce section were small and split by ugly gray scars. Renard tutted as he looked them over, removing the worst from his bag and replacing them with the best from others. It was a habit he'd picked up again after Emily had left, exchanging bruised fruit for fresh, switching out small eggs for bigger ones. When they had first started dating, she'd walk away and pretend to examine something else until he was done, and eventually he'd gotten the hint. Now that she was gone there was no reason for him to stop.

"Sir, you can't do that," a woman's voice called from behind him.

"What?" Renard shouted back, placing his cherries in his cart and wheeling it away. "I can't hear you."

The store clerk shook her head and turned back to stocking oranges into a display pyramid. From behind, with her square shoulders and graying hair smoothed into a tight bun, she could've been Emily waiting for him to finish exchanging his fruit. She could've been his mother, about to turn and see him at seven years old eating cherries out of the bags. He picked one out and chewed, gnawing all the way through the stem and the flesh and into the pit until it cracked open. An ache gathered in the left side of his chest, and Renard massaged it with one hand as he collected the rest of his groceries. Avoided eye contact with mothers and sons, happy couples. He headed to the self-checkout line, where he deftly balanced the bag of cherries just so that it registered as half a pound lighter than its actual weight. $5.98, the scale reported.

Renard's apartment complex sat ten minutes away from the H-E-B, situated between the leftovers of the city and the green squares of manicured lawns. Muscle memory urged his hands to turn right at the stoplight, to drive deeper into the suburbia where Emily lived in their house, but he guided his old Kia into the left turn lane instead. There was a grocery store closer to his new apartment, but she'd gone to this one for the entire twenty-seven years of their marriage. Now he'd make a trip for some fruit, a forgotten half-gallon of milk, certain he'd recognize her even with the anonymity of a mask. She always shopped on Tuesdays. Once or twice he thought he might've seen her, but as soon as he had resolved to approach, his insides dropped into his feet like stones and held them in place until she disappeared into another aisle.

The midday sun beat down on Renard as he pulled into the parking lot in front of his building and gathered his groceries from the backseat. He had to squint through his glasses to pick out his apartment number from the rows of identical gray doors lining the hallway, but as it was, he still tried his key in his next-door neighbor's lock before he found the right one.

Inside the apartment, Renard set his bags down among all the belongings he'd collected in his seventy-two years of life. Even though it'd been three months and eight days since Emily had asked him to leave, he'd only just begun to unpack from the move, and the one-room apartment was still crowded with unlabeled cardboard boxes and half-wrapped canvases. A framed Rothko print, nearly five feet tall, leaned against the wall opposite the mattress he had yet to buy a bedframe for. In the dining room, an IKEA table and chair set that his son had donated from his garage housed Renard's laptop, stacks of prints, and a plate congealed with grease from last night's dinner. The computer screen was still open to his last searches:

Cherry orchards in Chile. What seasons do cherries grow in Chile. Nutritional benefits to cherries. Most romantic flowers to buy your wife. Dallas airport to Santiago cost.

Renard exchanged his new groceries for the old ones molding in his fridge. He hadn't lived on his own in so long that he still bought enough food for two, which meant his milk often curdled before he could finish a gallon and his bread grew green and black spots unless he remembered to freeze it in time. He had more excuses to grocery shop now, but he also had to pretend to scan items at the self-checkout so he could afford the extra expense.

After putting away his food, Renard rinsed a bowl of cherries and sat down in front of his computer, pushing aside some of the clutter. A pill bottle announced its fall from the table with a loud rattle. Delicately, almost surgically, Renard worked a cherry in his mouth to make a direct incision along the curve that hid the pit inside. He sucked the sweet juice of the fruit's flesh and then rolled the pit around in his teeth, gnawing on the hard stone until it gave way beneath the pressure of his molars. He picked another cherry from the bowl and began to chew again.

"Renard, you're obsessing again," Emily would say as she tapped the stack of glossy prints on his desk. He'd started getting them for her when she mentioned she'd wanted to be an

artist, but even long after they had enough paintings to cover their walls, he couldn't stop buying new ones. Just one more, and she might sleep facing towards him again. Just one more, and she would cancel the divorce filing. "Remember you shouldn't eat the cherry pits. They're not good for you." Remember you have a family. Remember you had your chances, she said as she held his hand in her lap, the orange manila folder on the coffee table between them. He crunched down vengefully on the cherry pit still in his mouth.

Can you undo a divorce or do you have to get remarried. Why do Chilean cherries taste better than normal cherries. Average age of cherry-pickers.

He'd honestly been good at managing it back then—the itch for control, the obsession over something constant in his life. When he'd first met Emily, he sent her flowers after their dates just the right amount of times. He waited a full year before he proposed. He kissed her belly every night after they found out she was pregnant, but he didn't buy hundreds of baby clothes or diapers. It was only years later, when Emily began waiting in the bathroom for him to fall asleep before she came to bed, when she stopped kissing him goodbye before work each morning, that he slipped. The cherries were an old habit.

When he was young, Renard's mother told him that while she was pregnant with him, she had only been able to stomach cherries for weeks. She'd won six neighborhood baking competitions in a row with her cherry pie recipe, which she'd only make twice a year: once for the contest, once for Christmas dinner. So she tried the cherries in pies, then in cakes, then in tarts, until she was so sick of the taste she could hardly eat. After his own diagnosis, she said that maybe his obsessiveness had soaked into her stomach and demanded that she eat and eat and eat until she could no longer look at a cherry without tasting that same cloying sweetness. No matter what she did, her other fruit pies weren't good enough to take even second place at the

neighborhood competition. And even though Renard ate so many cherries that he could've been a pie himself, she couldn't look at him without the memory of what she had lost.

For years afterwards Renard tried countless cherries in all their species and forms, wondering what it was that she couldn't love about him. Maybe his mother had made a mistake. Maybe Emily had made a mistake. If they ate the right cherries, if they accepted the right art prints, then they would understand his obsessiveness. They would forgive him for it.

He'd moved out right at the beginning of March, just before lockdown began. Renard thought maybe the quarantine was the reason why Emily refused to let him come by to pick up the rest of his prints, why she wouldn't come to the door when he visited on his walks around the old neighborhood. They were both getting older, after all. They were both "high-risk." When he waited in line at their family clinic for his first dose of the vaccine, he thought she might be there too. She'd always been responsible about that sort of thing, always the one to take Justin for his flu shots and submit the records to the school nurse. But no sign of her. Not even afterwards, when the vaccine fever made him dream that the heat was her body in the bed next to him again.

Now, the cherry fresh on his tongue, Renard's hand trembled as he booked the flight: Dallas International to Santiago, Chile, for $1,200 on January 21st, 2021. At least those prices had dropped since Covid began. His skin itched at the thought of sitting so close to other people on the flight, all that recycled air pushing the virus out of their lungs and into his. Never mind; it couldn't be avoided. He clicked on *apartments for rent in Chile* and struggled through Spanish ads for sublets, roommates, and hostels. Someone somewhere had to be hiring cherry-pickers. He was a man over the age of forty-two, and healthy, which was a rarity nowadays.

The sudden ringing of his phone cut through the silence in the apartment, jerking Renard away from his Internet search. His son had gotten him the phone for Christmas, one for him and

one for Emily, and theirs were the only numbers he had saved. “Hello?” he asked into the speaker.

“I saw there’s a $1,200 charge on the card,” Emily said on the other end.

“Oh,” Renard said, his tongue sticking in his mouth at the sound of her voice. “Oh—right. The shared card.”

“I’ve told you to go to the bank to fix that a dozen times.” It was only mid-afternoon, but she sounded tired, he thought. She liked to go to bed early, get a full nine hours of sleep. Was something keeping her up nowadays? Was she thinking of him? Was there another man, maybe? She was saying something else, but that’s right—the doctor had told him his hearing really was going, too. “I said, what are you buying that’s so expensive? Is it another painting?”

“No,” he said. “I’m moving to Chile to start a cherry orchard there.”

The other end of the line was silent. If he listened closely enough, he thought he might hear her breathing.

“The price of cherries has been going up,” he explained, grasping at the chance for a longer conversation with her. “It’s cheaper to grow them on my own—and they have the best flavor there, Chile does, I mean.”

Still quiet. Maybe he could tell her he loved her again.

“The charge was for a plane flight,” he said.

“Is this to get my attention,” she asked.

“What? No,” Renard protested automatically.

“You must be joking,” Emily said, her voice beginning to shrill. “You can’t move to Chile. You don’t even speak Spanish.”

"It's not a joke," he said. "I booked the flight." Then, before he could stop himself, he added, "What reason do I have to stay?"

In the beat of silence that followed, Renard cursed to himself, cycling through a dozen potential ways to redirect the conversation to their relationship. But with Emily, he knew, the damage was already done. "Yeah, that's what I asked myself too," she said flatly, all traces of distress removed from her voice. The phone beeped once, and then the call went dead.

"Goddammit," Renard shouted, heaving his phone across the room into the Rothko print. The glass frame tinkled musically as it shattered, crunched under his shoes as he stormed over to rip the print out of its casing. Renard tore into it greedily, shredding the red paper with his juice-stained fingertips, using his teeth when his hands began to shake too much. Emily had hung this painting in their living room after they'd bought it on their trip to the MoMA in New York City. The paper was bitter and gluey in his mouth, but the memory made the taste more bearable, like he'd consumed her love for the painting and absorbed it into himself instead. The ache in his chest throbbed, demanding to be felt.

Renard breathed in and out as he stood among the ribbons of paper on his floor. He picked up his phone, prepared to call Emily again, prepared to start all over, but the screen was spiderwebbed with cracks and little fragments of glass pressed into the pads of his thumbs when he tried to hit the call button again. He went to his computer and loaded up his email instead. *Justin,* he typed. *I'm afraid I've dropped my phone and it's shattered. Could you help me get it fixed at the Apple store? Love, Dad.*

A new email pinged in from his son only two minutes later. *Dad,* it began. *Mom said you're moving to Chile. Is that true? You need to call me.*

Justin, Renard said. *I cannot call you because my phone is broken. Please meet me at the Apple store later today. Does 4 p.m. work for you?*

Dad, he said. *You can't avoid answering my questions. I get off work at 5:00. I'll pick you up after.*

Renard was unwrapping more of his prints so that he could take pictures of them to sell on eBay when Justin strode into his apartment maskless only a few hours later. His son eyed the room, taking in the shreds of Rothko and lack of bedframe.

"Let's go, Dad," Justin said. "I don't have all day. I have to pick up Melissa from soccer at seven."

"I'm coming," Renard said, heaving himself unsteadily to his feet.

"This place is a dump," Justin said, stooping to pick the discarded pill bottle off the floor. "Have you been taking your meds?"

"Of course I have," Renard snapped, hoping Justin hadn't noticed how many pills were left in the container. He picked his phone up from the table and shoved some of the cherries into his pants pocket. "Don't patronize me."

Justin lifted his hands in mock surrender, backing towards the door of the apartment. The two made their way out to where Justin's gleaming silver Audi was parked next to Renard's beaten Kia. Renard brushed a sports water bottle and pink vape pen off his son's passenger seat and sat down, settling himself into the seat while Justin started the car.

"I need to get my phone fixed so I can see if I have any missed calls from your mother," Renard said to fill the silence.

"Oh, come on, Dad," Justin said, whipping the car out of the parking lot so fast that Renard had to clutch his armrest to steady himself. Nausea rolled in his stomach. "After the shit you pulled today? I'd be surprised if she spoke to you again."

"What did I do?" Renard protested, heat knotting in his chest. He squeezed the cherries in his pocket so tightly that he knew there would be red stains in his pants from the juices. In their household, Justin and Emily had always been a united front against him. You shouldn't yell at him over tracking in dirt, she would say. You're being unfair to Mom, Justin would interject in an argument. "I'm trying my best," Renard said now, like he always did.

"You're moving to Chile for *cheaper cherries*," Justin said. "Do you even realize how ridiculous that sounds?"

He waited half a moment for Renard to respond, but then barreled forward before he had a chance to collect his thoughts. "Don't you want to see your grandkids grow up? If you need money that bad, why didn't you just ask, Dad?"

"It's not—it's not just about the cherries," Renard said, his voice trailing off.

The side mirror reflected Justin's middle finger as he merged onto the highway amidst a cacophony of car horns. "You're moving to get away from us, then," he said, like it was a fact.

"I'm not!" Renard said. "You and Mom always assume the worst about me. I've been isolating alone since the beginning of the pandemic. Is it so bad that I just want to get out?"

Justin was quiet for a moment, the arrow on his speedometer contemplating the area just above seventy. "Why do you think I always took Mom's side?" he asked finally, his gaze rigid on the road ahead of them even though they didn't have to exit for another five miles.

"Because you two—"

"Because you'd get on our case for every little detail," Justin interrupted. He raised his voice mockingly. "Why'd you leave your stuff out on the table? An A- in biology instead of an A+? Why are you crying because I bought more art instead of Christmas presents?"

"I wouldn't say that," Renard protested. When he thought back, there were his memories of cheering at Justin's soccer games, a celebration dinner for his graduation, yearly art shows. Maybe some lower grades and a healthy amount of teen angst mixed in.

"You did," Justin said.

Renard's mouth dried recalling the earlier conversation with Emily. The beeping of the dead call. Justin wouldn't have answered his emails if he hated him, he reminded himself. He chose his words carefully. "I'm sorry if you felt that way," he said. "I shouldn't have said those things to you."

Justin let out a harsh, sharp laugh. "My therapist says it was borderline abusive."

"It was discipline," Renard insisted, his fingers itching for control, for the sharp, fleshy burst of fruit under his tongue. He picked a cherry from his pocket and chewed through the taste of lint until he reached the pit, and then he chewed through that too. His vision swam with dark spots and he blinked to clear them away.

"Whatever you say, Dad," Justin sighed, his foot deciding finally to press down on the accelerator. They were going seventy. Seventy-five. Renard flexed his hands, now spotted and shriveled with age, and wondered if the muscles in his fingers might remember the tenderness with which he had first held his son the same way they remembered the route to Emily's house.

"It's been awhile since I've seen the kids," he said after a few more miles had passed under the car.

"They have busy schedules," Justin said, switching into the exit lane. "After-school activities just started again now that they're easing up on Covid restrictions. Melissa has soccer, you know. Tommy's in Science Olympiad practice three days a week."

"Maybe we could have a family dinner before I leave," Renard said.

"Yeah. Sure. We'll work something out," Justin said noncommittally. "It's still Covid, you know."

And yet we're sitting in the car without masks, and your kids are at soccer and Science Olympiad practice, Renard thought, but the words stuck in his mouth with the bitter remains of the Rothko painting. He massaged the skin where a headache was beginning to form in his temples. "Does Mom still come over?" he asked instead.

"Sometimes," Justin said, pausing as he turned into the mall parking lot. "We wear masks and eat dinner outside."

"How is she?" Renard asked tentatively.

Justin parked in the corner of the lot, far from any cars that could possibly scratch his paint. It was a habit Renard had taught him when he was young. Justin turned to look at his father, his eyes tired. For the first time, Renard noticed wrinkles lining his son's mouth and cheeks that matched his own. "Don't, Dad," Justin said. "I'm an adult. I'm not going to ferry messages between you two."

"It's not like I haven't tried to talk to her," Renard said, clenching his hands into shaky fists.

Justin exhaled slowly. "I guess I can say something. But I wouldn't expect much."

Renard's heart picked up in his chest, kicking against the knot that had formed inside. If anyone could open Emily to him, it was Justin. He tried to remember what he'd done when

Emily had been happy so he could do it when he saw her again. Had he held her hand in a way she liked? What had he said to make her fall in love with him?

"So, do we have to call to let them know we're here?" Justin asked.

"Why would we have to do that?" Renard said.

"You have to make an appointment to go inside now," Justin said slowly. "Did you not make an appointment, Dad?"

"I didn't know," Renard admitted.

Justin sighed heavily and smacked his hands against the steering wheel. "Great. Well, this was a royal waste of my time."

"I'm sorry," Renard said. As they sat, the summer heat sank through the car's air conditioning and settled in the sweat gripped between his palms. He thought to offer dinner together, but Justin was already shifting the car back into drive and pulling out of the lot. Instead Renard stared out of the car, watching a family of three hold hands as they entered the Apple store. On the side of the highway farms rolled by his window, punctuated with clusters of cookie-cutter houses painted in a spectrum of blues. He and Emily had raised Justin in one of those houses so many years ago. The layout was probably the same. He closed his eyes and found his bedroom with Emily still curled up asleep, Justin in her arms, mourning doves cooing outside the window. He opened his mouth to ask if his son remembered.

"Look at that," Justin said suddenly, stomping on the brakes so hard that Renard jerked forward in his seat. "There's your cherry trees."

And there they were: rows upon rows of them, an entire orchard, their branches redolent with pink blossoms and small red clusters of fruit. How could he have forgotten there were cherry trees in Dallas, only miles from where they'd lived for the past twenty-seven years? The

cherries that grew in Chile were supposed to be especially sweet, round, ruby red, but what about these? The words stuck in his mouth as Justin sped up again: Pull over. Pull over. Let me pick some cherries for your mother.

The orchard stretched and fell away into more townhouses and farmland, but Renard kept his eyes on the window. Growing up, his family had lived on the other side of Dallas. Now he remembered that when he was young, he would walk to the cherry orchard down the road and spend his mornings cupped in the branches, eating the fruit in fistfuls. He'd make a basket out of his T-shirt and carefully ferry dozens of cherries back to his house, where he'd leave them out in case his mother might try one and change her mind about them. Change her mind about him.

And his mother, usually ever so careful about the details, always so sure to keep her house in exact order, would leave them there to rot. Renard would watch day by day as they blackened and shriveled until finally the fruit flies came and he gathered them back into his T-shirt basket to bury outside. Those Dallas cherries had turned his blood red and obsessive, seeking out more fruit, more art, more reasons for people to love him. All Emily had to do was taste just one and she would understand.

"What is so special about a goddamn cherry, Renard?" Emily would say. "I've eaten cherries before. Our marriage has fallen apart. Not because of some stupid fruit. Because of you. I will be old and alone for the rest of my life because of you."

Renard clenched the armrests of his seat as Justin pulled off into a McDonald's drive-thru near his apartment. "I didn't see anything edible in your apartment," he said, as though he was annoyed that he'd had to make another stop. The grease from the food melted into the air and made it thicker, harder to breathe. Renard chewed another cherry pit from his pocket. The ache

in his chest spread down his left arm and into his fingertips, desperate to touch his son before he left. To touch anyone.

Justin pulled into Renard's apartment complex, navigating through the rows of buildings until he reached 1421. "Just make sure you talk to your mother for me," Renard said, clutching the McDonald's bag to his chest as he maneuvered himself out of the car and stood next to the open passenger door. "Please."

"I'll talk to her," Justin agreed. "Call me after you make an appointment." He leaned across the passenger seat to close the door before he could say anything else. Of course, Renard couldn't call him because his phone was broken, but Justin was already gone.

Inside his apartment, his laptop was still open on the dining room table. He set the now-lukewarm fast food to the side before the smell made his nausea surge back up his throat, and then he tapped his computer to life. One-way plane ticket from Dallas to Santiago. $1,200 glared back at him accusingly.

"No, no," Renard murmured to himself, slamming the laptop shut. He'd just wasted a thousand dollars that he didn't have, and for what—so that Emily might call him, beg him to stay, tell him that she still loved him? Of course he'd known he used the shared card. He hadn't even had enough money in his own bank account, replenished biweekly with Social Security and Covid relief checks, to pay for the ticket himself. And now even that was gone—wasted, Chile no different from Dallas, no less lonely.

A sob bubbled up in Renard's stomach and expanded into his lungs. It wrenched itself from the narrow length of his throat until he thought the largeness of it might tear him apart. He stumbled towards the kitchen, opening the fridge and grabbing the bag of cherries from inside. He shoved one in his mouth and chewed viciously. The bitter taste of paper unfurled on his

tongue like a flower. Tears filled and overflowed the crags of his aged cheeks, dripping into his open mouth. It received them like a baptism.

"Please, Emily," Renard cried, pushing whole cherries into his mouth now, stems and all. "Try the cherries. Just one and you'll understand." He chewed furiously, his teeth nearly cracked on the pits, until he finally ruptured those too and the taste of almonds saturated his tongue.

That persistent ache in his chest now dispersed through his muscles, nerves, capillaries. His limbs moved slow and heavy, nausea rolling in his gut even as he forced more cherries in. "What is this," Renard gasped, clutching his stomach. "Oh my God. Oh my God, it's the coronavirus." He reached for his phone, only to feel the broken glass sharp against his skin again. "Emily, Emily," he wailed. "I'm going to die."

"It's been three months, Renard," Emily's voice said from behind him. He turned to catch sight of her, but she had already begun to whisper in his other ear. "But it's been over for much longer than that. When will you accept it?"

"It's not fair," he wheezed, rubbing at his chest as though he could loosen his tightening lungs. "I still love you."

"Oh, baby," Emily murmured, leaning in and caressing his cheek. Her hands smoothed his hair back from his forehead, like his mother used to do when he had a fever as a child. "I know, I know. What have you done to yourself?"

The heat pressed in on him; he was nearly giddy with it now. His teeth shifted and rolled in his mouth, digging into his gums as he crunched down, unsure now whether he was chewing the cherries or his own molars. He shouldn't have eaten the pits, he knew. He had ever since he was a child, even though his mother always reminded him not to swallow the fruit seeds when he ate the scraps from her pies. How many did she say it would take for him to die? He couldn't

remember. Renard shoved more cherries in his mouth, chewed, felt his dentures loosening in his gums from the pressure. Fruit burst under his tongue, fleshy and hot, like another mouth on his. Kissing him sweetly. He would accept this love if he could have nothing else. He would chew until there was nothing left.