

Candi's Cabaret

by

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ABSTRACT

Candi's Cabaret is a novel in stories centered on place/theme/character. The stories are all tethered in some way to a strip club on the outskirts of Youngstown next door to a motel and focus (primarily) on the women who do/have worked there. Each section has its own plot but in the background of each it follows the story of Grace/Elliot, zir sister Lindsey, and Celeste. The overarching background plot follows Grace/Elliot and Celeste developing a romantic relationship while Grace/Elliot rejects zir assigned sex and starts to neglect zir younger sister in favor of exploring zir new identity. Eventually (about mid-novel) Lindsey is abducted/goes missing which begins to erode the relationship between Celeste and Elliot, until the end when Lindsey's corpse is discovered hidden in the trees behind the club.

Candi's Cabaret was written to display a sense of solidarity between marginalized women and explore the identities of women who do sex work (ranging from our societys most acceptable to our least). While doing so the novel also explores the attitudes and dangers surrounding this kind of work and the environment it creates, not only for the women themselves but female sexed children who grow up near it. Intersecting issues of gender, sexuality and poverty are examined through the different narrator's perspectives to try and reach a comprehensive view of how these things shape the world that marginalized women live in.

I.

We Followed the Road Up North

When we pulled up to the motel there was a possum in the road with its rear end squashed so hard and so flat you could see the tire tracks in its ass. It was still propped up on its front legs, its upper body swaying in the wind like it was some kind of drunk dancing, eyes half closed and somehow still alive. Lindsey was up front cause she always had to be up front, and the moment she saw it she started bawling her eyes out, asking Ma to save it.

That's when I closed my book and popped my head up between their seats to see what was going on and saw it, all the gore, and thought how Lindsey must be so dumb to not realize some things are just past the point of saving. I think I even saw a loop of its guts poking out, perfect and noose-like.

“You've got to stop,” she kept wailing. “We got to get it to a vet.” Lindsey's face was a ball of snot and she twisted her hand in the loose fabric of our Ma's sleeve. Lindsey had to give her rabbit up in the move, and it seemed that more than anything had wrecked her. I tried to catch Ma's eyes in the rearview but they were hidden behind a wall of black glass. She'd been wearing the glasses all day, though it hadn't even been sunny since we crossed over into Kentucky.

“You have to do something,” Lindsey pleaded. I heaved a sigh and settled my body back down into the mound of trash bags and clothes in the back. I flipped my book, *Mad Women! Thieves, Liars, and Killers*, back open. It was the last thing my Pa bought me. I wondered briefly if he was trying to tell me something. Something maybe about Ma.

Upfront she set her mouth in a firm line and steered towards the edge of the road where the possum was melted into the concrete. We th-thumped over its head, flattening it. Lindsey went from a wail to full blown siren. I twisted my head around to watch out the back window, see that all was good and done. It wasn't really necessary though. If Ma knew anything about anything, it was how to finish something.

#

The motel was a bunch of squat buildings, like long trailers, lined up in a row and all made of the same cheap brick. Between each building there was a small road with parking. In front of each room was a little patch of sidewalk that people seemed to be using in place of a yard. They had shit set up. Deck chairs, barbeques. That kind of thing. In the front-most building the corner room was replaced with the office. Behind the motel was a wall of trees clustered together a few blocks thick, half-dead despite it being mid-summer. The motel was sandwiched between a hybrid gas-station-fast-food chain, the kind I'd always thought truckers must live at, and a small shit-shack of a building that looked more like a garage than a place of business. If it weren't for the sign with its gaudy neon lights and the outline of a woman's legs sticking out of the name I probably wouldn't have known what it was.

Back in Georgia we lived in a pretty woodsy place—the kind with only one major road and two cemeteries; the good one and the not so good one. The kind of place where everyone knew everybody's business, or at least liked to pretend they did, and everyone just loved talking church. Even there we had one of these about thirty miles out, right on the lip of the highway. No one really talked about it so of course all the kids knew what it

was.

Anytime any girl had the nerve to grow tits it was all over for her. Every boy, and most of the other girls, would be lined up telling her she'd be getting a job there any day now.

At fourteen I was still flat as a board, and I had the foulest mouth so nobody ever told me I'd be climbing a pole. Nobody really ever told me shit. If I can say anything for my Ma I can say she gave me one solid piece of advice: if someone starts trying to fuck with you, you spit out as many foul words as you can. They're more likely to back down than lay hands on you then.

That theory, though, didn't really work out so great for her. Maybe it ought not to be tried too many times.

#

Once Ma got Lindsey quieted down she looked around the lot like it was some kind of garden, hands on her hips and this peaceful smile splitting her cracked lips. "Here we are," she said. "What do you girls think?" Lindsey just snuffled. Me, I kept looking up at those pin-up girl legs and curly-q letters spelling out *Candi's Cabaret* like a little girl wrote it. Ma talked Ohio up all the way from Georgia, about how much better it would be, and how we'd fit right in. Said she loved it as a girl. I knew it was a load of horseshit. If there's anything my Ma is especially good at, it's being a fantastic liar.

"Why don't you girls take a walk around the place while I unpack and try to get a hold of Aunt Tammy? I'm sure she'll want to see you guys real soon, okay? Go stretch those legs out." Mom turned back to the car and hoisted out her purse and one of the trash bags of clothes. "Don't go far, though, alright?"

Lindsey crossed the lot and encircled my wrist in her hand. Her eyes were puffed closed from all her bawling. Seven is a little too old to be wailing over every carcass on the road, but Lindsey was real good at getting away with being soft. She had those eyes you see on deer when they're frozen in the road and you're coasting too fast and it's too dark, and you both know it's more or less over.

Ma pretty much made me take care of everything when it came to Lindsey. Whenever she didn't want to deal, she dumped her on me, even if I had no clue what to do with her. Honest, it was a pretty raw deal.

Still, I knew it was better to leave than stay so I cradled my book against my chest with one arm, took her hand in the other, and led her in a wide circle around the car and our mother. We headed back away from the road towards the line of trees separating this section of trash from the other sections of trash beyond. We stomped along the edge, not daring yet to go deep into them, and tried to pretend we were back home in our own woods.

We walked from one edge of the motel property to the other. Turned when our feet touched the weedy grass of the strip club, headed back towards the other edge. Then back again. Eventually the sky started getting dark, but I kept us going. It'd been a long drive, and I wasn't exactly ready to be cooped up again.

"Hey, Grace," Lindsey asked when it was full-on dusk, "you think maybe there are fairies out here like there were back home?"

"Aint' no such thing and you know it." We stopped then and Lindsey sat down between the roots of one of the trees, head hung low.

"Ma told me though," Lindsey insisted. "She took us out, all those nights, to try

and catch them. You remember, Grace. She said if we stayed still we'd get to see 'em."

I spat a loogie down by her shoe and she squirmed away. "Yeah, and she was lying. You gotta learn the difference, Lindsey."

She started up with the tears again so I sat down against the tree with her and put a hand on the back of her head. I'd seen Ma do this to shut her up before. Across the lot there were cars pulling into the club's parking lot. Two beaters, with scars of rust spreading out near the tires. Women were stepping out of them in near unison, waving and having conversations way too loud and way too upbeat to be honest. One of them reached out and gathered a bunch of the other's long black hair. She held it to her face, sniffed it and laughed. Everything smelt like diesel and piss. Lindsey had her head ducked between her knees and was pulling out the grass nearby. She was getting snot all down her blue jeans. I worked my fingers against her scalp.

"Ma didn't have to kill that possum," she said.

"It was pretty much already dead."

"Things get better all the time," Lindsey shook my hand out of her hair and squinted at me, her voice hitched up like she was about to pitch a fit.

"I guess so, sometimes." I backed down cause I already had enough of a headache as it was, and I knew she wasn't going to let it die if I kept pushing. If it went on it was going to spin out and be nothing actually about the possum and more to do with us being at the motel, our parents, and the shit I didn't want to say to her. There are some people who just can't learn, and some things you just shouldn't teach, and this was a bit of both.

Lindsey stood up and started scrubbing at the wet spots on her jeans. I stayed where I was, watching the women disappear behind the white door, watching the sign

light up. The letters were all teal, the legs pink, and the heels sticking off the feet were razor red. It looked gaudy as fuck. Lindsey started humming herself some nonsense and spinning in circles, getting further and further away from me till I could only half hear her. With each step she faded a little out of my mind until I didn't have to think too much about her. I folded the book open and let my eyes lay against the page.

Delia Swift, alias Bridget Fury, a blazing red head, came to New Orleans in 1856 after escaping from an Ohio Penitentiary. One of the area's many public women, Swift/Fury is notable for having formed one of the first female street gangs. Having been incarcerated already for murdering a man in Ohio, Swift/Fury continued her reign of terror in New Orleans. Swift was first arrested for fleeing Ohio, but she was never extradited, as Ohio failed to claim her. She went on to appear before the court in New Orleans numerous times. It was always remarked that she had a polite and good humor before the judge, but would rage when insulted. Having a particular fondness for violence against men, Swift/Fury reportedly stabbed a man, who later died due to the injury, for calling her and her women "a parcel of bitches."

The words crawled slow across the page. I let my eyes close and the book fall into my lap, dipped my head back against the tree. There was a throb pulsing in my throat, worming its way down into my gut.

"Don't go too near the road," I told Lindsey, but she was away and humming. I could see her tore up like the possum. The headlights in her eyes. I was dead tired.

Half-sleeping I could hear the cars rumble through the lot. The crack of broken glass. For half a minute I thought I was back home in the ranch house in Georgia, that Pa was just pulling in to the drive. I saw his hand wrapped around Ma's wrist, his knuckle

hairy and swollen. She's screaming in his face, cussing and trying to break loose. Lindsey, reaching out towards the two of them and crying, walking right into the middle of their grunts, and their dry fists. Dad had dirt under his nails. Lindsey hung off Mom's pants, shrieking. A red headed woman, laughing. Her teeth rotted out, smelling like mold and rotten meat. I kept my body locked up. Let them keep themselves. Let them tear each other apart, I thought. Lindsey, eyes like a deer. Lindsey, tore down the middle and her guts twisted like ribbon, knotted like rope.

The pages of the book flipped in my lap. My hair rose. A breeze ran its fingers down my spine.

My tongue was a blanket of moss and dirt, and there was a man's voice. Plying and soft. Said something to my right. "Come here," he said, "Come on over, sweetheart."

Lindsey was going on about fairies and home. There was a deep laugh, like a well. Wet, throaty, and it was too cold for July.

I opened my eyes then and saw her. Small and light like a salamander. She was standing on her tip toes, taking something from a pasty old man in a frayed tweed suit across the line where the motel became *Candi's Cabaret*.

"Lindsey," I shouted. Her head swiveled around, her face washed to a blur by the dark. My legs were dulled knives, and I was slow in making them work. The book fell out of my lap. By the time I had stood up right the man was already backing away, smiling and waving. Lindsey was cupping her hands to her face, looking at whatever he gave her.

"Lindsey," I barked, "get over here now." She was swaying my way, lips moving like she's the star of a movie where the birds could fucking talk and would help her fold

her clothes, her hands held up to her mouth.

I snatched her wrists together in my fist when she came within arm's reach and pulled them down. My palms were slick and I could feel my heart pounding just about a mile a minute. She started shrieking and struggling, and it was hard to get a good grip on her, but eventually I wrestled whatever it was he had given her out of her palm.

“He gave it to me,” she screamed, “It's mine.”

I uncurled my fingers and lying twisted in my hand there was a lighting bug, its ass smeared and glowing across the palm of my hand. Lindsey saw it was dead and started to kick me in the shins, trying to get her wrists free. She called me a killer and a monster. She said the man gave it to her cause it could take us home and shit. I kept my grip tight around her wrists and tried to brush the bits of bug off onto my pants. I could still feel pieces of it stuck like sand in the lines of my palm. After I got off all I could I jerked Lindsey's arm hard to get her to quiet down and lowered my face close to hers, and tried to keep myself from shaking too bad.

“You want to get yourself fucking killed?” I was spitting as I talked, and I could see Lindsey flinch every time a drop hit her, but my whole body had become a puddle. “You want that man to take you away, huh?”

“He wasn't doing anything,” Lindsey whimpered. Across the lot I could see a woman leaned up against the building in an overcoat, her tights crisscrossing in black lines over her pale skin, a cigarette burning between her lips like a needle point. I watched her watch us. “You're hurting me.”

I whipped Lindsey around to face the woman and put my mouth up against her ear. “You want to end up a whore, Lindsey?” I twisted the skin of her wrist when she

tried to turn her face away. “Just keep talking to strange men, then. Just keep acting like a dumb little twat.”

Lindsey crumpled back into me then and broke into a chorus of sobs and “stop”. I tried to pull her up by her arms but she was limp as a wet paper bag. I wrapped my arm around her gut and heaved her up to my side. I half-carried, half-dragged her back towards the motel while she whispered how much she hated me.

I had left *Mad Women* behind.

Outside of one of the rooms Mom had parked the car crooked. All of our shit was still packed in one half of the back seat, and she'd left the light on inside. Through the window I could see her sitting on the floor, her body slumped back against the bed. Her lipstick was smeared across her chin. The stub of a joint glowed, faint beneath a coat of ash, in her one hand. The other was tucked over her swollen eye, but I could see the other, large, white, rolling like a tire. As if she were crouched in the woods, searching for pricks of light, madly looking for things that weren't there that she still craved.

II.

Did You Hear the One About

Ricky was wringing the truck's steering wheel tight enough for his knuckles to go white with the pressure. The spidery veins in the back of his hands were popping out worse than I'd ever seen before. Past the arch of his nose I could see buildings blur past, spacing themselves further and further apart as we moved towards the boonies. Soon enough it was nothing but gas stations, mechanics, fast-food chains and bars. I turned my face away, leaned my head back against the headrest and pinched my eyes closed for a minute before I heard him thumping his thumb against the wheel. We were almost there. Ricky was slowing and in the distance I could see the sign cresting the horizon like some great, horrible beast rising up out of the ocean.

"Ricky," I said. He looked over and smiled briefly.

"You look like a secret agent, you know," he said. He pushed the toothpick in his mouth hard against his lower lip with his teeth. "Maybe you shouldn't have worn that coat."

"Stop here and I'll walk over the rest of the way," I knocked my knuckles against the window. Ricky's hand loosened slightly and his shoulders dropped down from where they had nearly been shoved in his ears. He turned quick and hard into the parking lot of the gas station fused with a McDonald's and the force pulled my body towards his. My overcoat split open and our shoulders rubbed for a second before we could spring apart.

"I really don't mind driving you to the door," he said. "Really, it isn't a problem." He was already putting the car in park and massaging his palm with his paddle of a thumb.

“No, its fine. I think their lobby is still open. Why don’t you grab some food.” I closed the coat back up and fished a wad of bills from the pocket, pressed them into Ricky’s hand. Outside the sun was sinking behind a jagged row of trees, seeping shadows across the motel parking lot between us and the club.

Ricky’s jaw trembled a bit as he worked the toothpick from one edge of his mouth to the other. “You don’t have to, you know,” he said, “there are a few places I haven’t tried yet. And you could still put more apps in. Somewhere else.”

I angled the rear view mirror towards my face and dabbed at some lipstick that was straying below my lip line. The smudge lightened and spread lower.

“Deb,” Ricky said in his high, pining voice. The same voice he had used to ask me to prom. The same voice he’d been using for the last two months. “Deb, we’re going to be alright, right?” He reached over and squeezed my shoulder through the coat. I licked my thumb and pressed hard against the stain near my mouth.

“Chill, Ricky. You’re the one who is flipping out.” I twisted my mouth back and forth, practiced smiling. Ricky pulled his hand away. “Do I look okay?” I turned my face towards him for inspection but kept my eyes locked on the mirror.

“You look great,” he breathed. “Really, really great. Don’t worry, alright Deb?”

“Right.” I opened the truck door. “Don't spend all that without getting me something to eat, alright? I shouldn't be long.”

He reached out towards me but stopped his hand before it brushed my shoulder. “Hey Deb,” he pulled his hand back and took the toothpick from his mouth, “You hear about the hippie who drowned in the ocean?”

“Hm?” I looked at him and saw how his facial hair was still growing in patches,

how his nose flared too much when he spoke, and how his pimply skin was turning very, very green. I laid the image alongside the one of him in a suit with his hair swooped back, his face shaved smooth, and tried to subtract the difference.

“He was too far out, Deb.” Ricky pulled his lips back and ran a hand through his hair. “You get it?”

“Very funny, Rick.” I hoisted myself out of the truck and my heels clacked to the ground. I shut the door, the engine still humming under the white shine of the hood. A breeze rolled up the coat, my skirt, nipped at tender folds of skin. I walked around the front and looked up past the dent in the grill to Ricky behind the glass. His eyes were shut hard enough to shoot ripples of lines through the bridge of his nose and up his forehead. His mouth was working furiously around the pick in his mouth, rolling over the joke, practicing his laugh.

I tried to remind myself that this—these jokes—were just things he’d picked up while he was gone. That they were a phase. They would pass.

I crossed out of the service station into the parking lot of the motel and cut behind it to hide from the road in the growing shadow of the tree line. My heels licked like thunder against the cement. There were leaves wilted already, speckling the ground, prematurely dead. I skewered at least ten as I walked. Nearly twisted my ankle on half crushed beer cans.

There was a little girl playing by herself in the thin grass, spinning and singing half songs, half jibberish. She looked like cotton candy, fluff and feathers. I looked for her mother, but all I could find was another older girl, her body wrapped in a large flannel, a book popped open in her lap. She looked like she was asleep.

I wanted to tell the girl to go home, but I just kept walking, my eyes locked on the door. When I reached it I knocked hard enough to leave marks on my knuckle.

I waited for an answer. I wished I had a cellphone, or a way to check the time.

The skin behind my knees was freezing. I squatted by the door and pulled the hem of the coat down until it covered my feet. I fished a cigarette out of the near empty pack in my pocket.

#

My father always said you had to spend money to make money. This, above all else, was the maxim he had chosen to brand on his tongue and pass along to my brother and I. I can't know if my brother would have put it to use or not, but I took it to heart.

At the thrift store I sunk 8.75 in the pink leopard print skirt, the black bikini top, and the set of worn but still pretty much in tact black heels. I also bought the pea-green vintage army coat. Ricky and I had spent ten minutes arguing over it in the aisle as I ran the sleeve of it through my fingers, flattening out the wrinkles.

“Do you really need it?” He was rubbing his temples the way he did when he said I was being “unreasonable”.

“It'll get cold soon. Summers already almost over.” I said.

“Yeah, but you could buy a nicer coat later.”

In the end I couldn't tell Ricky why I wanted it. That I needed something like it. That my brother used to love all things military. That when no one was looking I used to play army with him. That I hated it when my thighs were showing.

I splurged at the dollar store for a new pair of panty hose. Some things you don't buy second hand. I gave Ricky ten dollars for gas to drive me to the interview.

“Some people are too afraid to invest in things,” my father used to tell me. “But they’ll never get anywhere if they don’t take any chances.”

At the end of it I had a total of two hundred and sixteen dollars left. In the parking lot I’d given Ricky about eight. I could only hope that when I got back I’d have at least two hundred. That Mike and Lora hadn’t found the rest hidden in the crease of their couch and taken the last of it away.

I could only hope that I’d have a job.

#

Without some way to measure it time gets to define itself. Ricky told me that. It was one of the first things he had said when he got out. That time had its own way of moving when he was alone in his cell.

I didn’t know how long it was taking, how long it would take, for them to answer. How long it was before or after the time I was scheduled to come in. There was an old man sitting in his car, motor running.

At first he'd come out and tried to speak to me. He'd asked me if I was new blood. I shrugged and smiled, and he grew bored. I wondered if these were the type of people—the men—who came here. If they were all like him, withered and dressed in clothes decades old.

He had tried to speak to the girl who stopped dancing long enough for him to pluck something from the air, and tuck it into her hand before the older girl was up on her feet. Her body had been so tense, wound tight as a rabbit's about to bolt back into the shelter of the trees.

He retreated to his car, but stayed there, motor running. His eyes darting forward

to me, then back to the girls, until eventually the eldest dragged the youngest away.

Then it was just me, watching him watch the world through a sheet of glass. And the door.

#

Some people are just born assholes. This is an uncomfortable truth that we all secretly carry in our hearts. Nobody wants to admit that there is a strong possibility their baby will grow up to be an asshole. For all intents and purposes, the baby already is an asshole. But nobody likes to speak badly about babies. We have to wait until they're adults.

Mike and Lora were so practiced at being assholes they must have learned in the womb. I bet they grew their nails early and scratched at their respective mothers' insides. I had always suspected they were born assholes, but didn't know it as an undeniable truth until I lived with them. I learned a lot, living with them.

Like all couples eventually run out of new things to talk about. After some time conversations play out like a script, only changing ever so slightly each recital, anchored down by a few key words. I saw this in Mike and Lora, I heard it through the walls when they thought I was sleeping. After I moved in I saw it in Ricky and I as well.

Mike and Lora's key words: Deb. Stuck-up. Bitch. Not. Our. Fault. Ungrateful. Lazy. Stupid. Rich, dumb cunt. How long? Want. Money. Beer. Food. Clothes. Space. Ricky. Ditz. Slut. Gone. I don't know. Do something about it. Me? He's your friend. You invited them. Guilt.

Long enough.

Ricky's key words: Sorry. Accident. Joke. Deb. Haven't I done enough?

Suffered? Let me be. What I did for you. Sacrifice. Isn't enough? Look at me. Love. I. You. Do? Okay? Are you? Deb? Don't. Be like that. Better. Forget. Brother. Truck. Father. Remember? You have to stop. Get it? It's supposed to be funny. Lighten up.

Mine: are quiet. Wet. Guttural. Heavy bones settling.

#

The door creaked open and a squat woman eyed me from the doorway. She was olive skinned with short silver hair and a practiced grimace of a mouth that unhinged to spit "You Debra" in a voice as strange and sweet as sugared milk.

I bit my lower lip and nodded my head. She jerked her head to indicate that I should come in and I wobbled to my feet.

The inside was covered in creased black velvet, worn with tears in the fabric every so often. There was a black polished bar against the side of the wall with doors on either side of it. One was plain, a swinging door, the kind every restaurant had that led back into the foggy areas only employees ever inhabited. The other was big, oak, ornate enough to have been nice once, but it had been scratched and stained over the years. There were small blue lights along the edge of the floor on a string. In the back there was a stage, lit dimly, surrounded by mirrors. And a pole reaching from the polished floor, up, up, up, so far I would have had to reach my eyes to see the end of it. I didn't. The tables were made of glass, the closest of which I could still see smudges on.

Three women sat at one, their feet bare and propped up on nearby chairs. They were dressed in soft, small, shining dresses, almost as if they were going to prom. The one who looked to be the eldest was a black woman in a sleeveless silver with a slice of fabric cut out to frame her waist. Her eyelids were painted gold with an arch of silver in

the crease. She had her head tilted in one hand and a cigarette held between the fingers of her other. Every now and then she would lazily bring it up to her lips then drop it down to rest in the ashtray. A girl who looked younger than me with tan skin sat next to her, her dress elastic and metallic, trying to pose with the same weariness. She kept rolling her cigarette between her fingers and pulling her long black hair over her shoulder. The third seemed to hover between the ages of the other two. She was meatier with a full mouth and curly, bleach blonde hair. Her skin was pale enough for the lights to sink into and color her blue. It made her look like she had just come out of a meat locker. All their eyes swiveled towards me as the squat woman led me in.

It was exactly as I always imagined a strip club would be when I closed my eyes. My bones felt like an anchor, thinking about it. Caving with their own weight. Like they would sink me right through the floor. I paused by the bar to take off my coat and try to meld in. I draped it over a stool. Behind me I heard a shuffle of movement and a low snicker. The younger girl was holding her hand against her mouth and laughing behind it. The eldest saw me look and rapped her knuckles hard against the table. The girl quieted down but her eyes were still folded up like quarter moons.

The old woman turned her head towards me and let out a small “whoof.” She rolled her eyes and motioned me through the swinging door. We passed through a hall where I waited in a kitchen full of glasses smudged with lipstick and the fuzz of old soda while she rooted out the keys to another more solid door.

Behind it there was a small office with a cork board covered in papers, forums and old schedules mostly. Around the edge there were snapshots of the short woman pinned like a boarder. Looking from left to right was like watching ten years of time

grind their teeth into her. Once her face was unlined, her hair was salt and peppered and long. In almost every one she had her arm on a girl's shoulder. There was another woman in a few, with fluffed blonde hair and lips so red it looked like she had cut her mouth open, but besides her the squat woman was the only one in all of them. In one she stood stiff next to a man dressed in leather, a snake draped around his arm. There was a lump in the snake's throat, large, rodentish. She was arching away from its head, her mouth covered with one of her hands, and it looked like she might have been laughing, or maybe screaming. Or both.

She sat herself down slowly in a high backed leather chair and fished a set of eyeglasses out of a desk drawer. I sat down opposite of her and she cleared her throat before diving into simple yes and no questions about my availability and nonexistent work experience.

"When you use the stage, when you dance here, you gotta pay up. That's one thing. For the first few nights while you're learning we won't make you, but be ready for that by the end of the week," she said. I nodded. Shrugged. Let my eyes roll around the row of polaroids up top once more.

The moments of the interview passed in a blur of numb and mumbles. At the end I opened my mouth to croak a question or two and the woman's mouth twitched up at the end. She gave some answer, but I didn't care enough to listen. She rose to her feet and walked back out of the room. I followed behind.

The stage lights were on, illuminating a hunk of polished black tile and the gilded pole. The youngest had climbed to the top and locked her ankles in a complex knot above her head. She dangled upside down and ran her hands through the sheet of her hair.

Below her the two other women stood, catcalling.

“Look out, baby, it's snowing,” the bleach blonde shrieked and batted at the air. There must have been dandruff, but I couldn't see it.

“Elaine,” the woman called, and the black woman in silver broke away from the others and came towards us. Up close I could see her eye shadow flaking off, turning into a glittered trail that curved down the arc of her cheek and the side of her nose. “Elaine, take care of this one this week.” The woman grabbed my arm and pushed me forward. “For Christ's sake, teach her how to dress.” The youngest slipped down from the pole and sat on the edge of the stage. She bent her eyes over me, sucking her cheeks in against her teeth to keep from grinning.

#

The truck was empty but I could see Ricky through the glass window of the McDonald's half of the building. He was sitting with two older heavy set men. I was washed out by the full dark of night that had crept in while I was inside the club, but under the florescent lights I could see Ricky's face, splotched red with hard, white speckles of zits running the length of his chin and the bridge of his nose. One of the men was thumping the table and laughing loud and hard in Ricky's ear. Ricky rolled his eyes back and his mouth split open.

I checked to see that my coat was closed and knocked on the glass. I waited for him to notice.

#

The first night I worked it felt like someone had taken a crowbar to my feet, even though most of it had been waiting. I sat on a bar stool and the women spoke to each

other at a small table nearby. The stereo throbbed. Every now and then Elaine would tell me something and I would have to crane over the back of the seat to hear her.

“When a man comes in,” she said, “try to seat him at a table. We get more tips that way because we serve them the drinks.”

“Good to know.” I said.

More waiting. More sitting. Poppi placed a strand of licorice between her lips and sucked on it until it went limp. She slurped it down, started a new one.

“You're going to end up with thunder thighs you keep eating that junk, girl.” Kaleigh said and leaned over to squeeze her leg.

“Tu madre,” Poppi spat but smiled.

“There's a bartender on the weekend.” Elaine said, “But we can't keep a waitress. If there's another girl at the table with them, push them to buy her a drink. Waitresses never last. The house won't even pay them for the first 90 days. They never make it past that. Past the first week. We've given up.”

“Good to know,” I said. I tore a napkin in my lap under the cover of the bar.

More waiting. More licorice between lips. More chatter covered just under the pulse of sound.

“Is it always this dead?” I asked Elaine.

“Wait,” she said.

We stayed still, waiting. Gathering dust like fine, old furniture. Pretty, but seldom used.

I wanted to speak to them. I wanted to open my mouth at the same rate they opened theirs, but these weren't my conversations they were having.

A man came in through the door and Maude creaked to life. She took his I.D. and Poppi rose from the table and swooped to his side. It was like someone had blown the dust from her skin.

“Watch,” Elaine said. More came.

I sat with Elaine at tables. I practiced talking. I practiced pushing for drinks.

“Why don't you dance,” the man was gray haired, in a uniform for some company I'd never heard of. “We came to watch you dance, not drink.”

“It's her first night,” Elaine said. “You're her first customer—she's not ready yet.” She winked a golden eye.

“Then you dance,” the man insisted, splotched red, lip quivering. His fist curled and uncurled on the table. He had placed it on my shoulder, when he came in.

“Buy me a drink and maybe I'll want to.” She laughed and tapped the table, raking it with nails, plastic, long, red as apples. Her eyes bubbles about to burst.

When the club shut down I had to stay an extra two hours, learning how to hold on to the pole, learning how to bat my eyes and laugh and ask for a drink in a way that didn't seem like a hustle, but a date. Things not in books, things I had to see to understand.

I stumbled a lot and thought for sure my feet were nothing more than stumps of blood forever arched into the shape of a heel. When Elaine finally let me stop I popped my shoes off and sat down. I cradled my feet in my hands, gave each a turn of tender touches, running my fingers over the swollen toes and pulling each apart gently.

Ricky nearly forgot to pick me up so I sat out front watching the motel wake up.

Outside of one of the rooms a woman had the hood of her car popped open. Her

hair was half-curled and half-ratted, and she had a pair of sunglasses perched on her nose. She kept trying to pat her hair down as she spoke to a man with a bowling ball gut. He kept looping and unlooping a set of jumper cables, twisting them into a gentle noose, while they spoke. On the curb outside of the room the girls from before sat hunched together. It looked like they were dressed in the same clothes as the day before. The woman had her back turned to them, and every now and then she laid her hand on the man's arm and the two of them laughed loud enough for it to carry over to me. The man's was hoarse, like a cough.

#

After a week I started sleeping on the couch during the day while Ricky and Mike and Lora sat around the dining room table, complaining about the lack of space. When my eyes were closed Ricky pressed alongside Mike and Lora to mutter words that shifted into fattened snakes in my dreams. They curled into slithering piles, their guts bulged with quivering lumps. Rodent tails slipped into their lips and disappeared. They would split apart to show me my brother's eye, his mouth hung open, his small hand gone limp. When I was awake Ricky would be pale and sweaty next to me on the couch, coughing questions.

“Do you like it?”

“Have you danced for anyone yet?”

“Do they touch you?”

Every now and then he would lay two fingers against my wrist or along my jaw and then pull his hand back and tuck it under his armpit. “You don't have to do this long, Deb,” he kept saying. The longer I did it the shorter his touches became. Three weeks in

they had dried up completely. I was touchless.

#

The youngest girl was named Jenna, but everyone called her Poppi. It was her stage name and she liked it better than Jenna. When I asked her how she got it she was out back smoking a cigarette behind the dumpster in an overly large white T-shirt and a pair of khakis. We were waiting for our rides, standing a few feet apart from one another. She let a puff of smoke seep between her teeth. "Because I'll get you huh-igh," she said and laughed so hard the T-shirt quaked. Eventually she quieted down and looked at me from the corner of her eyes. "My grandpapi," she said. "He gave me the name. When I was young." She put the smoke back in her mouth and stretched her arms up over her head till I could see the arc of her ribs pushing against her shirt. She had been there for six months. Without her heels she stood at five foot one. Without makeup she looked fifteen and her front tooth had a brown stain shaped like a blurred hand. She was pretty much the same age as me, but we didn't go to school together.

I lived in the suburbs. I went to a nice school, where pretty much all the kids were white, wore new clothes, and spoke like dictionaries. I didn't ask her where she went to school. Under her shirt she kept a rosary.

The blonde was named Kaleigh. She told me she didn't use stage names. "They're just a sad attempt to keep what is here separate from the outside," she said. I thought she smoked pot. She had breasts like meteors. Her words. She said they're why she's there, that the gravitational pull of them dragged her through the door and they wouldn't let her leave. I hadn't asked her why she was there.

The manager was called Maude. She was the only one who had been there longer

than Elaine. She didn't own the place but the man who did moved to Pittsburgh and trusted her to handle pretty much everything. Elaine told me that Maude could have been a singer but something went wrong when she was just getting started. Kaleigh said she killed a man for sleeping with another woman, but Poppi said that it's the other way around. She killed a woman she loved for sleeping with a man. Mostly Maude didn't speak to me my first week. She just sat at the door with a cocktail in one hand, smoking thick cigars.

Some people called Elaine Cherry-leigh, some called her Honey. During my first week when night had turned into morning and morning into mid-day while she tried to teach me how to dance, a girl no older than thirteen or fourteen came in and called her Mom. Her hair was weaved back in braids and clamped together with a ring of colored beads, bright as the rainbow. I shouldn't have been as surprised as I was. Kaliegh had three sons that she often spoke of, but I had never seen them.

The girl had been watching me dance, chewing her lower lip and cocking an eyebrow like I was a mess.

Elaine lived in the motel but no one had told me why.

There was another girl when I started but she only worked there on weekends. She'd started just before me. "Don't bother learning her name," Kaleigh said after my third night shadowing Elaine. She was sipping cocktails and rubbing Poppi's feet. "She won't be here long." Elaine nodded slowly and Poppi followed suit, her lips pursed.

"Some girls you can just tell are gonna bolt quick," Poppi said.

"And me?" I asked, looking to Elaine. She just raised her eyebrows and sipped her drink. Poppi laughed.

#

After I had added up what I had thought I made, I told him how long it might be before we could get our own place. “Babe,” Ricky said, bent past me towards the mirror as I brushed my teeth, digging his chipped nails into a purple bruise of a zit. “Settle down. There's no need to rush.”

When I left the bathroom I counted the stack of wilted bills, the stir of them perfuming the air with beer and aggressive cologne. It didn't add up. It kept not adding up.

I made money, and money kept leaving. I didn't see it go, but that didn't stop it.

#

Behind the stage Elaine showed me the dressing room, full of lockers stacked one on one. Mirrors lined with regulations, and a hanger of clothes we could borrow if we needed. Nothing gross, no panties, or anything like that. Just costumes, wigs, that kind of thing, and pasties we could buy for a dollar. Duck tape, the mirror warned, was no longer acceptable.

Next to the front door there was a short hall leading to the bathrooms split in a Y. To the right, the women's, left to the men's. The wallpaper was a red so deep it was near purple, patterned with women's faces. The same three over and over. One, chin cradled in the palm of her hand. One, head cocked to the side, the arch of her neck like a parentheses. One, from behind, face tilted towards her bare shoulder. All watching through a wave of bangs.

They lined the hall, repeated but shifting slightly: a tear in the paper, a small bulge underneath bleeding through. A sneer—accidental. A scratched out eye, a mouth

damp and swollen with water damage.

The women's restroom was a single stall that smelled of smoke. Every time you flushed the toilet water gurgled out of the drain in the center of the room.

During my fourth week I found the weekend girl back there on the floor, her legs stretched out, a heel half off her foot. She had a small rubber hose tied around her arm and she was flicking the end of a needle. When I came in she swore at me until I left.

When I came out shaking Maude went in and I never saw the girl again.

When the club closed that morning Elaine and I stayed after to help Maude launder the clothes. Mostly I just stayed in the room and took them off of hangers while they carried them to the laundromat down the road. I loaded them into baskets, and then hung them up when they came back. At the end Maude and Elaine settled next to me when all the clothes were done to help rehang them. Maude sang, low and throaty. Elaine smiled. I thought about that girl. I thought about how things could be worse.

#

After enough pressure I gave Mike and Lora three hundred dollars. Less than they wanted, more than I felt comfortable giving. Ricky chewed his nails as I passed the money to them, his eyes buzzing from their faces to mine, his skin a wet shine. When they were done I curled up on the couch and the three of them took a seat at the dining room table. They had rotated the television around so that they could see it from there. At that point I was the only one who used the couch. Even when I was awake they gave it a wide berth. I suspected that they threw a sheet over it when I was gone to keep the parts I left behind tethered there.

I didn't really know where or when Ricky was sleeping. He came and got me from

the club in the morning, dropped me off at night. When I was awake a few hours before I went in, he'd be up. His eyes on me. His mouth a small smile. Asking: "Are you okay, Deb?" Handing me a cup of water. "One day we're going to laugh about this."

"Ten years from now this is going to be a big joke, don't you think?"

"Deb? You're going to be alright."

During the day while I slept they would watch talk shows. Ricky would tell jokes. I could hear them slither up the sleeves of my army coat. I kept it on in the house. Always. I kept my money in my pocket. I kept my ears half open and tried my best not to dream.

"What's the difference between a stripper," Ricky wheezed, "and a Cadillac?"

"Huh," Mike and Lora said.

"I don't have a Cadillac."

A woman on the TV kept screaming bitch. It sounded like someone threw a chair.

The three of them laughed together. There was the sound of a slap.

"No shit," Mike said.

When I woke up Ricky asked me for twenty dollars and Lora offered to do my hair. She sat me down on a stool in the kitchen and wrapped my hair in a loose braid, running her fingers from my scalp to the tips. I was still half dozing, and it felt nice. Like I was a family dog, being pet back to sleep.

"She has such nice hair," Lora said to Ricky. She stepped in front of me and smiled down into my face. I rubbed some of the mucus in my eye free and tried to smile back. "I'm jealous."

"She does," Ricky said. "You look beautiful, Deb."

At the club door he asked me for gas money. I handed it over without adding it up.

#

By the time I'd been at the club for a month everyone had taken to calling me "Babygirl." Even Poppi. I had my first regular, a man named Thomas with a low brow and thick hands who asked me to sit with him and nurse drinks for a little every other night. He thought I was drinking rum and coke but it was always just soda and ice. Maude didn't like it when the younger girls got drunk, but I had seen Poppi drinking wine a number of times both during her shift and outside waiting for her ride.

"Blood of Christ," she said the first time I caught her, her mouth a purple smear and the stain on her tooth bigger and brighter than ever before.

Thomas liked to talk to me about ants. Thomas was a mechanic but really wished he would have gone to college to study Entomology. "Ants," he told me, "lay down scent trails for others to follow."

I went "hmmmm?" I raised my eyebrows. Elaine was still doing my makeup at the time, and it made my eyelids feel stiff and heavy. I twisted a lock of my hair, batted my eyes.

"A lot of people don't know this," Thomas told me, "But ants enslave other ants. They hold them hostage and make them toil just like we used to." Thomas was always three sheets to the wind when he talked about ants.

"Really," I said. "That's horrible."

Thomas laid a hand on my knee and nodded over his drink. "It is," he said. "The only thing worse than mankind," he said, "is the ants."

My brother's name was Tom. He was five. He was waiting for me to get home.

I didn't think he would have ever come to a place like this. It's no longer an issue.

#

I made good on my Father's investment to have me gone and doubled the original five hundred a month in. I asked Maude if I could keep it somewhere in the club. A place small and out of the way. She was with me after we closed while I was waiting for Ricky. It was six in the morning and he was two hours late. Maude was still sipping a cocktail. Even Elaine had left.

We were sitting together in the open door of the club, her on her stool, me on the ground by her feet.

Maude told me I could keep it in one of the lockers if I brought my own lock.

Maude took a cigar out of the flannel she was wearing over her black t-shirt. She tore the cellophane in two to get it out, rolled it between her fingers. She popped it in her mouth and lit it.

Very suddenly I felt her hand in my hair. She lifted it up and let it run through her fingers before reaching down to scratch my scalp like she would a dog. "Red headed baby," she sang, "You marvelous girl. Red headed baby, my brains in a whirl."

I twisted out of her hands and rolled my eyes up to look at her face. The cigar was dangling out of the corner of her mouth. She reached up and took it out, pointed the burning end at me. "That's you," she said, "Red-headed baby."

She reached back out and patted my head, right above my ear. She chuckled, but her eyelids were hanging low, very nearly closed. She propped her head against the frame of the door and the cigar fell out of her hand and landed on the carpet just over the door

jam.

I scooped it up and put it to my lips. It tasted like vanilla. I put it out on the cement. I felt my own body sagging.

When I woke up Ricky was beating his horn. My head had dropped back against Maude's knees and her hand was resting on the crown of my head.

Ricky's eyes were bloodshot and I could smell the booze through the open window. When I got up to leave Maude rose and locked the door. She told me to sleep well and walked to the car without looking in Ricky's direction.

We spent the ride back to Mike and Lora's screaming. Ricky kept his foot pressed hard against the pedal. I kept my hands to my eyes, and thought of my brother. I told him to slow down. He told me he wasn't me. That he could handle it. I told him it wasn't fair. I told him it was still his fault.

“You made me,” I said.

“Where would you be?” He asked, “Where would you be if it weren't for me?” At a red light he slammed hard on the brakes hard enough to throw me against the dashboard.

“You made yourself,” he said. A pimple on his chin had burst and was dribbling blood into the curling hair on his chin.

When I curled up on the couch I could hear him riot with Mike and Lora behind the bedroom door. There was a mix of curses, a laying of blame.

Ricky had a new joke.

Ricky told them.

“What does a stripper and a bowling ball have in common?”

“What?”

“You can put your fingers in their holes, throw them in the gutter, and they'll still come back for more.”

I thought I must be sleeping. Or that this is an after-school special. Or that maybe he is right.

#

Tom had teeth like mothballs, small and round and white and crooked. Still baby teeth. Still just a baby. I can remember holding him when he was first born, and there were no other arms, there was no other mother. I can remember seeing him grow up, and how our age difference made it a little easier for me to play Mama.

I wasn't meant to be a mother, though. I loved Tom. But I still wasn't meant to be a mother. I didn't remember what Mothers were like. I didn't know how it would feel to have one brush her hands through my hair. How they'd sing. I knew Mother's weren't meant to guzzle wine coolers in the back of a truck. They weren't supposed to let boys play with their skirts or trail kisses down their neck while they drove. Mothers kept their eyes on the road and hands on wheels. Mothers weren't supposed to kill their own babies.

#

Poppi had a family she got to go home to. Elaine had her daughter. Kaleigh had a husband, a set of kids. I had Ricky. Maude had the club, and I guess, us. And maybe the weekend bartender, a small dark-skinned man with a brilliant white beard and straight gleaming teeth. A man so quiet he may as well not have been there at all.

Things could have been worse.

Thomas didn't have anyone. He had a library card and oil under his fingernails.

He talked about getting a dog. I told him he should get an ant farm, but it only made him mad. He clenched his hand around his drink and breathed hard out of his nose. He left the table without saying anything. He didn't leave me a tip.

People are covered in tiny landmines, small atomic bombs hidden under their skin.

#

I woke up with a bruise on my shoulder. From the dashboard? From a misplaced step on the stage? From wherever. It didn't particularly matter. Except that it was large, and colored ugly, like spoiled chicken breast. When I woke it was sore and I stood in the mirror running my finger around it. I couldn't hear anyone else. Mike and Lora's door was closed and I felt like maybe the world had come to an end while I had slept. That I was the only one left. It felt safe, the bathroom walls like the shell of an egg closing between me and everyone else. I stripped my clothes off and let them all fall to the floor. I traced the outline of the bruise, the bend of my arm. Down to my breast. Over a rib after rib down to my stomach.

I leaned my forehead against the mirror and turned the faucet on. Let it run. Watched the water spiral down the drain over the curve of my cheekbones.

"Deb, baby, what happened?" Ricky asked. Through the crack of the bathroom door I could see his eye, the arch of his lip. Little bits of him. Obscured enough that they were familiar, again. I edged the door open with my toe and he slipped in. He pressed a hand against my shoulder and looked into my eyes. "Did I?"

I took his hand off of the bruise and put it over my mouth. Moved it to my eyes. Moved it through my hair. Pulled his wrist down so that he had no choice but to feel the

edges and new architecture of my body. At one point he broke free and his hand shot out to pull the door closed. Flick the light off. I snagged his wrist again. Turned the lights back on.

I wanted to see. The newness of what we were. He bit his lip. His head ducked down to rest against my shoulder, eclipsing his face with the arch of my collarbone. The color of the bruise. But I could see his arms, knobby, thin. The mole near the crux of his elbow. Things that hadn't gone away.

It could have been worse.

Sweaty, after, I dressed. He had been clothed, through the whole of it. His eyes were bloodstained, lined like cracked old plates. When he breathed through his nose it sounded wet and clogged. He was leaned back against the wall, his forehead lined with sweat and his eyes half-closed. I slunk past him back to the couch. He followed and kneeled between my feet, rested his head on my lap.

"Deb," he said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm hungry," I said.

"I could get you something to eat, Deb? Anything you want."

"Anything'll do." I said. "I have to get ready for work." I slipped my hand between my thigh and his shoulder and pushed him upward.

"I'll be back quick." He crossed the room and slipped out of the door, smiling at me shy like he used to. Like some dog that had been kicked too many times.

I watched the truck coast down the road from the living room window. I stuck my head in the collar of my coat and breathed in the smell of me being alone. The bathroom door was still open, leaking funk. The sound of the faucet, hissing.

#

Every now and then the cop came in. Not in uniform. No, instead he wore a burlap coat and knit cap even though it wasn't even cold yet, and sat at the bar. I kept my distance. Poppi was his favorite. I would watch them out of the corner of my eye. I would watch him follow her back into the back room. Sometimes I wanted to ask:

“Do you remember me? Who I was?”

I wondered if this place had smeared my features. I wondered if “sweet girl” had been erased from the vocabulary of my body. I wanted to ask every time I saw him.

Do you remember? How I was huddled over in front of the cab, my head resting in the dent, my eyes lined with mucus. How I had a letterman jacket draped over my back? Ricky had put it on me. He'd put it on me right after he said “I have to, Deb.” Even though I hadn't asked him to. Never had. I kept my eyes locked on the asphalt where the blood was still pooling outward, towards the open toes of my sandals. Even though the paramedics had already come and taken Tom away. Wheeled him off on the gurney, sheet tucked around him. Like he was just hiding. Do you remember that? I wanted to ask him when Poppi's hand locked around his wrist.

Elaine brushed my hair back over my shoulder. “Babygirl,” she said, “you look like you ate something foul. What's wrong with you?”

At first I was thankful. That he didn't give Ricky a Breathalyzer. That Ricky took the fall, and they let him bargain down, that he was only gone for six months. I was thankful for not being locked away. Not so much. Not anymore.

#

While I was sleeping someone dipped their hand inside my coat pocket. There

was a crumple of paper. Their wrist got caught on the pull out. It was hard to keep pretending to sleep at that point. I kept my eyes clenched shut. It could be Mike or Lora. It could be anyone, really. Do you know what the difference is between a stripper's boyfriend and aspirin?

I felt breath on my face, the smell of acne cream and stale beer.

He should have quit licking his lips.

Aspirin works.

It was only fifteen dollars. It could have been much worse.

#

Ricky dropped me off three hours early because he “had shit to do.” We hadn't touched since the day in the bathroom. I hadn't tried. He hadn't tried. Fall was going to be setting in soon, and it was the end of August. Still warm enough but there was a menace to the wind. The Winter would be bad. I paced outside, listening to my heels whisper against the cement. The motel lot was strangely empty. I thought the kids must be in school. I thought how they were most likely sharpening their pencils, sitting at polished desks, and how everything must smell like new paper for them. I was vice-president of the Science club. I had been class treasurer. I wasn't a cheerleader, but Ricky played football and I thought it was amazing when he looked my way. He also played guitar for a month. That was when we first started dating, but he would never sing me anything.

Then I remembered that these kids didn't go to a school like mine. They went to an institution, tall, high, dark. The first school we would crush early in the football season. Fodder, we called them, except my Sophomore year when they had gotten their hands on a sixteen year old who was six foot seven and angry. I had never seen a rage

like that.

The next summer someone from our school broke his leg. They said it was an accident. It happened in a “friendly scrape.” But they broke it in just the right way.

He never played again and we went on to plow through them every year after.

On top of that, I realized, it was Saturday.

Already I had lost the rhythm of my old life.

After half an hour I saw Elaine leading her daughter by the arm down the lip of the road towards the club. Her daughter's head was thrown back and her bottom lip was stuck out, and when they got closer I could see that the girl had a swollen black eye. Elaine was dressed in a black button up and a long pencil skirt and it took me a moment to lay this woman, with her eyebrows knit together and her face plain in a pretty, undecorated way, over Cherry-leigh covered in gold and silver. Laughing so loud at something some overweight man said that it shook the table.

She was scowling hard and muttering low things I couldn't understand. When she saw me she smiled and rolled her eyes, but it didn't look like she really meant to be friendly. “Kids,” she said. She drew up alongside of me and took out a ring of keys. “You shouldn't be standing outside here by yourself so early, Babygirl. Some man is likely to come by and snatch you up, and then where would we be?”

“I didn't have anywhere else to really go,” I said. “Ride had to drop me off early.” I didn't tell her that I didn't drive—that I never wanted to touch the wheel of a car again. How the thought of a pedal under my foot turned my legs into iron too heavy to lift. That Ricky had to cart me around, that it was one more way he stuck his neck out for me since he wouldn't have a license, a proper one, for a long time. How I kept lying, saying I

wasn't the one driving. How I took the bus to see Ricky in jail and didn't tell my dad. How when Ricky was released my father found out we were seeing each other—that I'd been waiting for Ricky to get out the whole time.

“How can you let that boy touch you?” My father asked. “Don't you care about your brother at all?”

How I finally had to tell him it was me. I was the one, not Ricky, who had been driving. How much worse that was. That was the last thing said between us. He didn't tell me to get out, just left me the money in an envelope under my door. I didn't tell him that I could still feel the blood, seeping out, cold against my toe. How ashamed I was. I didn't tell him. And I didn't tell Elaine.

“Well, come on in. You're lucky, I guess. The plumbing in my place is all stuck up so now we don't have any water.” She gave the girl's arm an angry tug but I could tell it didn't hurt. “So, of course this one had to go and get herself a shiner, and now we don't have any way to clean it.”

At the corner of the black eye there was a small split—like a vertical set of lips puckering.

I followed Elaine and her child inside and into the women's restroom. “Do you want help?” I asked, but she just grunted and sat the girl down on the toilet. She took her chin in her hands and stared hard into the girl's eyes. I thought of those television shows that Ricky, Mike and Lora watch. Of the audience. I felt cold in my spine. I was about to leave when Elaine asked me to wet some paper towels.

Over the faucet I could hear them talk.

“Looks bad. You start it?”

“Nah,” the girl spat back.

“Celeste, don't you lie to me.” I held a wad of paper towels under the water and balled it up. Then I flattened it.

“I didn't start it. That little white trash girl did. She was mouthing off.” I handed the wad to Elaine and leaned against the wall.

“You swing first?”

“Yeah, but I didn't start it,” the girl said.

“You get hit anywhere else?” Elaine's voice dropped a register and she pressed the paper towel against the swollen eye and dabbed around the wound. It came back with little kiss marks of blood and dirt.

“Nah, she only got her one hit in,” the girl snorted. “She's been acting like she owns this place ever since her and her stupid little sister moved in. Acts like she's better than me.”

“That's no reason to go getting into a fight.” Elaine turned to me and threw the wet towels in the trash. “More. Get a little soap on it.”

“What other reason is there, then?” the girl said.

“I've about had it with your nonsense, girl.” Elaine scolded. For a while there was nothing but water, the gentle pat of wet towel against skin, and me, standing in the corner against the wall watching. Elaine turned her daughter's head this way and that, their faces like mirrors, their eyebrows pinched at the bridge of the nose, their mouths hard lines. Elaine threw the wet towels away, asked for dry. She touched a finger to the wound and both of them breathed in, sharp and hard.

“I won, though,” the girl half-whispered and rolled her face out of her mother's

hands. "In case you care."

Elaine blew a burst of breath between her teeth and rose up to her feet, turned to the faucet to wash her hands. I could see her half-smiling, but her eyes were wide, shining and locked on themselves in the mirror. I'd seen her look this way before, at the very end of a shift, when some drunk places a hand on the small of her back or her ass while she passes by, and her step quickens and I think she is going to burn the place down.

"Yeah," Elaine said, "sure doesn't look like it."

"It could be worse," the girl replied. She hopped off the toilet, stepped behind her mother and angled her head to look at herself in the mirror. "Just ask the other girl."

#

From the stage it was impossible to see past the first row of tables. The stage lights got caught in my eyes and baked a fever into my skin. When I wrapped my leg around the pole and did a quick enough spin everything became a blur of peach and black velvet and a sparkling shine of holiday lights. When Elaine was first teaching me how to dance Poppi and Kaleigh would watch and laugh.

"You can't just keep looping yourself around the pole, girl," Kaleigh said. "You're never going to make any money that way."

"She thinks it's a carousel," said Poppi. "She's gonna end up puking."

But there's a moment when my body would lean into the curve and my hip would drop down, and the movement and speed sucked my stomach right out of me. A moment that felt like I was a kid on a jungle gym. In that moment I thought things weren't that bad.

In the box in the dressing room I'd saved up two thousand dollars. In the morning I sat with my feet up on a table, shoes off, letting the throb of the night bleed out. I would smoke cigarettes with the girls. Maude would wait with me when they were gone if Ricky was late, sing songs and dose off. I put her cigar out for her sometimes. Sometimes I would see the girl from the bathroom outside, collecting cans, wraithlike, and I'd think it could be worse. It could be worse. Days passed. A girl came.

"That one's not going to last long," Kaleigh said and I agreed, so we didn't bother giving her a name.

A girl went.

It had been two months. Thomas still hadn't gotten a dog, but he wasn't mad. Not at me, not anymore. "Ants," he told me, "warn other ants of danger through pheromones. Sometimes they can form communities of up to a thousand or more. They're always led by a Queen."

I would pat his hand, smile, and go "hmmm."

Things could be worse, I thought.

I stepped down from the stage and my vision was splotted with light and color, my feet dizzy. Poppi was drinking wine with a table of twenty somethings. One of them was getting married. At the bar someone was laughing and clapping his hand hard against the back of another man. The stool swiveled around and I saw Ricky, his arm reaching out, his finger cocking back to point me down. His jaw unhinged, his mouth wide, and round, and deep. His laugh a screech of rubber.

III

Soft Bodies

Milkbreath had his slumped eyes on when I told him about how I got fired. He was sitting back against the living room wall of our squat, this old teal and purple ranch house on a dead end road off of Market. It was the kind of dilapidated home some bank had seized that you could find everywhere in Youngstown.

After I'd been fired I'd slept next door to the club outside of a motel until the sun rose and the buses started running. I made up a couch of shit I found near the motel dumpster. Balled up clothes, stained and torn. Anything that didn't stink too bad. I propped my head up on a book, this hard covered one with the picture of a woman's hand, the nails painted red as a coke can, clutching a knife. I shifted the clothes around on top of me, but no matter how many I padded on a breeze was always sneaking through and tickling my skin.

By the time I got on the bus my body was cold and hard, and I was coming down with enough force to crack cement. I wasn't in a mood to be fucked with so I put off telling them about being fired for a while. I spent nights pretending to work but really just collecting cans and hawking them as scrap. After so long Ian noticed I wasn't pulling in enough cash and I had to fess up.

Ian had been there when I had started the story but after I got past the part where I lost my job, he started chewing up every bit of me he could and spitting it out. "What kind of fuckass gets herself fired from a strip club," he said. "Couldn't you stay straight enough to even fucking show your tits?"

“Fuck you, Ian. You don’t even know what happened.”

Milkbreath just kept knocking his head gently against the back wall, his eyelids fluttering up and down, and up and down. He didn’t say a thing.

“Fuck you, I don’t. What the fuck are we going to do about the money we owe Willie now? You got all fucked up, and now we’re all fucked. Just like you fucked us last time.”

“That wasn’t my fault,” I said. I had been hoping that Milkbreath might do something, might say anything, but he just let his head fall down to rest on his knees and folded his hands over it. “You would rather I’d gotten shot for your stupid fucking dope?”

“Bet you didn’t even get robbed. Bet you just fucking did it all. Worthless cunt.” Ian spat and stormed out of the squat to go who fucking cares where.

They were brothers, Ian and Milkbreath, that I’d been staying with. I had been with Ian but love with him was like breaking your sternum over and over again till you couldn’t even feel it. Milkbreath was the youngest of us. His name was Cody, but when he woke up in the morning he had this sour breath like a kitten. One of those one’s so young they still have mucus crusting their eyes. It was something sweet, that name, that we could have and not share with Ian.

They came down from Rhode Island, and we met downtown. After I started staying with them they told me we were family. That I could come with when they left.

When Ian was gone I lowered myself to the floor next to Milkbreath and put my chin on his hunched shoulder. “I need a hit,” I said. He rocked a little bit but didn’t say anything so I wiggled my chin in circles against his bone. “Milkbreath,” I said. “C’mon

and cook up with me.”

He slumped over to his side and I followed him to the floor so I was laying on top of him. “You’re in trouble,” he said, his voice creaking through his teeth like wind through tree branches. “Why’d you have to lose your job, huh?” He lifted his arm out from under me to wrap it around my back and give my shoulder a squeeze. He was thin, thinner than me, so that when I was laid out on top of him even a little bit it made him wheeze.

“It’s not like Ian said, you know. Not really. Like they give a fuck who gets high at a strip club. Huh? No fucking way. The dyke of a manager just had it out for me. Acting all high and fucking mighty when she’s nothing but a half-assed pimp.” I sat up and let Milkbreath’s lungs fill. “Come on, let’s do a little, yeah? They were all jealous of me. Wanted me gone and were gonna get me out no matter what I did. Jealous, every single one.”

Milkbreath lifted himself up off the floor and pulled my face towards him with one hand and my hair back with another. He mashed his mouth against mine a few times then pulled back laughing, his eyes glazed like sugar. “I bet they were. You’re so fucking hot, babe.”

“Yeah, well fucking Ian’s going to blame it on me anyway.” Milkbreath stood up and crossed the room to drag his backpack over to me against the wall. “He’s such a prick.”

“Well, we are pretty fucked now.” Milkbreath said and sat down next to me. “He just worries, is all. Everything has gone wrong since we came here.”

“It’s not my fault.” Milkbreath held the spoon and I flicked the lighter on under it.

We were good at being alone. Being alone was easier than being with Ian. He had become a bruise for us, constant and throbbing.

“Tie me off,” I asked and Milkbreath did. He tickled my elbow. His eyes were wide open now and nearly all blue, the pupils just small dots like islands in an ocean I was passing by overhead. Him and Ian almost looked like twins, almost, with the same black hair and same eyes. But Milkbreath was softer. Ian’s a brillopad. Milkbreath, a sponge. Or a rag.

He ran the needle against my skin in small circles then stopped to let it rest against my vein.

“Ready?” He asked and I nodded. In and out. Floor dropped like one of those towers at an amusement park.

From under my eyelids I saw a redheaded woman I didn’t know dressed like an antique photo. Laughing with a glass hovering by her mouth. My vision pinpricked closed, hair lined up like soldiers.

At attention.

#

I was laid out over Milkbreath’s lap playing with his hair while he was pulling the hose off his arm. “I kinda love you, you know.” I said.

He dug his nails into my thighs.

“I kinda love you, too, you know.” We shifted around on the floor to lay side by side. We stripped off pieces of clothes. We laughed into the hollows of one another’s mouths. His body smelled like old socks, but that was alright.

“I wish we could bathe.” I said.

“I’ll wash you with my tongue.” He let it drop over his bottom lip. It was speckled thick white and yellow. He ran it along my jaw.

We breathed in our mixed funk and he ran his fingers along my back. His touch eased the weight off of the sore spots in my arm. “Honestly,” I told him, “she came in and dragged me out the back door like I was trash.”

“Noway.” His eyelashes fluttered against my cheek.

“Yeahway,” I locked my mouth on his shoulder and suckled. Tasted ash and sourdough. “We should get out of here. Run off. Forget them. All of it. Ian, too. Just leave it all here. With him.”

“I hate it when you guys shit talk each other. He’s my brother. He, like, saved my life, you know? I’d be dead without him. Like, he takes care of me. You should be nice to him.”

“I could take care of us and be much less of a dick about it.”

“Really? You can’t even keep a job at a strip club.” Milkbreath rattled a laugh. I pulled myself off of him and he stayed on the ground, his eyes curved slits of blue, blue, blue. Vibrating: Milkbreath, Ian, Cody, Ian, Milkbreath. I pressed my palms into my eyes.

His lines straightened out, softened.

“Not cool.” I said.

“Sorry. I guess we’re all just sick of walking to the gas station to take a shit.” He reached up and placed a hand on my shoulder, pulled me back down so I could feel the arc of his ribs against my cheek.

“I guess.” I counted the pace of his heart dragging like snails. “Do you think you

could get it up tonight?”

“Let's just lay here awhile.”

“You know what,” he said after some time, “the people who painted this house; I don't know who they expected to sell it to. Who the fuck paints a house like that.”

“It's so boring on the inside, though.” I said. “Like coffee and cream.”

#

When I was young my room had been pink. Not a pastel, Easter egg kind of pink. Hot pink. This kind of Spice Girl leopard spot pink that radiated off the walls even when the lights were off so that it was hard to sleep.

My mother was a quiet woman who had gray hair and creaking knuckles as far back as I could remember. She ate little. She had lines around her mouth and chronic back pain. She knit lace doilies and left them all over the house, draped over everything. If I stayed still long enough she probably would have draped one over me. She was constantly dipping needles in and out of yarn.

She stayed out of my room. I think the color of it hurt her eyes.

I wonder if she painted it, after I left. Already, it'd been two years. When I stepped out of the door she was sitting with her back to me, her body bent over a ball of tangled yarn, her pain pills in my pocket.

On the floor of the squat I touched my fingers to my closed eyelids, tried to rub the beige color of the room out of my eyes. I pushed hard and spots like dollies bloomed, patterns of hunched women knotted within them.

My mother, squirming out of the yarn. My mother, but not, standing straight, and violently young. Came towards me, hands outstretched.

Said: “They think they can erase our line with our names, but sweetheart, I am in us. I can keep us bound together.”

My mother never had red hair, never had those thunderstorm eyes, teeth like barbed wire, body like a cement hourglass. The woman kicked the yarn off her high heel.

“Darling, don't worry about it. I am the maternal line.”

#

When Ian came back it was days later. Maybe a week. He'd do this. Disappear, reappear. I would worry but not Milkbreath. “He wouldn't leave me,” Milkbreath would say. “If I'm here, he'll be back.” We were sleeping on the floor together, arms weaved around each other tight as rope, fused by old sweat.

Ian wedged his foot between our chests and pried me off.

“What the fuck, Ian?” I could feel my ribs pop as I stood. “I'm trying to sleep.”

“Yeah, and I'm trying to save our asses.” He knocked his boot against Milkbreath's leg. “Get up and get dressed.” He told Milkbreath. “And you,” He picked up my shirt and tossed it at me. “Pretty sick of seeing that shit.”

“Fuck off.” I pulled it over my head.

“Cody, walk down to the store and get us some food, will you?” Ian took a few dollars out of his pocket and handed them to Milkbreath.

“Wanna come?” Milkbreath pocketed the money and knocked his knuckles against mine.

“Nah, Cody. Me and her, we need to talk.” Milkbreath's eyes darted from me to his brother, his pupils still pinched tight. His tongue darted out over his lips, heavy and scaled and for a minute I was sure he was going to slump back on the ground.

“What you have to say to her you can say to me,” he would say. I would settle into his lap. His legs would cradle me like a basket and Ian would be small, smaller than I remembered, and he would walk out the door. He would keep walking until his feet bled. Until the sun burned off his shadow.

“See you guys in a little, I guess,” Milkbreath said and he was gone by the time I got my eyes open.

Ian sat down and folded his legs at his ankles. He clamped his hand around my wrist and lowered me down into the empty space framed by his thighs. “We’re still family, aren’t we?” he asked. “There’s no reason for us to be fighting.”

#

I had a dream like a fishhook snag into my spine and pull me out of my body, out of a link of arms and legs. Wasn’t on the floor. Wasn’t dirty skinned and dry. This was all air, clean, breezing. The boy snored into my hair. Milkbreath, Ian, Cody? Does it matter when you’re family? Can you have family without a body?

I had killed. I knew that. Somehow I had killed. My mother without her dying. Her daughter. I had killed but I didn’t know what for, the who, the why. The blood was on my hands, but my hands were gone, hitched to a boy’s hip. Tucked between a boy’s thighs.

I was drinking champagne with a woman in a low hung gown, tits half popped out, a flower in her hair. We were laughing. “Bridget,” I said to her, “it’s not that easy.”

“You’re telling me what’s easy and what’s not?” She dabbed her mouth with a napkin. She smiled. Her teeth were purple, large, shaped like bricks. “You’re telling me? Telling me?” She kept laughing. When the wind blew a rainbow danced under her skin,

but most of the colors were missing. I saw red. Her hair was like dead embers. Or dried horse blood.

“I don’t know you.” I stopped laughing and told her.

“Honey, when they talk about my life they talk about it being punctured,” she said. Her nails were red as razors slipped too close to skin. Red like burns. Her hair a fire. A wound. “You know me. Everybody knows me. The only thing that’s funny about it is that they’re always talking about who I punctured. They never really care about the other way around. Who punctured me, you know, honey?” Her hand snapped out and locked around the space that would have been my wrist. Her pupils were bleeding out of her eyes and dribbling out on to her dress, staining the soft fabric.

“You’re ruining your clothes. Stop.” The ink of her pupils pooled in her lap and dripped down, down, down, slow and sludging over the hump of her knees.

“Your prisons are nasty. A joke. Ohio couldn’t hold me. They called me Fury, honey, and you can’t keep that in. Nothing could. I’m a headline, you know.” Her fist clenched around the stem of her glass and it tipped to spill over her lap, mix with her eyes. It became all shadow. All light. Her other hand twisted the air of my arm.

“I know,” I said, and she released it.

“I spilled my champagne.”

“I know,” I said. “You can have mine, though.” She sneered at me but took it.

“You’re cutting me,” the boy groaned. His body rolled away from me. My hands, free and moist, rose to my mouth. I tasted sour metal.

#

I never wanted to ever step near the club again but Ian said I had to. I wondered if

he had set it up that way on purpose. To keep me quiet. To remind me of whose screw up brought me there. Once we stepped off the bus they stood on either side of me, both holding an elbow in their hand.

An escort.

“It won’t be long,” Ian guided me towards the motel. I kept my eyes on the club. On the sign, and the stupid fucking legs stuck up in the air, the heels near knocked off like the bitch had just fallen down.

“At least you get to take a bath,” Milkbreath said. “Right?”

“She has to take a bath. No body, not even Willie, is going to pay to split a moldy log.”

“Is that what they're calling it? Really?” I asked. “That's the stupidest fucking thing I've ever heard.” Ian's fingers pinched hard into my elbow.

“Don't give me shit today,” he said.

“I’m sure this is so hard for you.” The sun was hung high and hot and I could feel it burning sweat out of me. Welling and dripping off the hair under my arms. In the back there were three kids fucking around. The two oldest were throwing a stuffed rabbit over the head of the youngest girl in the middle. She kept wandering back and forth, looking tired. Looking ready to cry. Even when I was young I hated kids. Hated the other girls. Hated the pink in my room.

I don’t know why it was painted that way. I don’t know who did it. My mother hated it, too. We lived together with that hate and it radiated off the walls, into our bones. My father, whoever he had been, was gone. Left, or dead, or never even really there to begin with. My mother never said.

“Come on, come on, get it,” one in a flannel shouted, waving the rabbit in the air.

“You think I’m happy about this?” Ian pulled my elbow and dragged me away from Milkbreath to face him. He stuck a finger in my face.

“We’ve got debt out our fucking asses because you lost a fucking gram, because you lost your fucking job. We’re all out, alright? Of everything. I’m trying to take care of us. Willie’s going to wipe our slate clean and fucking throw in some fucking dope to get us started.”

I could hear the slick grind of the girl’s feet against the pavement, kicking apart loose stone. The groan of her steps. The laugh, the flight, the rabbit.

“For whose pound of flesh?” I hissed.

He slapped me quick and hard across the cheek. It didn’t hurt, but it twisted my head back towards the kids. The rabbit dropped to the pavement from one kid’s hands—a girl, I realized, despite the flannel and the lack of tits and the dirty mean kind of face usually saved for teenage boys. I rubbed the wet out of my eyes and took a hard look at them.

The youngest, scrawny dirty blonde, hid behind the flannel’s back. The other, the one with her back to me, a black girl with braided hair, crossed the lot quick to whisper in the ratgirl’s ear. Their eyes were all on me. The mean faced one spit on the asphalt and reached up to pull the black girl closer to her. They kept watching. I could feel a tooth in the back of my mouth throb.

“You’re lucky,” Ian said, “that he’s willing to give us that much just to fuck you. I was honestly expecting less.”

“When you’re done maybe I can slip in and we can take another shower together,

huh?” Milkbreath said. “That’d be nice.”

“Nice,” I said. The girls took off down the lot, scurried down the other side of the motel out of sight. In the distance I could hear a cat yowling. I wanted to reach out and brush my knuckles against Milkbreath’s. “Can I at least get a fucking bump before I do this?”

“We’re all out. Of everything. You did the last last night.” Ian said.

“Bullshit,” I said.

“We’ll be waiting outside, just come and find us.” Ian said.

They both kissed me on my sore cheek and sent me down the line of doors to room number 32.

#

The room was like a nursing home, small and off-white, trying to be as hard to remember as possible. There was a picture of a sailboat on the bedside table in the same cheap frame my mother kept printouts of prayers in at home. She lined our walls with scriptures written in looping script, but I don’t remember Church at all, or God, or why. I flipped the picture of the sail boat face down. It shouldn’t have to see this, I thought. The bed was a flat, hard queen. I took a small baggie and needle out of my pocket.

Fuck those guys, I thought.

I sat in the shower and let the water run over my head while I picked off my scabs. I shaved with the razor Ian had given me. “Had to,” he said. Little curls of black hair clung to the tub and clustered around the drain. I pinched a tumble weed together out of some and rolled it along the roadway that was the edge of the tub.

I smashed it flat with my thumb. Uncorked the bath.

Should I get dressed again, I wondered. Should I leave?

I parted the blinds and peered out the window. Ian and Milkbreath were standing in the parking lot still. Ian had his thumbs hooked to his belt loops and his shoulders tossed back. He turned his head and said something to Milkbreath with a small snarl of a smile. Milkbreath clutched his belly and laughed and laughed. I turned my back on the window.

Willie wasn't there yet so I sat on the back corner of the bed and rested my head against the wall. I'd seen him once before. I was standing outside his car. Ian had been bent over, his head tucked in the open window. When he stepped away Willie looked up at me over the glass. His eyes were piss yellow. He had winked.

"Lucky," Ian had said, "Lucky he's got a soft spot for you."

I reached down and played with my toes. I ran my finger in and out of them, pulled each a part, and felt the wrinkles the water left in my skin. I smelled like scentless shampoo. The sheets were getting wet.

"Hey, baby doll." Willie was in the door, watching me finger my feet. I wished I had put clothes on. "Hey, there." The light was dimming outside but still bright enough to shoot a burn through my eyes and turn Willie into the shadow of a man. He swung the door closed and came towards me. "You having fun?" Up close he was a man in his sixties and his teeth were coming apart in his mouth. He was stripping off his jacket. He was undoing his belt.

"Can I get a hit?" I asked. "Before we do this? Can I get a hit?"

The bed caved under his weight, screeched. "Come here, baby," his palm was stretched out towards me. "Come here." There was dirt caked in the lines of his hand, a

callous the size of a quarter bubbling on the hump of his thumb. I wondered why Ian hadn't told him to bathe. He had his dick out, long like a worm. A twist of old rope. It wiggled in his hand and I pushed hard back into the wall, folded my legs over one another. Pulled them to my chest.

His dick was mottled with brown stains, like an old table cloth. He throttled it in his fist.

"I'm not going to get sick from this, am I?" I asked. "Can we do a bit first? Can I get a hit?"

"You'll get your hit, girlie." I could feel little flecks of tooth and spit splatter in my ear, trickle down my neck. "You'll get it."

Hands on my leg. His callous on my thigh, burst, oozed. Eyes closed, lips in teeth. Away.

#

Bridget was sprawled out in a clawfoot chair, an old one. The kind Grandmother's give to Mother's that only ever gathers dust after. She was fondling two glasses of champagne that were shining like mercury.

The cheek of her skin had rotted out and I could see her teeth chewing her tongue through a hole the size of a cigar burn.

"I acquired names for myself, you know. My first name they gave me free of charge but I worked for Fury. How many more names? Swift. Fury. Those are just two, maybe. I have names." She clinked the two glasses together and her skull popped its jaw before it was fleshy and new again. Her skin wouldn't sit still. "If you don't want to die nameless, sweetheart, you got to etch your own out in blood, that's all it comes down to,

you know.”

“Haven’t I bled enough?” I was soaked through with it and shivering. Going to catch a cold, like that. Bridget sipped one glass. The other.

“Not your blood, no one gives a shit for your blood.” She shook her head, laughed like a bowling ball. “Don’t you know by now? It’s filthy. You need to clean yourself up.”

“Can I have my champagne back now, Bridget?”

She lifted my glass and poured the rest into her own. “You gave it to me.”

“Did I?” I said. “Really?”

She reached over and took my hand, tucked it against her mouth and breathed into my palm. My skin baked away, flaked, fluttered into the sky as so much ash. “Sweets,” she said, “We’re all pretty much fucked now.”

#

Willie climbed off me and zipped himself up. I felt a slick sickness withering down my legs that smelled like the ocean. Rotten meat. He was wheezing through his teeth and stretching without looking at me.

“The dope,” I said. “Give me the dope.” Skin shining, trembling, cold. There was a sore spot on my tit, spreading out and throbbing. Like the motherfucker had nearly suckled my nipple off. I knew it’d be red, raw, wet. I knew it’d be that way for days. No washing it off.

“I already gave it to Ian. Take it up with him.”

I walked across the room, thighs brushing together with a wet sucking sound, parted the curtains. The sun was down. No Ian. No Milkbreath. The trees gnawed upward, shadows of teeth. “Where’d they go?”

“Hell if I know. Walked off when I gave them the shit.”

I went into the bathroom and tried to wipe the gunk off of me. On my knees I puked hard into the toilet. It was all fluid, flakes of blood settling at the bottom. I got dressed and Willie was sitting on the bed, smoking a cigarette. I stepped out of the motel.

“Hey,” I called. “Hey, I’m done now. Milkbreath?” I walked a circle around the lot.

“Ian?” I peeked around corners. I placed my hand on my chest and tried to push my heart down. Under my shirt, a row of ribs decompressing. A pain.

“Cody?”

“Hey?” I stepped up to the trees, the black bark burning into one massive hulking wall. I called into them. They sent my voice back to me.

I came back around to the start. The motel room door was open, Willie peering out with his eyes yellow, his ash falling to the carpet. “Something wrong, sweetheart?”

“They said they’d wait. Did you talk to Ian? Did they go back to the squat?”

“Fuck if I know.” He stood up and walked out the door. He passed me by. Threw the cigarette to the ground. The cherry burst against the cement, sparking and scattering like a little firework. I watched the bits of it burn out, fingers tucked against my lower lip. Feeling the swelling build there. “You’re one batty bitch, you know that?” He chuckled.

“Can you give me a ride? I need to see if they went home.”

“Take the bus.” He tossed two quarters down at my feet. He cranked the door of his car open. “It’s been fun.” The door closed. The car squealed awake. He left me in a storm of loose gravel and dirt. Alone.

Across the lot the strip club sign flickered, a blur of teal, pink. Red. The parking

lot was dotted with vehicles. The walls a throb of trapped noise. I sat back against the side of the motel and watched lights dance behind its window.

They'd come back if I was here.

#

"Night has a way of slipping past when you're alone," I said, "But when you're waiting for someone time just drags its ass. I just don't know how long this is taking. I can't tell if this is fast or slow."

"You're not alone," Bridget pointed out. She was sitting back against the wall with me, less solid here than she had been where we were before. Her body a shimmer of color. Or maybe dark. She had a glass clutched in one hand, dipping her fingers into its thick silver. Swirling it, around and around and around.

I closed my eyes and Milkbreath and Ian walked along the ghost highways of my veins.

"You know what word I hate?" Bridget said, "Public. They called me a public woman. Can you believe that, sweetheart?" I felt her dripping the water on the crown of my skull. "Public, like a toilet. Public, like a bus. Free access. Civilian. Who makes up these kinds of names, you think? Public." She snorted and something splashed into the cup.

"What're you going to do? People name things." I watched as she fished for the tip of her nose at the bottom of the glass.

"They tried to ship me back to Ohio, but Ohio didn't want me. Hah, shows them. They got me now whether they like it or not." She held the tip of her nose to the hole in her face. "Particular fondness for violence, for hurting men, that's what they said about

me. I don't find anything that particular about it." She reached around and plucked her ear, rubbing her thumb around the fat end of it. Skin flaked off, fluttered down like the start of a snow storm. Her hand came away wet with blood.

"Yeah, and how'd that work out for you?" I leaned forward and pressed my eyes into my knees to black out Ian, Milkbreath, Cody. Laughing, swinging their big bag of dope like a baby girl between them. Their pupils shrunk and sizzling like raisins. "You're falling apart."

"Don't act like you aren't the one fucked here. Like you don't want me. Didn't call me." She tapped her wet fingers against my arm. "Hey, lift that head up, girlie. Tell me, what's your story?"

"I don't have one. It's nothing. Nothing much. I stole my mother's daughter. I hitched my wagon to the wrong breed of horse. Their feet are trampling off now. Beating earth. Beating."

"That's no good," she slurped heavily from the cup. "You need something more. Some blood. You need to do something for yourself. This is pathetic."

"Who asked you, though?" My stomach was clenching its own empty self and I could feel my blood getting cold and sluggish. I could feel. I could still smell that damn man and my pants were sticking to my thighs like superglue. I wasn't in a mood to be fucked with.

"Your story is my story, babe. You gave it to me." There were more plunks, more splashes. I popped my eyes open—her face danced in the shine of silver, muscle balding skin, skullish. Her eyes rolled back, untethered, floating away. She gnashed her teeth together around her tongue and it came free, slithered down her neck into the collar of her

dress. It writhed in her cleavage. “We’re family now.”

“Heard that before. Put yourself together. I’m too sick for this.” Across the way women were coming out of the strip club and the lights were shutting down. The old bitch was waiting with two younger bitches outside, gabbing, smoking, laughing. At me, I thought. I tried to shrink into the wall.

Dragged me out the door, just like trash.

“I used to have a family like that,” Bridget said, soft fleshed and new again. Veins bulged and rippled under her skin, running in waves up and down her arms.

Reconnecting. “But you’ll do.” She aimed her brick teeth at me, patted my hand.

“Always saying punctured. Always saying fond of it. Do they ever ask? Do they, hon? Act like I fucked the system somehow by getting off as much as I did. Who got off more, though? One has to wonder. Who got off more? Answer: Them. They did. All they ever did was get off.” She did a wanking motion in the air above her crotch and laughed. Her jaw tore at the edges. “It’s enough to make you want to shave your head and grow your own dick. See what it’s like.”

“Don’t you wonder if you were hurting the wrong people? Wonder if you should have killed someone else?”

“Why would I ever do that?” Bridget bent her face back over the cup. It had swollen to the size of a cauldron. Split open her legs. She was having a hard time managing it. Her eye dribbled out, down the arch of her cheek, and dripped off of her face. It got caught on the rim of the cup before slipping under the surface.

The strip club lot was empty. The motel lot, empty. We were caught alone between the hours of night and day. No Milkbreath. No Ian. Had there ever been? Was

one a dream or both? No soul in fucking sight, but through the walls I could hear someone playing Opera. At a motel?

“Don’t put on airs,” I muttered.

“Why would I ever do that?” Bridget said.

“Even if you kill one another will rise in its place. I heard that once, and there’s no getting around it.”

“I’m telling you, you have to do something.” Bridget’s eye bobbed to the surface, round and perfect, webbed with little blue veins arched out like limbs on dead trees.

“It’s not all that easy.”

#

My mother had tried to teach me, when I was younger and she had time still, to knit. I would make lopsided scarves and hats without shape. The yarn would rope around my wrists and fingers. I would get lost in it, and my mother would sit back in her chair, her own needles clinking together. Face solid like a stone.

“You’ll get it,” she would say, but she wouldn’t untie me. I would have to tear myself out.

Some women just aren’t made to create, and if they can’t do that, there’s really only one other option, isn’t there?

“It’s just a coin. It’s just sides,” Fury said. “You just pick one and roll with it. You get that?”

I didn’t feel like talking, so I didn’t.

“They wrote books about me.” Bridget said.

“There are more of me than you could ever imagine. Waiting. Simmering. Can

you feel that heat, sweetheart? Can you? It's a dog summer. It just keeps on going,"

Bridget pulled her dress up over her ankles, bunched it around her hips, and spread out her legs. I could smell rotted bird, dust, iron, hard liquor. The kind that burns. She picked at the holes in the flesh of her thighs. Dug out old coins flecked with gun powder. She poured a stream of champagne out of my glass over them and the flesh resealed over her bones, pink and baby fresh. She sighed, content and leaned her head against my shoulder. "I could make you a branding iron. I could make you a name."

#

The setting sun was spreading shadows like blankets. I circled the lot enough times to wear a hole in the bottom of my sneaker. If I kept moving, Bridget couldn't chew my ear off. She had enough trouble keeping herself together sitting still. She waited by the wall. She raised her glass as I passed by.

She'd call out:

"Hey, baby, what are you doing?" Circle away.

People settled permanently there. People, living out of motels. That's funny, isn't it? But somehow I was the one who was fucked. Outside rooms: deck chairs, windchimes, a barbeque. Fucked.

"Don't you want to sit down?" Circle back.

Two of the kids from the day before, the white girl, dirty flannel. The sister, dirty haired. Squeezed out of a door and stood against the wall as I passed by. The little one reached up to hold the other's hand. The eldest pulled it away.

"You could have walked to New Orleans by now." Circle away.

The white girls ran past me to another door. The oldest cracked a fist against it.

The door creaked open and the black girl stepped out. There was a moment where the two eldest looked one another up and down. I hated the girls. Hated the girls in my grade when I was young. Their color, their nails, the smell of detergent. The white girl said something, shoved the other lightly on the shoulder. The shoved chose to smile. They both laughed in one another's face.

They were noise, blurred and wonderful, full of hate and unworried. Their eyes slid off me as I slunk through their world. They became dots burned out by the sun. I moved away. Kept moving away. Kept coming back.

“Why are you waiting around here anyway?” Circle. Circle. Circle.

“You think they're coming for you?” Circle. Circle.

I picked up the lighter fluid, the pack of matches, at the barbeque.

“Think they loved you?” Circle.

An almost whole cigarette left on the curb. Lit it up. Shook the lighter fluid close to my ear. Half full.

“Someone's going to call the police, and you haven't done anything interesting yet.” Bridget was pulling bits of herself out of the glass again, leaving streaks of red in the thick top layer of liquid. They'd bleed out, settle, blur black. “I need your help here. I'm not going to leave you. I'm your blood. Your family.” She ran a hand through her hair and came back with a ratted clump of it. “Baby, they said I had hair as bright as a bush fire.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I hear you.”

“Who punctured whom? My darling, darling, you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I hear you.” I sat down next to her and ripped a section of my

shirt off. I soaked it in lighter fluid. "I need a bottle."

"This is a little outside of my tastes, but at least it's something."

#

"Have you ever done this before?" Ian asked with the needle to my arm. We were still naked and caked with sweat, dirt, ash, on the floor of the squat. I was sitting on a beer can that had been crushed by our bodies. "This shit," Ian told me, "is divine. Take-you-to-the-heavens good. Make you see God." We had our legs wrapped around each other's waists. I could feel the tooth of the needle trying to pinch in.

"Of course I've done it," I told him. "Go ahead, already."

In and out. Smooth as my mother's slipstitch.

#

Outside of the strip club, the women had disappeared behind the door. They never liked me, not much. Never had a "hi" or anything to say to me, the way you're supposed to for the people you work with.

The sores on my arm were starting to pucker closed. I crouched by the dumpster, waiting. Thinking of the old bitch in there.

"I want to let you know," Bridget said, "That I'd prefer something else. A man. A puncture. Maybe." She had her back to the dumpster. The glass was the size of a basketball, tucked under her arm.

There was a noise behind her like crying. Someone speaking. "I'll let you know when we're done, alright? Then you can look. Until then go sit somewhere else."

"I want to go home, Grace."

"You're going to mess it all up if you keep crying. Just go over there."

From the other side the little girl stomped into view. She stopped a few feet away with her back to me. I stilled, match frozen in my hand. Unstruck. Bridget was gazing after the little girl, her fingers twisting her earlobe. Her lips were moving but she wasn't saying shit.

“What are you going to use it for, Grace?” A third voice all awed up. The little girl slumped down to the pavement, sat arms folded over her chest.

“I want to be called Elliot. From now on, okay? I’m going to use it as an initiation. For me. For a new me. Born out of its blood and shit.”

Fury had her head cocked against the dumpster, her skin burning away slow at the edges. Her teeth ground to dirt with the force of her grin.

“This is our moment,” I said, “Stop it.”

“Ssssh,” she said, finger to her lipless mouth.

“What about you?” The girl asked.

“I’m going to ask them to kill my Grandma.”

Bridget set the glass down. It tipped by her feet. Spilled out like sludge. Bright as pearls. Shined as teeth.

“That's wicked.”

“She’s sick,” the voice rose to defense. “Wakes up moaning every morning. Won’t quit moaning till she sleeps.” A whisper. “I don’t ever want to be like that. It's sick.”

Bridget reached her arm in to the dumpster. Then she stuck her head in. Her body slipped through after. I heard her cackle. I cradled the bottle against my chest and squeezed through the space between the trash and the building.

“What do we do?” The black girl asked. Her and the dirty faced white girl were hunched over a lump of shit on the ground, sitting across from each other like they were at a séance. Flies buzzed in the space left between their faces.

“We got to cut its throat, string it up, and let all the blood drip out. We’re gonna collect it and offer it up to the gods,” the white girl said. Bridget crouched between them, her eyes darting from one face to another, then down to the ground.

The white girl held a knife in one hand, with the other she reached out and took the black girl's.

“Make it take us home, Grace.” The dirt haired girl called from where she was. “You promised.”

“I’ll get you home.” She looked to the other girl and rolled her eyes. The other girl hid her smile behind her hand. “Get its neck up here where I can get at it.”

With her free hand the black girl raised up the body of a dead cat. Fur matted. Head slumped to the side. Eyes popped open, glazed, caked with mucus.

“Smells so ripe,” the white girl said and gagged.

“Hurry up and get it over with,” the black girl said. “I don’t want to keep touching it.”

“Yeah,” Bridget urged. “Do it. Go on.”

Milkbreath, kittenish, head popped up on my shoulder. The cat’s body twisted round in the girl’s hand as the knife tried to sink in. I scrambled out from between the dumpster.

“You little bastards.” I screamed. The girls scattered away. The cat dropped to the ground. The little girl flipped around to see me. She started to shriek. The two older girls

fled past her, hands clenched around each other's wrists.

"Wait," the youngest tried to rise to her feet and slipped, fell on her arm. The two stopped, turned back to her, tried to lift her up.

"Fucking psycho bitch." the white boygirl spat. "What the fuck are you doing back there?"

"Cat killers," I brandished the bottle towards them. "Filthy, dirty, shit-eating, cat killers." A fly landed on my cheek. I felt one crawling around the bulb of my knee, up my thigh. I could smell rot. Rot. The cat lay twisted on the ground.

"We didn't do shit to the cat. It was already dead." The white girl heaved the youngest up to her feet. There was a rough patch of blood and gravel running down the length of her arm.

Bridget backed away from me, her tongue running the length of her teeth, wiggling through holes of flesh like a maggot, white. Furred. She stepped towards the children but stopped. I heard the clinking of metal on metal. She said: "I think I rang the wrong number."

"You little lying piece of shit cat killers." I knelt down and gathered up the broken cat body in my arm. Its head rolled on my shoulder.

"Honey, you're fucked. There isn't any reason to be screaming your head off about a dead cat. You know what kind of situation you're in?" Bridget reached her hand out to me and I could see the light throbbing through the webs between her fingers.

"Jesus Christ, we're all just fucked." She ran her hands through her hair and looked from me, to the kids, to the cat, back to the little girl.

"Get the fuck out," I told her. "Stay the fuck away from me."

“Who the fuck are you talking to?” The ratgirl laughed.

“We oughta go,” the black girl tugged her arm in the direction of the motel.

“Come on, we should get out of here.”

do it. Told you it was bad.” I thought of her jumping for that rabbit. Her hands in the air.

How it sailed past through her arms.

No matter how many times or how hard you reached, shit’s just shit in the end, right?

“Etched in blood,” Bridget had said. “And you’re telling me what’s easy.”

“Crazy bitch,” the white girl kept laughing. “Didn’t I see you get the shit smacked out of you?” She had her nails dug into the little girl's underarms. I lit the match. The bottle burned in my hand.

It sailed.

It burst on the ground, a scatter of ember, a scar burning into the asphalt. Too short. The girls fled, the two older ones outstripping the youngest, linking hands. Leaving her toddling behind, arm clutched to her chest.

I sunk down to the filth of the dumpster with the cat clutched in my hands. I felt an old wet stain sinking into the legs of my pants. I lifted it up, holding its head straight.

Its eyes were rolled back, yellow. Its fur was falling out in patches, coming apart in my fingers, shifting away with the wind.

I put my mouth to its mouth and breathed in and out. Its chest rose and fell with mine.

“You’ve gone nuts, cupcake.” Bridget said. “Off the deep end.”

"I don't want to fucking talk to you anymore. Just go."

I looked up but Bridget was gone. The flames were ebbing out. The club pounded on, muffled music and light caged up. There were shards of broken glass cutting through my clothes, into my knees. I couldn't remember the prayers my mother said—the ones she had framed around our home, perched over her lace dollies. I wanted to say something for it. For the cat. I put my mouth back over its mouth and closed my eyes. Breathed in. Breathed out. Along the veins of my eyelids Milkbreath was sprawled out on a bed, his chest wheezing, his fingers combing the slight hairs sprung up on his stomach. I tasted curdled milk.

“You bastards,” I said. “You son of a bitch.”

IV

Into the Hands of God

Death's got this smell to it, medical and rotten sweet as burnt sugar. When bodies start to break apart it's kind of like wet flowers torn up and trampled after they've just bloomed. There isn't really any way to keep a smell like that out, but people try. Elaine had burnt candles, I could tell, scented but mostly just cheap wax lying over the deeper rooted smell of a body being worn out. They smelled like the same kind Ronan burnt to cover the traces of his weed and our own Abuelita's smell.

“I don’t like leaving,” Elaine said, “but there’s not much I can do about it.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” I said. These are the thing you do for people. Treat others the way you like to be treated. And I had meant it, it was no trouble. Still, she split the days in half between me and Babygirl.

When I showed up for my half Babygirl was looking green and sleepless, her hands picking at the hem of her skirt and her eyes red rimmed.

“Really,” she said as she edged out the door, “I don’t mind doing it. I could have done both, you know, if you guys wanted. It’s not a problem. Not after Elaine has helped me out so much.”

“I know,” I started easing the door closed behind her. “I know. Have a goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Poppi.” The door clicked shut and I watched out the window as she sprang across the parking lot to the motel rooms across the way and shut herself behind her own door safe and sound. Some people just can’t handle death. Can’t handle dying. Grief, tears, all of it, is like a knife to their belly.

Not for me. Not since I was eight and God marked me his own.

#

People would assume things of me. Because of what I did. They would think: “Something for her has to have gone wrong. She’s a train gone off the tracks. Lost.” That’s what a lot of them thought. Women, sometimes, would come in. Women with arched eyebrows, tight mouths. There to boost themselves up out of the wreckage of our lives. Loud women drunk like men, trying to be like men, to show their men that they can be just the same, showering us with bills and laughing at the pivoting landscape of our

bodies.

Women with manic smiles trying to show us that we can be just like they are, that they are no better, their money sweating in their outstretched palms to pay for their sense of understanding. Those women looked at me and they would think “something has gone wrong for her.”

The kindest would think it was not my fault. In the slim space behind their eyes where they kept the thoughts they didn't know they were thinking, there would be pricks of relief. “But not for me,” that space would whisper. “For her. Not me.”

They'd feel this wild joy they couldn't put words to. It would take them days to wash it off their skin.

The men would think it, too. When they were sitting at the tables with other men. When they weren't yet drunk enough to only consider rolls of flesh and the dank wet places they buried their dreams in. They'd watch me and they'd think: “Here's a girl who has fucked something up.” They'd feel superior. They wouldn't even feel a sliver of guilt for it.

Men like that, they liked Babygirl because she seemed so high-bred, but wilted. It was a prize to get to feel better than someone like that. They could save her, if they wanted, they'd think. They could teach her something, something she never knew, even as she thought she knew everything. Constantly I'd hear Babygirl being taught something.

Men like that, they liked seeing Elaine with her straight back, her face so bored and weary, have to smile at their jokes. Cave under a hand on her shoulder. Laugh and flirt because she had to. Men like that liked knowing that she had to.

I knew what men like that liked, and I knew it wasn't just fleshy bodies or

comfort.

I could have asked these men: whose hair was it who wiped the son of God's feet clean? Whose tears anointed that skin?

I didn't have any interest in men like that.

I only cared about the men who came in chewed up from the inside out. Too dizzy with their own pain to stop and think why I may or may not have been there. Men who just cared that I was there, stuffed back in the private room with them alone. Men who needed soothed.

#

Elaine's room had two beds, both Queens, that took up most of the room. A small space of tile where she had put a table and a miniature fridge. Her clothes, her daughter's clothes, and her mother's were folded and stacked against the wall near the bathroom. What could be seen of the carpet was clean and neat as a hospital. The walls were the color of birch trees.

On one of the beds Elaine's mother was laid back, attached to a sack of fluid hung up above her head and an oxygen machine that hooked its mask over her mouth. She was still, but I could see the dark, milky patches of her eyes roaming over me.

"Mrs. Thompson, hello," I said. "Where's Celeste?"

Her fingers scratched the sheet in the direction of the bathroom door. I crossed the room and knocked my knuckles against it lightly. "You naked in there?"

"Na," Celeste said, "Come on in." I popped the door open and peeked through. Celeste was sitting on the floor with a white girl, scissors in hand. She snipped off a limp tangle of the girl's brown hair close to the scalp. Already the girl's head looked patched,

like a lawn in a drought. Elaine's makeup bag was open and lipstick and eyeliner were scattered across the floor. Celeste had red lipstick smeared across her mouth. A younger white girl was sitting in the tub, knees drawn up to her chest, her eyelids smeared turtle-shell green. The scissors closed on another hunk of the girl's hair and it curled between Celeste's fingers.

She held it up to the other girl's lip.

“You look like a trucker,” Celeste said and the two of them laughed.

“Go on, glue it there,” the girl said.

“Your momma know you're doing this? That makeup looks expensive.” Celeste looked up at me, wary. The other girl shifted her body around to get her own eye-full. She licked her lip, shrugged, and turned back to Celeste.

“Yeah,” Celeste said. “She knows. This is Elliot. That's Lindsey.” She hooked her thumb back towards the girl in the tub. The little girl raised her hand, then tucked it under her armpit. “This is my mom's friend, Poppi.”

Elliot snorted, and asked low under her breath what kind of name that was. Her face was bare and thin. Another curl of hair drifted off her head. Celeste chewed her lower lip and the lipstick got on her front teeth.

“Well, you make a mess in here, you better be the ones to clean it.” I closed the door, but pressed my ear against it.

“How does it look?” Elliot asked.

“Mom's going to be mad.”

“You're going to look great,” Celeste said, “Really.” There was a wet sound of lip on lip. A snicker. I tucked my hair behind my ears and turned to Elaine's mother. She'd

worked the oxygen mask up off of her mouth and onto her forehead. It clung there, taut, like a blister ready to pop. Her mouth bubbled slow around a low moan.

“How are you doing tonight, Mrs. Thompson?” I asked. She groaned.

“Fatigué,” she said. “Je suis fatigué.”

#

During the early years of their marriage both my mother and father lost their families. Not to death, but to stubbornness. Eventually, my mother got hers back, but not my father. That was his reward for marrying a woman who wasn't white, who wasn't rich, who had no name of consequence. That, and my three sisters, my brother, and I. Abandoned, they were eager to build their own family.

They had always wanted a boy. I was the final disappointment before my brother, Ronan. Not to say that my parents didn't love us, the girls, but my father felt incomplete without a son. We were always conscious of his pain at having lost his own father. We couldn't not be. He wore it like a lapel, polished to a shine.

Even without that a son would have been needed. Daughters are made to leave. To be acquired by other homes. Sons are for keeping.

My sisters were all gone from their house already, married and moved away. I promised Ronan I wouldn't leave without him, though. He was born two years after me, and was set to graduate from St. Mary's Immaculate Heart like the rest of our family had before.

Until then I would wait, and tend the silences that bloomed around Abuelita's coughs, remember my Abuelo, and Micheal, and what God called me to do. I would work, and wait, and keep my own quiet.

#

Elaine looked as if she were coming apart at the seams, the night she asked me to watch her mother. She had touched the back of my elbow and motioned me away from the man I'd been sitting with. She stopped near the door. At a table nearby Babygirl was picking apart a moist napkin while one of her regulars spoke to her.

“Horses,” he said, “are like fish. They can't see in front of their faces.”

“Oh?” Babygirl flattened a balled up napkin against the table. “I don't know. I don't know if that's true.”

“Poppi, I need to ask you a favor.” Elaine said. I could have counted the hairs on the backs of my arms, watching Babygirl with that man. Men like that, I thought, could be my Father's father. He was too young, yes, but I knew the type. In the end all men like that are the same. Just one big hulk of fury and noise, meatish and growling, only wearing different faces.

“Their eyes are on the sides of their fucking heads,” the man said. “They can't see forward.”

“I don't think that's true at all. Have you ever seen a horse?” Babygirl said. The man thumped his fist hard against the glass. Hard enough that the bartender's head snapped up. Babygirl's back straightened against the chair and her hand went to her mouth.

“I don't know what horses you're talking about if that isn't fucking true,” he said.

I looked to Elaine. Usually, she would have said something. Usually, something would already have been done.

“Come outside with me, will you?”

“Sure thing,” I said, “Sure.”

Without a coat, goose pimpled, Elaine paced, a cigarette between her lips. She had to leave, she said. She needed someone to take care of her mother.

And so she asked me.

I knew about Elaine’s mother. I had seen her once through the window of the hotel, withered and sunk back into the pillows. I had heard Celeste complain about her: the smell, the way she looks, how she only ever speaks French, and the way she moans like a wounded animal.

“Of course,” I told her, “I can do it.”

“It’ll only be for a night,” she said, taking my wrist in her hand, “Just one.”

Later that night, in the back room with a regular I was pulled back to that moment. We were sitting together on the overstuffed cream couch, the pleather squeaking against my drawn up legs with each shift of body. He had his head on my shoulder. He was telling me about his wife, dead. Telling me about his sons, swallowed by the city and their own disasters. He had tears, earlier, that soaked into my hair, dribbled down my neck to rest in the hollow of my collarbone, but they had since dried.

When I reached up to rub my fist between his shoulder blades, to tell him it was alright, that he wasn’t alone—to do the things I am meant to do—he pulled back and took my wrist. His eyes were rattles, wide and white. It struck me, then, how much Elaine had looked like him.

#

For the marriage my mother had given up her language, her family, her home. She let our father brand us with Irish names, hooks to lure his family back in. Penance for our

skin, for our eyes, for our hair: dark where he was light.

Sometimes I would catch her standing over the sink, the sunlight streaming through the window and webbing itself in the black net of her hair. Her mouth would move, slow and without noise, over the words she hadn't spoken during the long yawn of her marriage.

She never spoke of her parents.

#

In every motel, a bible. In every mouth, a word, a grace and gift from God. Mrs. Thompson's eyes traced the grooves of the ceiling as I sat by her on the floor, scripture opened in my lap. The youngest girl was sitting in a ball by the bathroom door. Celeste giggled behind it, and I heard flesh and flesh move together.

Mrs. Thompson moaned.

“Do you want your oxygen, Mrs. Thompson?”

Her head tossed in the deep well of pillows, knocked the mask crooked to the top of her head.

The little girl clutched her knees tight and pushed her face against the wall.

“Grace,” she said. There was a clatter of plastic things being pushed aside and the door creaked open. The girls stepped out, one after another; Celeste's face was a smear of colors that were smudged on the other girl's skin in splotches.

“We're going out”, Celeste said.

“Don't be gone late, understand? I know your momma doesn't like you out past dark and the sun will be setting pretty soon,” Celeste rolled her eyes at me and her and the two girls weaseled out of the door.

Another quake of age, another moan from Mrs. Thompson.

“For by grace you have been saved by faith,” I read to her, “And it is not of your own doing. It is the gift of God.”

Her hands clenched against the bedspread and her eyes rolled back around, away from the ceiling, to me.

“Mrs. Thompson, let me tell you about my Abuelo.” I closed the book in my lap.

#

St. Mary's was on the cusp of the suburb and the city, twenty minutes by bus from our own home. We lived in an old Victorian on the north side across from Wick Park, a “historical” neighborhood, my father called it on his good days. The road was still unpaved brick. Jagged and red. That year Ronan had just started kindergarten, and my sisters had just started catching rides with boys, so we would walk hand in hand down the street alone. Three streets away the bus would meet us, and the other children who lived out in our neighborhood. I felt exposed and adult being alone, being the oldest.

We lived closest to our bus. Sometimes we would be there a whole fifteen minutes before the other kids showed up, and then it was another ten before the bus clattered to a stop and the doors cranked open. There were only five of us out that far whose parents could afford the fee to send their kids somewhere other than the public school six blocks away. Sometimes Ronan and I would see its students slinking up the other side of the road, their uniforms a dark, navy blue, rumpled and stained, where ours we're pressed and white and plaid. I thought, then, that I was less like those kids and more like my own classmates. In second grade, we were still learning the layers of difference that would rise picket by picket between us. It wasn't until the year after that

another girl in my grade would come up to me on the playground, her blonde hair a sheet of white-fire pulled back from the roses budding on her cheeks, to tell me “You don’t look like Jesus”.

When pushed she told me Jesus had blue eyes and skin white like feathers on angels, and crying by this point, I told her “God doesn’t have skin.”

“How am I made in his image, then?”

We fought hard as girls our size and age could. With words, mostly, and names. She called me dirty.

Our father was too busy to take us to school. He had to work to afford the tuition, to pay for our clothes, had to pay for these things with his own hands. He never let us forget. My mother, she never drove.

So we rode the bus through downtown past store fronts with painted names flaked and burned off by the sun, up the main road past aching homes two stories tall with slumped roofs until they grew lower, and wider, and cleaner and their yards sprawled out far enough to leave no room for sidewalks.

We were standing at the bus stop, a corner of empty field next to a local gas station, closed. It was a squat, orange and yellow building, boasting oil prices of 97 cents a gallon. A car was parked there, a long, green Buick, old but polished with windows tinted dark.

At the time we hadn't taken notice. We didn't think twice about that car until the man stepped out of it and called us by name.

#

“Names are important. They cannot be given without care. They can seldom be

taken back. A name is a brand seared in spirit, and while a new brand can be stamped over it, the old one will always be there, ready to burn through.

Are you listening, Mrs. Thompson?"

Mrs. Thompson's breath was a wheeze, a constant low whine of twisted air. Her mouth gaped, salmon like. All else was still, her body a piece of driftwood among the ocean of bedding. She was buried already in hand knit blankets, pillows without cases stained as coffee filters. Her eyes had roamed back to the ceiling.

I rose up and sat on the edge of her bed, down by her lap. I split the Bible open with my thumb. "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.' Mrs. Thompson, how did you feel when you gave Elaine her name?" I placed my hand on top of her hand and felt the creases under my palm. Fine, oiled and gritty, like aged suede. I set the Bible down next to me on the bed, nestled it in a frayed yarn blanket. "I don't read the Bible much," I admitted. "I hear it read. Mostly, though, I hear God. In my bones. In my own voice. In your breath, Mrs. Thompson. In your breath I hear God. Elaine is a beautiful name, Mrs. Thompson. "

"Fatigué. Mes os sont fatigués." Mrs. Thompson's hand flipped beneath mine and her fingers locked around my wrist as light as a web of dust. Our eyes touched, and I dug past the soapy film to see her, a girl. A girl with a dress, scarf around her neck, and legs free enough to run.

"My father gave me Jenna. As my grandfather crossed the field that day, Jenna was the name he had called, but he gave me one much sweeter."

#

We didn't trust him, at first. Our own Abuelo—our own blood. From a distance as he strode across the field towards us Ronan hid behind me and our bodies coiled, ready to spring. He looked young, strong at the start, but as he neared the sun hit him hard and the cracks in his skin came into focus. We could see the arc of his bones in his face, his ribs unrolling one by one under his shirt. I never saw my Abuelo strong, full, young. Mother kept no photos, or if she did, she kept them hidden.

When we met already most of his life had bled out.

Still, we were afraid. Those closest to death are those most frightening to the young. Our fear, obvious and innocent, stung him. He dropped down to his knees a distance away and held his hands out the way people do when approaching an animal they don't know. One too close to the highway, where any move you make could startle it, and any startle could be its end.

"Jenna," he said, "Ronan." Our mother had sent both sets of parents snapshots at least, one for each child, with our names written in the white space under our scrunched faces, wet with new birth. "It's me. It's your Abuelo." He motioned with his hands but we stayed still, fingers wound round each other's. The word Abuelo faltered, meaningless, between us. Grandfathers, we knew. Grandfathers, our classmates had. Grandfathers stood, bent but proud, in assemblies with their children to watch new children grow. Abuelo had been stifled on our tongues, had been stripped of any connection to family, to blood, to affection, to us.

But he spoke to us across the field. About our mother. Our sisters. In the language we had heard all our lives, and the language we had been denied in all but the mouthed whispers of our mother at the sink, our mother at our bedsides while we slept, and our

mother in our bones.

As he spoke he reached down and picked grass from the field, tore it up, let it fall from his hands. Eventually his fingers uprooted a flower, small, white, yellow at the center with small stems covered in powder reaching up. He held it out to me.

“A poppy,” he said. “Look.”

The petals caved with the wind, threatened to come untethered from the colored center. I unhooked my hand from Ronan’s and lifted my foot up.

I crossed the field to the flower in my Abuelo’s hand.

#

After that we rode to school with him. Each day, for a month, he met us at the bus stop, and each day we crawled into the back of his Buick, too shy, too afraid still to sit up front. Slowly, we learned the meaning of Abuelo. For the next month, he taught us Spanish and bought us breakfast sandwiches from fast food restaurants. Sometimes we ate in the lobby and showed up late to school, and then he signed us in.

One day, at dinner, Ronan said "por favor" and my mother’s eyes snapped to focus over the greenbean hanging off of her fork.

“What did you say?” she asked, her ears aching to life.

“Where did you learn that?” my father asked.

“School,” I covered. “I learned it at school. I told him.” Abuelo had come to mean secret, Abuelo had come to mean silence at home, Abuelo had come to mean mine, mine and Ronan’s, alone. Something to protect. Something to hide, without knowing why it must be hidden.

But Abuelo gave up the secret himself not long after. One day he took us home

from school, all the way to the porch. Knocked his deep lined fist against our door, clutching Ronan's hand in the other.

The color of my mother's face bled out when she answered. She nearly closed the door, nearly locked us out with him, when he put his hands up, showed her his empty palms and said:

“Please. I'm dying.”

#

Abuelo went into the hospital not long after that. He pulled together three family dinners. Tense Sunday evenings with my mother, my sisters, and my new Abuelita. Always in public, always near silent, never with my father. Three dinners where my mother and her parents quietly fingered the bruises between them. My mother's voice finally bloomed during the last dinner. She picked at her napkin. She asked.

“¿Después de todo lo que ha hecho, esperar que me perdone?”

“At least,” Abuelo said, “Let me see the children. At least take care of your mother when I'm gone.”

My mother's tongue flicked between her teeth, snake like. Ready to fork out and skewer him, and Ronan and I, for taking his hands. For leading him to our house. Her nostrils flared, her chest ballooned, as if she were breathing in the whole world. As if she wanted to leave no air the rest of us. As if she were finally ready to burst.

When I thought the moment had come—that she would rise up, float away like a balloon, or split in two, her mother reached out and stroked the back of her hand. My mother's eyes faltered, her lips parted, and she deflated.

She stood up, walked out the door, and waited in the car for us. Abuelo reached

down and stroked Ronan's head, smiled down into his face.

#

Outside the sun was rubbing its belly against the edge of the treeline. Their tops were bare. Long, like skeletons lifting their arms up, trying to catch the diminishing light. I pressed my face close to the window and my breath coated the glass.

Babygirl had her light on and her curtains open. She had her head perched in her hand, her eyes locked on a book in her lap.

The girls were kicking a can between them in the parking lot behind the club. Celeste's friend kept running a hand over her freshly shortened hair and smiling. The little one was laid out in the grass. It looked like she was sleeping.

"It will snow soon, Mrs. Thompson. Can you smell it?" I closed the curtains. I went back to her bed. "It was Spring when my Abuelo went into the hospital. That's the cruelest time, isn't it? To be sick. To be dying."

She put a hand to her head, tugged at the strap of the mask, tried to pull it all the way off of her head. I took her hand in mine and eased it back down to the bed. I pulled the mask off and let it drop to the floor.

"It's better to die along with everything else. It's better to die with the world. It's worse, isn't it, to die when everything is budding? Everything is new?"

I grabbed a pillow from the second bed. I sat back down with Mrs. Thompson, the pillow resting in my lap. I took it in my hands and fluffed it. "What do you think?"

#

Ronan and I made the trip to the hospital alone. It was only a few blocks from where we lived, just slightly further than the bus stop. The walk there was no trouble. It

was the maze of polished floors, rushing bodies, and the smell of sterilized piss that left us shaking each time.

It was our Abuelo's body, wearing thinner each day. The needles in his arm, the wires growing from his body. The gaping maw of his mouth growing slacker, slacker, slacker. No longer teaching words, just groping for something, anything, to sink into.

As he got worse we were only allowed in, one at a time. Ronan, always, he wanted to see first, and that was when I started to slip away.

I couldn't sit in the hall—not on that floor. Not when so often a table would be wheeled through, someone gasping, blind. Hands paddling above them, drowning in air. Not when at any moment one of the doctors, nurses, orderlies might pause while pushing the newly dying and notice me. Notice my loneliness, and remember that children were not meant to be in hospitals unattended.

And so I went to the Chapel, a floor down, and gave Ronan and my Abuelo their time and spent my own with God, and Michael.

#

The Hospital Chapel was a single room behind two oak doors decorated with two slabs of stained glass, donated, as a plaque beneath informed me, by a name I could not pronounce. There was only room enough for one row of pews, five deep, and a small altar and podium at the front. It was dim, lit by four lamps each placed in a corner and shrouded with white lame that absorbed all the light. Kept it cradled in its weave, iridescent and bright as costume jewelry.

There were two paintings hung above the altar. On the right there was Jesus, pale, hung from the cross, his head tilted down but his lips curved up—small, soft, peaceful

like he was just about to fall asleep. On the left, Mary—a white veil slipping from her head, exposing vibrant red hair curling around her face. Her hands framed her heart, floating outside her white tunic, burning. Her eyes were cast downward, and the artist had forgotten to paint her pupils in. Her irises were an uninterrupted blue. If I watched them long enough it seemed as if the color of them trembled out and seeped into the white. It made me nauseous watching them. Cold like someone was sliding ice cubes down my spine.

It was their gaze that held mine when Michael came in.

“Hey,” he said, “What’re you doing?” He was just an outline against the light of the hospital hall, his arm cocked up to rest against the open door—his silhouette tall, thin, and glowing.

“Praying,” I said. He stepped in and let the door swing closed behind him. He asked me my name.

“Poppy.” I said. “Like the flower.”

#

“Michael was a sweet boy, Mrs. Thompson. He must be grown by now. He must be long grown, but I can’t help but see him still as a sixteen year old. Head shaved and ears like Dumbo sticking out,” I placed my hands on either side of my head and stretched my fingers in to a fan. I laughed, sighed, caught the sigh in my palm. Mrs. Thompson blinked. “But that’s just how it is with young love, isn’t it? It locks the loved in forever at the age they were loved most.”

Mrs. Thompson turned her face to the wall and I tapped my fingers against her

hand. “Are you tired, Mrs. Thompson? I won’t go on for much longer.”

I propped the Bible open again on the pillow in my lap. I read: “Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.”

I traced my fingers over the indents of comfort. Of tears. There was a rip at the corner of the page. A splotch of ink bleeding out of the verse number.

“I still see Michael in the eyes of all my customers. He still anoints me, every day. But me? Does he still think about me? Is there someone else now, you think, whom he seeks comfort in? Is he still angry? As angry as he was? His father was dying in the same hospital as my Abuelo. Those deaths were ours to share. My Abuelo. His father, whom he hated most among all men.”

#

The longer I knew Michael the longer I stayed at the Chapel each visit. The longer Ronan had to sit by Abuelo’s bed until I would tag him out. The bluer the Virgin Mary’s eyes bled. The shorter my Abuelo’s breaths grew, until he was hooked to a machine. Until his mouth no longer opened. Until all he did was sleep, and they had to feed him through a tube.

“Why won’t he,” Michael would ask, running his hands over the light buzz of hair crowning his skull. Beneath I could see a patch of skin, taut with scars. His wrists were thin, pockmarked with grooves like potholes. The size of the cherry on a cigarette. “Why won’t he just die?”

For three weeks Michael had been waiting with me for his father’s collapse. We

prayed together on our knees before the painting and he nipped sips from a small steel flask that smelled like a forest fire.

I reached out and took his hand.

“The least he can do,” Michael said, “is die. For all he’s done, that’s all I ask. I just want to be there when it happens.”

#

In my Abuelo’s room more machines bowed their heads around his bed. Lines of light leapt across their screens, their voices an electronic hymn praying his life into him.

School was coming to a close and the field had sprouted all its flowers. They bloomed like opening eyes, everywhere. I sat by Abuelo, hands tucked in my lap, breath sick and sweet and tongue burning from the drinks Michael tipped past my lips.

I had never known you could pray for death. That death was a thing people could want.

I watched Abuelo’s lips, dried, cracking, trickling bits of blood and skin down the crease of his mouth, and wished he could speak. Wished he could tell me what he was praying for.

The breathing machine inhaled. The breathing machine exhaled.

#

Michael was a landmine, sometimes. Michael would come in, hands balled into fists. He would scream into the face of Mary, of Jesus, or me. Sometimes he came in, already stumbling, already reeking.

His father was making a recovery, the doctors told him. His father might come home.

“People shouldn’t go on living. People shouldn’t go on living when their meant to die. It’s our job to die.” Michael said. He traced the map of scartissue along the crown of his head, parting stalks of short hair with his nails.

He gave up on the flask. He brought in glass bottles. Bolder. Angrier.

When they were almost empty he hurled them at Mary’s frozen face to let them shatter between her eyes. The residue of beer would coat her skin; stick bits of broken glass to her cheeks, cook into the fire red of her hair.

He arched another back, and I grabbed onto his arm. Smaller, so much smaller than he, I could do nothing to keep him. I was lifted off my feet and thrown with the bottle. I crashed into the wall and the bottle shattered above my head.

I stayed on my knees, head hidden under my arms against the rain of glass.

My lip stung.

“Poppy.” I felt his hands, slick, wet, shaking, pressing in on my shoulders. He took hold of my chin, raised my face to his face. “What we’re you thinking?” He touched a finger to the corner of my mouth. “You’re bleeding,” he groaned. He held his finger up between our faces. It was glistening, candy apple, metallic as the fabric hung over the lamps. He ran his hand over his head, trailing my blood through the fuzz of his hair.

He put his lips to mine.

#

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

I took Mrs. Thompson's hand to my mouth and kissed it gently. The oxygen mask sent out a pulse of air, twisted on the ground, looped like a snake, waiting.

"Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away."

#

Ronan was perched on the edge of our porch, kicking up flakes of paint, exposing the wood beneath. He had his hand wrapped around the banister. "I don't want to keep going to the hospital," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "We have to."

"I don't want to go, Jenna." He screwed his lips into his teeth, "I don't want to see him just lying there."

"Ronan," I said.

"I don't want to see him dying."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "We have to."

#

The last time I saw Michael he had scrapes across his knuckles, little red lines like oozing grins, bruised, swollen. He didn't speak when he came in. He wrapped his hand around my neck and pulled me off the pew onto the floor next to the altar. He put his mouth on mine.

I tilted my head back and tried to pull myself up. His breath burned. His hair scraped against my cheek.

"Michael," I said. "What are you doing?"

"Praying." His hands hooked into my skirt and pulled.

His chest was heavy on my chest. Mary's heart, a fire above our heads. He twisted my arms up.

Mary's downturned smile, glass shards, hair burning, eyes cast towards me, pupiless. Mary the Virgin. Mary the Mother.

Michael's tears dripped down the bridge of his nose rolled over my own cheeks, stung in the crack on my lip. Salt. They splattered in my own eyes.

Mary blurred. The veil was falling, the hair stretching out like wildfire. Her mouth opening. Teeth. Purple, thick, growing. Jagged.

We crashed into the altar and there was metal, falling, crashing, rolling. The chalice. The offering plate. A candlestick under my back, wax snapped in two.

Michael stilled. He bit into my neck. A muffled moan. His jaw loosened and I stayed still. Waited while he sobbed into my hair.

He rose and zipped the crotch of his jeans. He kept his eyes on the floor. They were tucked deep in his skin, but they looked soft. Wet. His body hung like loose clothes on a wire. "Thanks," he said.

He walked out the door.

I turned my head, my neck sore. Wet. The offering plate had landed propped up against a pew and I could see me reflected back in the warped silver. My face lined and glistening with the rage he buried in me. My lips parted.

A stain on my tooth. A palm. Five tiny fingers, grasping.

I looked up to Mary.

#

The machine breathed in. Breathed out. My Abuelo's chest rose. It fell. The

monitors beeped on and on. Steady ticks. The clock on the wall. I touched my hand to my neck. My other hand was wrapped around hem of my skirt, keeping it closed between my legs, keeping Micheal in. A secret.

“Abuelo,” I asked. “Are you there?”

The ticks. The beeps. The machine breathes.

“Abuelo,” I said. “I saw God.”

I ran my hand down his ribs. Felt the pump fill him. Felt it suck him flat. My mouth throbbed.

I wrapped my palm around the hose shoved down his throat. I followed it, hand over hand over hand to the machine, its cord, the plugs. The voice of the machines. Their prayers. I tugged them free.

#

Mrs. Thompson’s eyes were on me, the film peeled back so that I could see everything—the pupil, wide and dark and clear enough to be a mirror of myself, my lips splitting apart to read:

“We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”

I closed the book, pushed it onto the bed and kneaded the pillow between my fists. She reached out and knocked her finger against my knuckle.

“God gave me, gave all of us, a purpose, Mrs. Thompson. Comfort. Comfort those who need it. Do you understand?”

The oxygen mask hissed on the floor. I kicked it away with my foot.

“Mrs. Thompson, do you understand?”

She kept her gaze steady with mine. I saw His touch between my lips, dark, swelling out of her pupil, overtaking her iris, clouding the whites.

She nodded, once.

The hand bled out of her eye, shadowed her face. I lifted the pillow and pressed against it.

#

I picked the oxygen mask up off of the floor. I lifted Mrs. Thompson's head and hooked it back over her mouth. I folded her hand over the Bible—cold, damp. But softer. Softer than it had been in my own and against my lips.

There was a knock at the door.

“Poppi,” Celeste called, “Let us in, I forgot my key.” She pounded again.

I wiped the saliva off of the pillow onto my jeans. Fluffed it. Placed it back on the second bed. I unlocked the door and cracked it open. The white girl had her arm hooked around Celeste's shoulder. She was whispering something in her ear.

Celeste laughed then rolled her eyes at me. “Bout time.”

“Where's the other?” I asked. “The little one? Where is she?”

“What are you talking about—she's right here,” Celeste said. The white girl's face snapped from side to side, searching.

“Lindsey?” she called.

Her arm slithered off of Celeste's back. They twisted their heads back around, their eyes probing the dark line of tree trunks, the row of closed doors, and the empty parking lot.

V.
Potholes

When I got in there were two men at the bar already, both thick bodied with stained T-shirts. One was wearing a hat dyed to look like it'd been splattered with mud and he kept sticking his finger under the other's nose and shouting. A new song came on and he stopped for a moment, swayed back and forth, mouthed the words. Maude was at

the other end polishing a glass and looking up whenever he got real loud.

I'd pulled in the parking lot at 6:55 and the sun was down already. I hated when the nights got longer, colder, and the roads froze over. The winter made me dream of coyotes, down from mountains. Even though I had never seen one—a coyote, that is. Mountains, I knew. As I walked towards the club a sheet of paper, lower half damp in a rain puddle, flapped its dry end at me. I picked it up. The bottom ripped off, dissolved in the water.

Have You Seen Me?

A little girl, eyes cast downward and hair clipped back in a ponytail smiled goofy in a washed out, grainy black and white photo, copied to the page slightly crooked.

Name: Lindsey Thompson

Hair Color: Light Brown

The rest of the information was lost to the puddle.

I carried it into the club with me, past the drunks at the bar and into the back. Elaine was sitting on the counter in front of the mirror. Poppi in the chair next to her, a curling iron wrapped in a roll of her hair, half her head burned into waves. Babygirl was reading a thick text book on the floor, already heeled and face painted. A new girl was pacing through the row of lockers, lifting her hand every now and then to touch her lips, wet and red. I placed the flier carefully at the bottom of a locker. I hung my purse above it.

There had been a search for the girl, of course. Right outside the club.

“Let's all make a lot of money tonight,” Elaine said, clapped her hands three times. Elaine had taken part in looking, even though she had to arrange for her mother's

funeral. Then she'd come here after she looked nearly every night, more often than not followed by a handful of men, their shoes plastered with dead leaves and mud, who'd been searching alongside of her during the day. If they knew she was the same woman they never let on. Connections like that made the men uncomfortable. They wanted to leave us here where we belonged, lit by pulsing lights in half-dark rooms.

“She's my daughter's friend.” Elaine had said when I told her not to push herself too much.

Last week they had finally given up. It was getting too cold out to look. At first the men came in hot with vengeance and howling for blood. Bawling community. We would smile, and we would pity the girl. Then three weeks rolled by and the conversations changed. They started saying no one really knew her, or her mother, not that well. Sure, she'd been going to school with their kids. But they lived out of a motel. The mother only ever hung around truckers and worked part time at a liquor store. What did you expect with a family like that, living the way they did? Where they did?

And then the cluster of men, of flash lights in the woods, were gone.

The fliers started flaking off of phone poles and speckling the ground. I'd see the other kid, bald headed and body heavy with oversized clothes stacked layer after layer, stapling more up every day. Every day more fell.

“Make money?” Poppi said,. She twisted the iron around a fresh strand of hair. Rolled her eyes. “Pfft, it's going to be a shit night. I can feel it in my bones.”

People were avoiding us, our club. We'd been hooked to the scene of the crime. Suddenly everyone was pious. No Strip Clubs. Criminals hang out there. Baby snatchers. Replace it with Church on Sundays, and Don't Forget to Brush your Teeth and Get to Bed

Early. Healthy Living, Grace of God, all that bullshit. Which meant little to no tips, more nights sitting alone in the dark sharing blocks of cheese and crackers, talking about the weather.

The new girl rested her back against the lockers and Poppi looked her up and down in the mirror. "They tell you?" Poppi asked.

"Tell me what?"

"The bathroom is haunted."

"Cut that out, Poppi," Elaine said. She reached out and knocked her knuckle against Poppi's elbow.

"It's true," Poppi said. She uncurled the iron and the strand of black hair bounced up against her chin. She picked up a bobby pin and stuck the curl back behind her ear. Began wrapping up a new one. "Some broad, back when this place first opened, went in there and sliced her veins *skrrrrt*, right down the middle. Now she just sits around on the toilet."

"Don't listen to this girl and her bull," Elaine said. The new girl half-smiled but she was clutching her arms against her chest like a cold wind was blowing right through her.

"It's truth." Poppi said. "Ask Kaleigh." Poppi raised her eyebrows at me in the mirror.

"Oh, sure," I said, "I've seen her. Butt naked. Just wailing away on the toilet."

Elaine sighed. "You better cut it out, I'm not in the mood for ghost stories tonight."

"Hides in the wallpaper, waits for someone to go in. Watches 'em." Poppi bugged

her eyes out at herself in the mirror. She clamped the iron over the end of another strand of her hair, started rolling it up to her scalp.

“I hate that wallpaper,” Babygirl said. She flipped a page, shifted her legs. “It's creepy.”

“Don't you start too, Babygirl,” Elaine warned. “I can't handle three of you.”

“I'm just saying.”

“Would one of you please, please quit fooling around and get out there and take care of those men?” Elaine groaned.

“With half my head curled?” Poppi said. With her free hand she reached into a bag of licorice and placed one in her mouth. Slurped it up quick. It disappeared behind her lips.

“I'm not on till eight,” Babygirl said. Flipped a page.

I took off one of my sneakers and let it fall, heavy and wet, to the ground. Our eyes slid to the new girl.

“None of you want to make money, I swear.” Elaine said, but her eyes were focusing on her too. “Would you go out there? If you're all dressed?”

The girl picked at the hem of her dress. It was frayed a little at the bottom, which hugged the meatiest part of her thigh. She looked at us looking at her in the mirror and then at herself. She nodded and went out the door.

“That girl,” I said under my breath, “ain't sticking around much longer after tonight.”

“She said she worked a club before,” Elaine said and shrugged.

“Probably lying,” Poppi tossed the curls around on her head with her hand and

smiled. She ran a her tongue over her front teeth. She tore loose another strand of licorice.

“At least she's willing to go talk with the customers,” Elaine replied. “More than I can say for you three.”

“Those two aren't going to tip for shit, trust me. I know the type,” I pulled my shirt over my head. The air ran its fingers down my back. Something about the dressing room always reminded me of the public pool: the lockers, the chemical smell, the stripped bodies. Shirt to the floor, pants after. I pulled a small dress out of my bag: black with sequins sewn all around a collar drooped far enough that I could flash quick bits of tit. Something new. The little girl smiled at the bottom of my locker, her eyes just flat holes burning through half-lowered lids. I covered her with my clothes. “I don't envy her.” I said, pulled the dress over my head.

#

I had wanted a baby girl, when I first got pregnant. I was pretty young, and dumb. I thought it would be nice to have a girl. My not-yet husband laughed at me.

“A girl's too much work,” he said, “you better pray it's a boy.”

“Girls are not!” I batted his arm, already haired and bulged even though he'd only been out of high school two years. Me, I was still in. “How so?”

We were sitting on a couch together in his friend's basement while they all watched a game upstairs. Already it had been a month and the sureness of my pregnancy, the fear of it, had faded for a little. He had his arm around me, and he smelled like motor oil and smoke. He had a beard growing in that felt rough against my skin when we were close, and a cap popped back on his head. We felt safe enough to feel wonder at the fact

that we had made a life together—a tiny, squirming, kicking thing yet to be seen.

He cocked back his head and took down a mouth of beer, swished it back and forth in his cheeks before swallowing it. He raised his eyebrows, shrugged. “Girls you got to watch all the time. Girls are trouble.”

“Are not. It's boys who're trouble.” I ducked out from under his arm and sat with my back against the arm rest and kicked my legs up over his lap.

“I'm not saying boys aren't, but you can let them get in to trouble,” he laughed and placed his hand on my gut. “But girls?” He clicked his tongue. I watched the thick strips of black stains lining his fingers move in slow circles against my stomach. Then down.

#

“Get yourself a cow,” the man with the splattered hat was laughing in the face of the other when I came out. They had made a space for the new girl so she was sitting between them, but her chair was pushed back from the bar and the man was bent over in front of her to yell at his friend. He gestured wide and his hand almost grazed her face. She looked like she was about to piss herself. “And then you get that cow knocked up. You see? It pops out a new one. You sell it off. You can keep getting it to pop out babies, and keep making a mint off of 'em. It's easy.”

“I think it's a lot more work than that, pal,” his friend mumbled. I took a seat next to him.

“My sister had a friend who raised cows,” the girl said. Then she slammed her mouth shut and stared at the hands in her lap. The man darted his eyes towards her, then raised his finger to rest under his friend's nose, blocking her off.

“Hey, sweetie,” I said, placing a hand on the quiet one's arm. His head swiveled

away from his friend's finger, left it floating there useless. "Names Kaleigh."

"Mark," he said and extended a calloused hand towards me. I took it, gave it a weak shake and a small squeeze.

"How're you doing tonight, hon?"

He smiled easy and his mouth opened but his friend cut across, leaning further over past the new girl.

"We came to see ass and tits and there haven't been any at all, that's how we're doing," he hollered. I turned my head slightly to catch Maude's eye. She looked up from the bar and shrugged, slight, hardly noticeable.

"Still early, hon" I said. "You wanna round a drinks?"

"Nah," the drunk said, "nah, we're good. You going to dance or what?"

Maude shrugged again and I gave a nod, both to her and him. She scurried out from behind the bar to the dj booth and adjusted the volume of the music. I stepped away from the bar and up to the stage.

#

It was a boy. We were wed. We moved into a small trailer in a nice enough park near our parent's homes. Five mile per hour speed limits and space enough just for three. Husband got himself a job, construction, through his father. Me? A G.E.D.

Every girls' dream, right? A provider and a blue, bouncing baby boy on my knee and hours and hours and hours to fill watching it grow.

And then another on the way.

Promotion. New house for the new baby. Duplex, with a wooden porch. The landlord, an old woman, living upstairs. Every night he'd come home at six. Then seven.

Then eight. His hands rough as leather. His mouth bar-funked. More hours for my belly to blow up before the kid popped out. Hours to wait and things to do. Back aching.

“Body's sore,” he would say, mouth pressed to a beer while I drank pre-sweetened tea. Rough hands pressed on my belly, rubbing. Then down.

Three boys, total. No girl. Tubes tied. Twisted shut like a pretzel.

“Don't you feel,” he asked after, “a little less like a woman?”

I lived in a house full of black t-shirts, sleeves torn off, hung across chairs, tossed in corners, balled up, sweating. Boys, growing, bulging. Their father's sons. Skinned knees, dirt on the carpet. Dirty looks. Football skin.

I realized I had never touched anything made of actual lace.

#

I started to feel ridiculous, legs up in the air waving. The men had their backs turned away from the stage, away from me. The skin of my thighs started to look grilled, oily. The song ended. Another started. I pulled the collar of my top up over my breasts and left the stage. I sat at the far end of the bar near Maude.

Let the new girl handle it.

“You alright?” Maude asked. I tapped a finger against the bar, nodded my head down to the cooler.

She pulled a beer out and slid it across the table to me. “Only the one, alright? The owner is supposed to be coming in soon.”

“Like he gives a shit,” I said, popped the top off against the counter.

“He's starting to now with all this money we're not making,” Maude ran a towel over the counter and eyed the men over her shoulder. “That poor girl.”

The man in the splattered cap leaned all the way forward, like a tree about to snap, and the new girl tried to push her chair back to get out of his way. He was shouting something at his friend. A dollop of spit welled in his lower lip, quivered and spilled over. It splattered on the new girl's thigh.

Her heels cracked against the floor. She sped to the bathroom. I laughed and Maude caught my eye and sighed.

“Gonna go see how she is.” Maude said. She lumbered out from behind the bar and then it was me and them, alone.

“We gonna go,” the drunk was leaning over Mark who was still sitting at the bar. “You want to take it outside?”

“Man, what the fuck did I do to you?”

“You keep being a little pussy.” The drunk's eyelids quivered. He'd gone slightly cross eyed. They rolled over to the space right near my shoulder. “Why ain't you dancin'?” I sipped my beer and let my attention drift to the glasses behind the bar.

“You keep acting like this and I'm going to get the fuck out of here,” Mark said.

“You want to be a pussy?”

Mark rose to his feet, batted away his friend's hand as it tried to lock on his shoulder. He slapped down a few bills and stormed out the door. The drunk followed him.

I slid down the bar and picked the bills up. Counted out four ones and a five. I left a dollar on the counter and tucked the rest in the elastic of my thong. Moved back to my own seat.

Maude came out followed by the new girl whose skin was colorless, her lips

drawn and tucked in between her teeth. She sat down in front of the dollar, looked left, right. Picked it up and folded it down the front of her dress. Elaine came out with Poppy and Babygirl. They gazed around the club and sat down at a table together. \

The door swung open and the drunk was back. He leered and I felt winter: remembered my first baby. Draped in a blue blanket across my knees, only his porky face and toes sticking out. I would take his foot in my hand and pull them apart.

This little piggy, this little piggy, this little piggy got gobbled all the way up.

And then I would lunge, teeth bared, and take his feet in my mouth. Maul them gently.

We named him Michael, after my husband, but I had wanted Greg. The other two: Pete and Robert.

The man's eyes wandered over each of us. The three, at the table, feet propped up, mouths and eyes busy with one another, the new girl floating in the middle of the bar where he had left her, and me, my head propped up in my hand, bent towards the mouth of my beer.

His body caved my way.

#

For a while after my tubes were snipped closed my husband disappeared. Already the dip in the bed we used to leave together had pulled apart: his getting shallower night by night. Mine, deeper, wider.

He stopped touching.

“A man ain't a man without a woman,” he had said that the night of our wedding. Whispered it in my ear and the fuzz of his beard pricked against my cheek and nose,

made me want to sneeze something fierce. In the next room our baby cried.

Nights drifted on and on. Through the thin wall I could hear the snores of our sons' like low squeals. I would press my fist into my stomach and feel for the empty pocket inside. The spot where I'd lost whatever it was he had loved.

“Do you think he's cheating?” My ma asked when I called her and danced around my loneliness. “He wouldn't, don't you think? I think you oughta make him something nice for dinner. I could take the kids.”

I dropped a fist full of clothes into the washer, squinted my nose against the rise of boy, man, sweat, smoke and caught it, a tendril of roses. I pictured her: young with pixie tits and a mouth puckered in a permanent pout, like a salmon. Blonde with dark roots bleeding through. I laughed and pressed a hand to my face. My palms felt like sandpaper.

“Nah, Ma.” I said. “We'll be just fine. He's just busy, is all.”

I closed the washer and hit start. Said goodbye, hung up the phone. I pressed my waist into the machine and felt it quake. Down, through my thighs. Up the rolls of my gut. Into my breasts. I dipped my hand down my shirt and cupped one, squeezed.

It felt like my husband was right there with me.

#

“What'chu doing sweetheart?” The man didn't take a seat but stood over me, thumbs hooked in his beltloops. He had one eye popped closed.

“Working, I guess,” I said. I tipped the beer back into my mouth and turned my attention away from him. The new girl was sitting on her hands, her head bowed as if she were in church.

“You know where to find anything fun?” He asked.

“I don't know what you mean.” I kept my eyes away from him. I ground my tongue between my teeth and focused on the feel of paper on my hip.

“Oh, you know I know how it is.” He leaned in closer. His shirt brushed up against my shoulder. He was talking too loud to be this close. I could feel the wet of his mouth in each word he spoke. I leaned my body back into the chair and cradled the bottle in my lap. I checked over my shoulder. Maude was speaking to Elaine.

I ran a hand through my hair to get it out of my face and glared up at him. “I don't know shit about what you mean,” I said. “This is a gentleman's club. You better start acting the part.”

He blinked, slow. Once. Twice. His mouth ached open into a grin and he laughed in my face. Spit on our floor. His hand locked on my shoulder, slimed as a hunk of raw steak.

“A gentleman,” he shook his head and pushed his face close to mine. “I offend you or something?”

His breath was rank, sickly and kind of sweet. I twisted my head away and tried to catch Maude's eye, anyone's, but they had disappeared back into the back. The new girl was watching, her hand pressed to her dress where the outline of the folded dollar pushed against the fabric. My veins were pounding. His hand was a coal against my skin, slipping down.

“I'm just saying,” I said.

“Saying what? Saying I'm an asshole?”

My fingers wrapped around the neck of the beer.

The door swung open and cracked against the wall.

#

What does a woman need to be a woman? When do we stop being girls? Where's the line?

A man can prove his manhood. In his work. In his hands. On a woman. A man can lose his manhood, too. To all sorts of things. To other men. To his job. To decay. To a girl.

He wept, a lot, at first. Bitter. Not in the hospital. Not until he got home and closed our bedroom door.

Accident: car, late at night coming home from the bar, he told me. Drunk and dozing off at the wheel. Windshield shattered. Tire iron cracked. His legs snapped.

“Never walk again,” the doctor told me. He looked young and had a soft, girlish voice and this sandy hair I wanted to brush off of his face.

“Never?” I said. There was a cawing in my heart. A flutter, clawed, and strange.

The doctor gazed into my face, his eyebrow cocked. He chewed his lower lip, and must have come to some conclusion, cause he repeated. “Never. Would you like to see him now?”

In the hospital he was drugged and staggering through the new numbness in his lower half. He appreciated me—my hands against his forehead, my hands turning his body gently in the bed. He gazed up at me, wrapped in thin as paper sheets and stuttered words of affection.

But when he got home he disappeared again into our own bedroom. I laid on the couch and could hear him through the walls, groaning. Pounding the wall with his fist.

His boys drifted around me, nosing the sore spots of their father's new grief, looking to me for the first time as if I could tell them what to do.

I helped him bathe. I brought him food. I talked to lawyers. I changed him and wiped his ass clean and felt the weight of motherhood, of wifeness, lay like lead on my shoulders. How long had it been since I had felt real need? The wheelchair sat folded next to his bed. He didn't want the world, those first few months home.

One night after eating in bed:

“You gotta get up and get outta here,” I said, “You're going to waste away, locked up like this.”

“You think I want to be here,” he snapped, “You think I want to be stuck here hour after hour with you? You think I like it?” He tipped the plate off of his lap and it fell to the floor. Scattered bits of potato skin and cracked it down the middle.

I slipped the keys off of the table and walked out as he screamed, grunted, demanded I come back. His son's were huddled outside our door, a pyramid of porkish faces sweating in our cramped halls. On the porch the old woman sat in a worn, wooden rocking chair. She had knitting folded in her lap. Her eyes followed me down the steps and into my car. She didn't say anything, her prune face scrunched tight as a fist and just as yellow as the moon.

I drove.

#

The owner of the club was a weasel of a man, always dressed in black turtle necks and dark jeans, leather shoes. A thin gold chain looped around his neck. Hair: cut too short and dyed too dark. His skin white like toilet paper and just as soft. Smelled like

cheap lotion and baby powder.

He had two other men with him. They wore blazers, dark. Ties at their throats. One had a girl on his arm. Thin as a sapling with her hair tied up in two blonde braids on either side of her head. She wore a little silver tank top that looked like scales and a pair of black, tight-like pants. They were all laughing too loud.

I snapped to my feet and leaned over the counter to toss my beer in the trash and moved away from the man towards the back room but Maude was already coming out, hand wiping sweat off her forehead, Poppy behind her.

“Here we are,” the owner, Samuel, said, gesturing wide with his arms. His companions paused on the threshold and looked round. They murmured low to one another and there were chuckles.

The drunk man at the bar swayed on his feet. Cocked his head back and looked at them all.

Maude reached their party and held her hand out to Samuel but he didn't take it. She ran it through her hair instead.

“Drinks,” Samuel said, he walked past Maude and towards a table. “For me, and my guests. On the house.” The three at the door looked at Maude. The bow of her back bent, ready to snap. They moved past her towards the table. Sat down. Samuel had his legs popped up on a table nearby. Maude turned to Poppi and motioned her towards them. Her plump lips parted for a second, her tongue touched briefly to her front teeth. Then her body pulled towards them—like she was stumbling step after step without ever hitting the ground. She crouched down by the table and smiled up into Samuel's face as she took their drink orders,

The drunk watched, his fingers drumming against his gut, a slow honey smile spilling over his face. He hooked a thumb in his belt look, popped the brim of his hat higher up his forehead. He sauntered toward the table, swatted Poppi's ass as she passed him. He sat next to Samuel.

“Fucking assholes,” Poppi muttered low at the bar. There was a thin layer of sweat bubbling through her foundation. Before she could finish even making all their drinks Samuel was red in the face, laughing, calling to her. Telling her to bring the man a beer.

“And where are our drinks?” Samuel asked. “Get the lead out of you ass, girl.”

The drunk laid a hand on Samuel's shoulder and together they laughed.

#

I drove all the time. There was no sign of damage on the car. Insurance had come, swept it away, replaced its broken parts and polished it up. It felt new. It purred.

I said I was looking for jobs, when asked. Really I was doing what I'd done that first night I'd fled, coasting up and down the roads. Like me and my husband used to do when we were young and first fooling around. At first just around the town square past the small store fronts, circling the roundabout, shooting off onto the main road, driving down it, turning back. Till the car ran out of gas. Till my foot ached against the pedal.

Then further out. Away from the center of town and over the curved and empty country roads speckled by corn fields, bored cows, horses swatting their own asses with ratted tails, the old trailer park, family farms falling apart. All the way past all that. Back. Into the city, where things cluttered together and rusted. Back.

My eyes bent against the cracks in the road. My husband had never told me where

the accident was, and I'd never asked. The winter had beat its fist against the cement, leaving it speckled with holes, lines like veins bleeding out. I let the car's wheels bite in and out of them. Felt my jaw crack with each bounce.

Never did find shit, till one night as I coasted home fuel tank near empty, a raccoon darted out, it's eyes like fine diamonds lit up and sparkling. It's skull split under my tire.

I pulled off to the side of the road.

It was laid out on it's back, head caked red and fresh and oozing. It's paws twitched in the air, curling and uncurling like it was trying to get itself a good grip on something. Then they stilled.

#

Babygirl was on the stage, her legs arching out to pull her body in circles around the pole. Her hands hung up over her head, her fists wrapped around the metal like she was trying to throttle it. Samuel's three guests had their chairs angled towards her but were mostly leaned back in their chairs, looking around the place, looking at each other, talking quietly. Samuel and the drunk hadn't even pretended to watch in any serious way. They were bent across the table speaking over each other. Pounding the glass top with their fists. Samuel looked ridiculous, like that. He must have weighed one hundred and thirty pounds, not a nickle over and there he was, acting like he had the body of a quarterback.

Maude had retreated back behind the bar near where I was sitting. Elaine still hadn't come out of the dressing room and Poppi kept slipping back there to check on her.

Babygirl turned and pulled herself up hand over hand up to the top of the pole.

She wrapped her legs around it, spun in a circle. Then gripped it in her hands again, kicked her legs out, pinwheeled them as she sunk down, as if she were walking through the air.

Poppi came out, eyes sunk, hair losing its bounce and curl and sat on a stool next to me. “Said it'd be a shit night,” she said. “I could fucking smell it coming.” She plugged her nose and puffed out her cheeks, her eyes bulging.

I laughed and Maude's eyes darted up from the glass in her hand to us.

Samuel and the drunk went quiet.

“What's so funny over there?” The drunk asked.

Babygirl's heels clapped against the stage. She crawled on her hands and knees to the edge of the stage. I turned my back on her, on them, and eyed the glasses again. How the light sunk into them, and colored them just like icicles.

“What are you girls doing just sitting around?” Samuel called. “S'no wonder why you don't make any money.” A costume drawl, ridiculous. He leaned back in his chair and popped his hands behind his head, the turtle neck bunching around his jaw like extra rolls of skin.

Poppi swiveled her stool to face them, her back straightened out and she flipped a bit of her hair behind her ear. “I don't see any money to be made,” she said. “And it ain't like I get paid by the hour.” Maude edged over to where we were and laid the rag down—damp and graying. She rested her hand near Poppi's wrist.

“Ssh, girl,” she whispered. But it was too late.

“Is this how you let them act?” Samuel's voice had shot up to its normal whine. He sat up straight and peered through us to Maude. “Like spoiled little bitches? Is this

how you let them treat customers?"

Maude opened her mouth. Her eyes rolled from Babygirl on stage, ass bouncing, to me, to Poppi, back to Samuel. She closed it.

"Ain't seen a single one of 'em dance." The drunk said. "Not all night."

I remembered the grilled chicken of my thighs. Felt heat rise up my back, into my face. "Maybe you need your eyes checked, then," I said under the throb of Babygirl's music.

"What was that?"

"I said maybe you oughta pay attention." I put on a smile and turned to face them. Nodded my head towards Babygirl on the stage. She had rose up on her knees, still gyrating, but her face was drawn. Her eyes were turned towards the arch of the hall leading back to the bathrooms.

Faint traces of rubber and iron wafted up my nose. My hair prickled.

"You want attention, baby?" The drunk howled, "Well, why didn't you say so?" He stood and finished his beer off in one long suck. Set it down on the table and grinned little piggy like. Hooked a thumb in his belt loop. "Let's say you and me get a room," he said. He wasn't talking to me, but to Samuel.

#

A wife shouldn't leave her husband to rot. A wife shouldn't run off every chance she gets. A wife shouldn't treat her husband like a chore. A wife shouldn't let the house go to ruin. A wife shouldn't let the kids run wild. When she's needed, a wife shouldn't be elsewhere.

Everyday a new thing I ought not to be doing. Every day another corpse under the

wheel of my tire. Squirrels, quick but dumb. Raccoons. Possums, rare, with bright pink eyes like rose quarts. Once on a nearly empty stretch of country road, a cat. I was daring. I dreamed of deer and crushed fenders. A serial roadkiller.

A nurse came in once a week. Women in pressed stiff scrubs, small splatters and stains scrubbed in to the fabric. I sat on the couch while they checked on my husband.

Two months in the clothes began piling up, the money drifting out. Disability checks: not enough. The stench of unwashed dishes, unwashed bodies.

A new nurse, older, more pressed less stained. Came in, sniffed, and went back to the bedroom to tend my husband. I sat on the couch playing with a lighter, a blanket tossed over my lap. I flicked the flame on and watched it lap the air. Let the pressure of my thumb ease off and watched it die.

A squirrel, plump and slow, half crushed, limbs wiggling like jelly. It's little chest rose up then dipped in, wrinkled and deep as a popped balloon. Eyes cooled and hard as marbles.

Flicked the lighter back on.

“Heh-hem,” the nurse coughed, standing nun-like at the boarder between hall and living room. I felt a wave of heat roll up my thighs and into my face sure, for one second, that she knew what I was.

“Yeah?” I spat. I dropped the lighter into the net of blanket stretched out between my legs.

“Your husband,” she said, “is showing signs of frustration. Depression.” Me, at the sink, me at the dinner table, waiting. “He needs to move.” Babe in lap, nipples sore, back hurt, pregnant again, dusted and waiting and waiting. “Maybe if he could maneuver

himself more easily—a less cramped space, a bigger home?” I snorted. “Or at least it may help if it weren't so cluttered.” Her eyes were drifting over the lumps of laundry, the stacks of pizza boxes, the boy's toys.

I nodded stiffly.

“There's help available if you need it,” she said, but her face wasn't kind. She let herself out.

I flicked the lighter back on and thought of that cat. The yowl, the thump. Calico orange, with green eyes. Well groomed. The little girl who must be waiting for it at home, isolated out on some farm where all other animals were put to work. Would there be fliers, I wondered. I had kicked the body into the ditch and thrown weeds over it. The heated metal burned a moon into the pad of my finger.

I wondered where my sympathy went.

#

In the back with Samuel, the drunk, not getting paid, not getting shit, I sat with my leg crossed over the other. Bounced it, sending trembles up the weight of my thigh. “This,” Samuel had said when Maude mentioned the rates, “is my club. These are my girls. I don't pay shit.” Poppi left out front to entertain the guests with Babygirl. Where the fuck was Elaine? Why was she spared this shit? I watched the heel dangle on the hump of my toe as it bounced.

Alone with me they were suddenly attentive and the pant of their breath was fogging the air even though we were in the biggest private room we had. The one with cream colored couches and arm chairs, an old oak table sturdy enough to hold the weight of two bodies. A chandelier, hung with heavy off white drapes so everything looked

muted. The space under their eyes was dark from the shadow of their brows.

“Well,” Samuel said. The drunk chuckled. I picked at my nails. My polish was chipping off. They were leaned forward in their seats. The drunk had his elbow popped up on his knee and his head in his hand, his jaw stabbed out towards me. Stubble lined it in patches, crusted with flecks of dead skin.

A sax whinnied over the speakers. “Hi-di-hidie-hi,” the air crooned.

“Well,” I said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Work,” Samuel said.

#

Winter was rolling in. Fewer animals. Slicker roads. I felt the empty gnaw me again. Frustrated, days long with nothing at all. I pulled over at a fast food joint to buy some cheap meat, unwrapped it, touched my finger to the slick grease of the patty.

The sign lit up as I sunk my teeth in, threw it's reflection over my hood. Candi's Cabaret. A women's legs, shapely with a sharp heel, pointing my eyes towards the door.

Then there was a whole different crop of girls. Elaine, yeah. Elaine was there, and Maude. A hefty blonde woman had met me at the door, dressed in nothing but lace underthings, deep sea blue heels. On the stage a slip of a thing was sliding round the pole like an eel and when I watched her wide eyed Loraine laughed in my face. “You want a table?” She asked. “Or you wanna sit at the stage?”

“I came,” I said, “to see about a job?” My voice hitched up and Loraine laughed in my face again, a spark of teeth lined cotton candy pink. She took my hand and it felt soft and stiff as the split raccoon's.

“Well, lets see what we can do for you darling,” she said. She lifted one leg, and

without looking shifted in back behind the other. “Come on back.” She stepped backwards, her hips rolling with the music, and pulled me along.

#

Money. Money enough to rent a cheap, flat one story home with three bedrooms and a small hatch of an attic that no one could reach but me. Money enough to tear the carpet out and have tile laid down to make it easier on my husband. Money enough to hire help to care for him.

“Bartending,” I told him, a glut of singles clutched in my hand after the first night.

Those first few weeks Loraine took me under her wing and taught me how to be what I was becoming. Those first few weeks I'd feel myself turning red in grocery store lines when old women, women like my mother, would turn their heads, catch sight of me behind them counting bill after bill out, and I'd wonder: do they know?

Could they smell it on me?

What my mother would say.

“Bartending isn't,” she fumbled over the phone, “well, it isn't safe is it? Or very respectable? Why don't you do something else? Elsa's daughter is working as the manager of that resale shop down in Youngstown, you know the one that specializes in children's clothes? Why not there? She could get you in. Wouldn't that be nice?”

The empty pit of me lurched at the thought of all those small jumpers and cradles stacked, dinged, waiting to be passed on. The couples with their crying babies. “I doubt it'd pay as much, Ma.”

“Well, think about it. You coming over Sunday?”

I placed my hand against my stomach, rubbed the knot under the skin out. Fingers

feeling for something, anything. “Maybe, Ma,” I said.

#

“Look at her go,” the drunk laughed. On the table on my knees, ass in the air. I was thinking of my husband and Loraine. Even inside, even closed up behind door after door, I could feel the winter slipping through the vents. I could smell the wet paper in my locker.

#

“We're all just girls here,” Loraine said. Her cheeks had a tendency of turning from pink to hot red as the night wore on and more drinks slipped past her lips. She had just kissed me on the mouth at a table full of frat boys who had wandered in two hours to close, already stinking drunk. They had asked her her age. She batted her eyes and touched my wrist. “Ain't that the truth, sweetheart?”

Together we slipped around the pole, laughing like it was a slumber party. Laid out on our stomachs kicking our feet in the air.

The way they hitched their eyes into our skin, sat forward, legs splayed, hands tucked over their crotches or clutching their beers, well I almost believed her. I rolled on the floor and thrust my hips in the closest one's face. I felt the lace of my thong pull away from my waist and a bill slip in. I could taste the bubblegum of Loraine's lipgloss on my tongue.

I am just a girl, I thought, and this is just for fun.

I looked up off the floor into their slack faces, the same look my husband wore during a game, and I felt full, and connected and powerful. Even more than I had when I'd watch those little furred things curl up on the side of the road.

Had I known. Had I known.

Men, and how very easy they really were, maybe I wouldn't have lost my husband.

I bucked, rose up, threw my head back and laughed and laughed. Not a woman, not a wife, not a mother. Just a girl.

#

“You run this place, huh?” The drunk asked Samuel. “Cock o' roost and shit?”

Samuel laughed like a siren. “Well, you could say that I guess. They've let themselves get a little out of hand lately, ever since I moved. Hard to check in much now.”

“Oh yeah?” The drunk said. “You gotta stub that shit out. You let them start acting up enough and they'll never mind you again.”

“Guess they forgot how to behave,” Samuel said, “Guess they thought they could do what they want with me gone.” He was mumbling, then. I had no fucking clue what he could mean. He'd never been around much. Things had almost always been how they were.

I spread my legs. I tossed my hair. I chewed my lips.

#

Outside, on slow nights, on nights where the men were rude and the money tight, Loraine would sit with me by the dumpster and we'd pass a joint between us. She wasn't just a girl then, but a volcano bubbling. Lips snarled, voice low and hard as gravel.

“Mother fuckers,” she said, exhaling smoke that burned through the air thick and hot as steam. “Think they can just fucking go on like that? Right in fucking front of me?”

I'm sorry, but this is a fucking place of business, not their personal fucking pussy den.”

Names. We heard them all. Almost every night there'd be one or two who'd come in, spitting them as we're up on stage just trying to get through our set. It was almost always when we we're feeling shitty, is the thing, and the night was already not going the greatest.

Cunt, bitch, whore, slut, these were common. It was funny how quick they could roll right off of after you'd hear 'em enough. “Wash your snatch.”

“We near the ocean? Smells like dead fish.”

“Come on, bitch, smile. Split those dick suckers open for me.”

“Looks like you take it up the ass. You take it up the ass, sweetheart?”

Once, a preacher came in and called Loraine Jezebel. So innocent, so strange, so out of place compared to the other hollars, Loriane had been stunned. Like she'd just been slapped. She stopped mid swing on the pole and looked down at him at the edge of the stage, him clutching his Bible.

And she laughed.

“Honey, I ain't Jezebel,” she said, “She doesn't work Tuesday nights.” Another laugh, one so hard she had to fall down to her knees and clutch her stomach. So hard the man just gave up and left.

But sometimes they really got under her skin, and when we were out by the dumpster the streetlights would make a pool of her eyes so full it was like they were going to spill over. There was nothing I could say, really. I was just supposed to listen.

“They can't just fucking say what ever they want to us, you know?” She would chew the edges off of her nails. Bite them jagged. When her hands were finally free of

her mouth I would take one and give it a squeeze. Then we'd finish the joint in silence, both knowing that they damn well could.

#

In the attic I kept my outfits. It became “Mommy's Special Room”. I would reach up and pull the hatch down and climb up the ladder, pull it up after me. It was just large enough to fit me, and some pillows on the floor, and a few boxes of things I didn't want my boys peeping in. Lace underwear, tasseled bras, studded heels sharp enough to cut right through a misplaced hand.

The walls were this nasty pea green half-papered with this ugly strawberries and cream pattern of a little girl leading a sheep around on a leash, her bonnet oversized and covering her face. Someone had tried to tear it off before we moved in. I tried wedging my nail under it to get it to come apart but had to quit when one of my nails split right down the center hard enough to cut the skin underneath and give me a blood blister that stuck around for three weeks. It wasn't going to budge.

So instead I started covering the paper up.

#

Roll, roll, roll. I could feel the weight of my ass move like plates under my skin. I could feel hot breath rolling down the crack. Somebody standing up, hunched over me. Somebody too close. I straightened my back, spun to face them. Samuel looked ready to pass out, laid back in the corner of the couch, finger tapping lazily against his chin. His eyes caught my eyes and narrowed.

Like a garden snake close to biting.

Close, near off the couch, the drunk was looming, empty bottle twisting through his dirty fingers.

#

Loraine disappeared. Four months after I started she just didn't come in one night. And then another. Nobody went looking for her. It just happened and we just moved on. There wasn't any flashlights in the woods. There wasn't much of anything. A regular of hers asked after her, when met with shrugs, he just picked another girl.

So it goes.

I'd come home dripped in funk and half-asleep, half-drunk on my feet. My husband would be sitting in his chair at the table. The night Loraine disappeared he was drawing little pictures in spilled sugar, his shoulders hunched in, eyes cast down.

"Sweetheart, you oughta get to bed," I told him.

"I missed you," he said. "I worry, you know."

I knelt down on the floor and laid my head in his lap. "You don't have to worry. It's just a dumb college kid bar," I said.

He put his hand in my hair and I jerked my head up away from his crotch. He started rubbing his fingers into my scalp in small circles.

"I love you, you know," he said, quiet, whimpered. Like a suckling pup.

"I know," I said, and meant it. I stood up and he wheeled past me into the bedroom. Left the door open, waiting.

I reached up and pulled down the hatch to my attic. Climbed up inside. Pulled it closed after me.

#

The drunk slipped his hand under his pants and eyed me. I had my torso bent back so that my feet were near touching my shoulder blades. I kept my eyes on Samuel as I rocked. I kept hoping he might do something. That was his job, wasn't it?

The drunk unclicked his belt. Zipper.

I bucked back off of the table and landed on my side. Rolled, a pinwheel of legs, until I hit the wall and slid up it. Shouldn't have bothered pretending it was still a dance, still for fun. He had his dick out, stroking it. Slow, like he was working a kink out.

My arms snapped to my side, my legs closed. I folded my arms over my breasts. My eyes locked on Samuel. "Aren't you going to do anything?"

Samuel looked from the man to me, and snorted. "This shouldn't be all that new to you. You're a whore right?"

"Excuse me?" My top was on the other side of the table, inbetween the man's legs. "What did you just call me?"

"I know all about what you girls do back here," Samuel sneered. "Expect me to foot the bill when you get in trouble, huh?" The drunk looked down to Samuel and Samuel just shrugged and turned his head. The drunk cleared the table in one long step.

His hands reached out—chipped nails, tobacco stained, thumbs knobbed and crooked. I slapped them away and turned to the door.

He locked his hands into my breast, nails cutting in, lifted me off the floor. My body was a block of ice. The room was a freezer. Cold. Tharn. That's what they call it, you know, when a rabbit sees the headlights coming and it can't move out of the way. Tharn.

Dead bodies, curled up on the side of the road. Little things with little bead eyes. I

felt wet dripping down between the curve of my breast. Off my nipple.

I kicked my legs out and screamed, trying to catch the mother fucker on the edge of my heel.

The door caved open and Maude came in, mouth unhinged, spitting words I couldn't hear or understand. Everything was noise, electric buzzing, like a hair dryer blowing straight in my ears. She locked a hand around my wrist and pulled me out of the man's arms. I heard him laugh.

She shoved him back, hard.

“You don't fucking touch my girls,” she had her hands clenched in front of her. “You get the fuck out, you get the fuck out right now.”

Samuel stood up. “Your girls?” he said. “Did you forget--”

Her face was a flushed patch of red and white. She paused, rocked back and tilted her head to look Samuel in the eye. “You.” She pointed a finger across the table at him. “You don't just let men come in here and manhandle the dancers. What the fuck were you thinking? You think you can just do what you want?”

For a moment I wanted to laugh, watching Maude, five foot nothing, trying to pull her body up tall, trying to swell herself up enough to scare them. A strangle of sound blossomed between my teeth and I smothered it with my palm.

“Kaleigh,” she said, whipping towards me. I flinched back. She reached a hand towards me. Paused. Ran it through her hair. “Kaleigh, go home.”

Samuel opened his mouth and she turned back to him. “We'll talk. We'll talk now. But I want him gone. I want him gone once Kaleigh is in her car, and driving off. Then,” her shoulders slumped, she pinched the bridge of her nose. “Then we'll talk.”

She turned back to me. “Kaleigh. Go.” Her face was lined like crumpled paper, her eyes sagged. She was shrinking in front of me. “Just go.

I did.

#

Eight nail marks, top of my breasts. Perfect and curved like the sliver of the moon. Five bleeding little rivers down the rolls of my body. Dipping in and out of crevices of skin. Smearing. I left my top in the room. The new girl caught sight of me and turned her head away.

I pulled my clothes on in the locker room and folded the flier up. It was still damp. I had to treat it with care.

#

When I got home my husband was sitting up by the couch. On the T.V. there was an old black and white film. A young woman fell back into the arms of a gentleman in a suit. She's saying something, but the volume was down and I was too tired to read the words at the bottom of the screen.

“You're home early,” my husband said.

“Got roughed up by some stupid kid,” I said. I pull down my collar and show him one of the cuts.

His eyes widened and his hands tensed around the arm rests of his chair. He ran his hand over his face. Still calloused, nails still clipped close to the skin. Still working hands. He'd taken up carving. Our kitchen table covered in small curls of shaved oak.

He sighed and I could tell he wanted to tell me there were other jobs out there. That even he—now--could maybe look for something or other. We'd had this talk enough

for him to know not to. Not now.

“I should kick his ass,” he grumbled.

I laughed and shook my head. I sat down in his lap and buried my head in the crook of his neck. We'd grown close. Not the way we were when we were young, when I was a bird in his palm. Seeing him waiting, tender, scared, seeing the others hunched and drooling, drunk and dumb, eyes spun around my hips like silk, had rewritten something between us. Things I never wanted him to know.

I kissed his cheek. “Wouldn't do him much good. Kids like that never learn their lessons.”

He buried his head in my hair. “Wanna finish this movie in the bedroom?”

“Sure, darling. Go on ahead, I got to clean myself up a bit.”

When he was gone from the living room I pulled down the ladder. Climbed up.

I took the flier with the girl out of my purse. Traced the curve of her eyes, her smile, the flow of her hair with my fingers. I uncapped a bottle of glue and lined the back edges of the paper. I stuck it to the wall.

I ran my hands over it, letting it meld into place with the other scraps of paper. News articles. A series of house fires: serial arsonist in Youngstown. Man mowed down in a hit and run, dies. Age 36. A collection of articles about mutilated pets found throughout downtown Youngstown. A dog's body tossed from the highway overpass ruins a picnic. Unidentified bodies found when volunteers clean the Duck Pond. Cut up, stained sections a book I found outside the club. Women gone mad. Women killing. Little snatches of pea green and strawberry and cream. Little bo-peep bonnets and the face of her sheep. Heaps and heaps of paper, adding up. Faces, still, caught mid-tragedy,

staring blank eyed and black and white. Missing, Lindsey.

Through the small crack of the window I could see the moon's heavy head shine behind a layer of still clouds as gray as old ash. A snowflake dropped. Clung to the glass. I thought of teeth, biting. The dried blood on my breast itched.

I touched a finger to Lindsey's lips. I climbed back down the ladder and I closed the hatch.

VI

Furred Animals

The possum rose out of the snow.

Six inches deep and still falling. Never saw nothing like it in Georgia. It was the kind of night Northern kids prayed for that we could only dream of. The kind that could wipe out a whole day of school. Maybe two. My feet were shoeless but not cold. The possum shook itself as if it'd been dazed, like someone had just knocked it upside its head. Then it put its little paw out, stepped onto the road. Another, slow and careful like it was on a tightrope.

A few steps in the possum froze stiff, head snapped up, and it twisted and tangled like a kite in the wind. Landed with a soft thud on the ground and tumbled.

Back on the lip of the road the possum rose out of the snow.

I'd been watching it. Step, step, step, wham. Not getting much farther than it had the first time, sometimes not getting very far at all.

There were others, too, up and down the road, fuzzing with distance and becoming nothing more than glowing pinpricks not much different than the snowflakes caught in the shine of the street lights. Dogs, cats, wild things like raccoons and groundhogs. There was even a deer a little ways down on the other side of the road, bounding across it with eyes wide and nostrils twitching before crumpling hard to the ground in bits and pieces.

I'd been watching them do it, over and over. I tried to holler, tried to spook them back towards trees, the buried grass, and safe places, but they paid me no mind at all. Even when I went to lift the possum my hands sailed through it.

Every now and then a car would pull in, a person would get out. The animals ignored them like they ignored me. The people ignored me like they ignored the animals, even when I waved my arms, kicked at the snow, and screamed at the top of my lungs.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on and I wasn't exactly an idiot. I knew the moment I saw that possum what was going on even if I didn't like it, didn't want to admit it.

All those animals, they were dead. Same as me, I guessed.

#

Back at home Grace used to play this game with a handful of the other older kids called Grave Keeper. They'd go down to the cemetery a few blocks away, the one that didn't have a gate, and the pathway leading through it was cracked and weedy. That was

Grace's favorite. It had the big old twisted kind of trees with trunks six or seven arm lengths round, and leaves that hung off them like cobwebs.

Mom made Grace take me and she hated it. None of the other kids had younger siblings they had to tote around. Most of them, all but Grace and me, were boys that lived on our road. They were Grace's friends. I had a friend from school who lived across town and a rabbit to keep me company, and that was enough except in the Summer, when I'd get hooked to Grace more often than not. It was also when the weather was most ripe for the boy's games.

I hated Grave Keeper. Out of all the games they'd play it was the worst. Sometimes when they wrestled it would get a little too rough and I'd get knots in my stomach but Grace never really let them put their hands on me, so I was never really worried. I'd rather play kick the can, or even just regular hide and seek, but Grace made up Grave Keeper and it was her favorite so we played that more often than not.

How it was played is like this—we'd all go out to the graveyard. One of us, usually not me cause most of the time I didn't want to be a real part of the game, would have a swatch of this old shirt tied around their eyes so they couldn't see. That cemetery mostly had the flat stones, small rectangles of names sunk good and deep in the damp earth. It wasn't until way further back that there were proper headstones with carvings of angels and that stuff. Those graves were old and crumbling apart. If you ran into them you were just as likely to break a piece of it off as you were to get a bruise. Then, in the back back back, there were the graves like tiny houses, with stone columns and heavy metal doors. Those were the oldest of all. It was tough getting through the bigger graves unscathed when it was your turn at the blindfold, but Grace said wearing it was

necessary. The nights were long in coming during the summer, and even when they did come, she wanted us dead blind.

The person, the Grave Keeper, they would spin around and around and around counting to fifty while we all scattered and tried to press ourselves against the ground, behind the trees, inbetween tall headstones, and if they were real brave, near the old tombs. That was Grace's usual place.

Then the Grave Keeper would start walking and calling out. Their voice would bounce all around the graveyard, become a howl, like some hungry mutt, asking “Is anybody there?”

And we would have to moan as if we were dead but up and walking, like in a horror movie. Grace had it down to a T because those were her favorite things to watch. She did it all the time. Sometimes when I was trying to sleep and my eyes were just about closed she'd lean over from her bed and let loose one long whisper of a groan that could have curdled milk. My skin would just about jump off of me. With each moan the Grave Keeper would lunge towards the closest sound and try to catch hold of whoever was making it to, as Grace put it, “put 'em back where they belong.” First person caught would be it and they'd get the cloth tied around their eyes and be forced to walk around sightless.

I didn't really moan most of the time when I was playing. I had my own favorite place there where I'd go to try and pass the time. Towards the back but not too close to the tombs there was this real nice old grave. Hudson, was the name, but I didn't know the people it was for or anyone that might have. I went for the carving.

It was a single grave but it looked like the stone was big enough for two. On the

one side, where usually the other name would be, there was a woman. I don't know if it was supposed to be an angel and maybe they just didn't put the wings on it, or if maybe it was one of the Marys or what. It didn't say anything about that, and there wasn't much about her to give it away. Her face was the least clear part of it all, really. Her eyes were there, but empty, and her eyebrows just two quick cuts arched up over them and her nose a line between. It looked like the only thing the guy who did it took anytime at all on was the mouth. Up close I could see the lines on the lips and how they poofed up into a small smile. Calm. That's probably why it was so finished, cause the artist wanted to make sure it looked calm.

She was wearing a long dress but it looked torn, like it'd been ripped off at the shoulder as if she'd just been in a scuffle and the neckline was drooping down low. In one of her arms she had a sheep. A lamb, probably, cause it didn't have any wool at all, or else it just got sheared. It had its head tossed up to rest on her clothed shoulder and its neck was split with a crack. I could never tell if it had been made on purpose or not. In the other hand she had this sword. Long, and old and heavy, angled in front of her legs so it was cutting the rest of the world off from her, and her lamb.

Underneath there were letters, thick and curved, chipping at the edges. "Comfort," it said, "for those in Need."

I would huddle up at the foot of that headstone and look at her so hard I could see her when I closed my eyes hours later. Traced the lines of the sheep, her lips, her dress, and the letters in my mind. I didn't like being in the graveyard, not even during the day. So I didn't moan and I tried my best not to get touched, because the only thing worse than being there would be being there and walking around blind. Under the lady and the lamb

was the closest I felt to feeling safe.

#

I wasn't sure what to do with myself. Wasn't sure if it would last. Why the animals kept on throwing themselves to pieces. What the point of it was. I sat, knees tucked under my chin, and watched snow fall through the light of the teal, pink and red lights from the sign next door, blinking like stars before sweeping off into the dark night.

The possum rose out of the snow.

I thought of its head cracked under mom's tire. How many months ago? The next day flies had gathered around it and it looked so sad and so smashed. We'd been standing outside the motel trying to flag somebody down to help us jump our car. We'd run out of all the food we snagged for our trip from Georgia, and my stomach had been cramping up it felt so empty. I just kept looking at it, the possum, and trying not to cry.

“Don't think about it, Lindsey.” Ma said and laid a hand on my head for a moment before a truck breezed by and she was off, chasing after it, with her hands waving above her head. Grace had been facing away from us, sitting on the ground watching the motel and the tree line, throwing pebbles. When Ma took off she reached her hand up and took mine, gave it a tug so that I'd sit down next to her.

“Ain't no reason to be standing there looking like a fool with her,” Grace said. She turned her face away and spat on the ground. “You aren't the one who killed the battery.”

We sat quiet for a little together while Ma walked back up the road, then turned and took off after another car speeding down the highway. I picked pebble after pebble up and made a small pyramid, like they did for the dead in Egypt. I could still hear the flies buzzing behind me around the possums body. Back home we had big fat horseflies with

bites like bullets.

Grace circled her fingers round my wrist and said “It's just you and me, now.”

Ma came back and stood next to us, sweating rose oil and heaving. “I could use some help, girls,” she said. “The longer you just sit there the longer it takes for us to get something to eat.”

Grace cocked her head back to look Ma in the eye. “Ain't no reason she should have to look at that.” She thrust her chin towards the possum. “Just cause you fucked up.”

I looked up at Ma as she opened her mouth, aimed a finger at Grace. My eyes were wet, dribbling. She clicked her tongue and turned away from us, back towards the road. “I had to end its suffering,” Ma said. “Wasn't any way for a thing like that to live in this world.”

But it'd still been there just the same, hadn't it? Walking and dying and suffering, and she hadn't stopped anything.

I rose up off the snow and turned towards the motel. I went to look for Grace.

#

There was Greg, John, Mark, and Rodger. Those were the boys Grace hung out with back home. All of them had the same kind of pinched mouths and flat noses, close shaved hair cuts. Rodger was the youngest next to me, and the scrawniest, and he was always trying to start something. Something usually with me.

Pipsqueak, pansy, twerp, cry baby he'd call me. Or something like booger while he's picking his nose. He'd try to reach out and wipe it in my hair. Rodger did things like that. Most of the other boys didn't pay me any mind. And they didn't pay Rodger any either. I think it drove him nuts seeing Grace so tight with the others while he was just a

tag-a-long like me. I think he might have hated her.

“You know your sister's a faggot?” he'd whispered to me once. I had lagged behind everybody while we were walking back home and he kept slowing and slowing till he was beside me. I knew I was in for something cause he and Grace had wrestled earlier that day and she'd gotten him down on the ground and wrenched his arm up behind his back till he was red in the face and howling. It was just becoming Spring then and there were new leaves twisting out of all the trees. The sun was speckling through, and his face was patched in light and shadow. “A fah-ha-get. Everybody knows it.”

“Shut up,” I told him, “You're the only faggot here.” Honest, I wasn't even sure what it meant, but I knew it was what the boys called each other when they really wanted to get someone's back up so I knew it was no good. Sure enough, it got Rodger's goat quick even though he had started it. His hand shot out into my chest and knocked me off my feet straight on the ground.

“Pussy. Why don't you cry about it to your dyke sister.”

Grace had already peeled out of the back and was coming towards us, shouting my name.

“She just fell,” Rodger said. “Ain't no problem.” He reached down toward me and I blinked hard, watching the shadow of a leaf wave in his palm. I covered it with my own and he heaved me up.

#

Outside our motel room our car was nothing more than a hunched mound of snow. The lights inside our room were off, and the windows laced with webs of frost crisscrossing and glittering. I cupped my hands against the glass and tried to peer through

them into the room but it was all one blank sheet of darkness.

I slouched down against the wall and watched the snow build and build. I closed my eyes and tried to listen for my mother's snores, Grace's small groans, little bits of sounds that made up home. Across the way and down the alley of doors two women slipped out of a room, both of them hardly dressed for the weather. A man stepped out after them, got into a car. It hummed to life and slipped through the piling snow.

The women came towards me, one caked in a thin sheen of sweat, wearing a dirty t-shirt too big for her and a pair of jeans, the other was wearing a gown, like an old one that pinched at the waist and then blossomed out into so many layers and ruffles. Kind of like a flower hanging upside down. I thought maybe it could be a costume. Sometimes I saw women wearing all sorts of outfits going in and out of the building next door.

Grace would catch me looking and snort hard. Sometimes rap me on the knuckles.

“They're whores, Lindsey,” Grace said, “Don't you be making moon eyes at 'em or you'll end up one yourself.” She didn't say that kind of thing when Celeste was around, not after the first time when it came to fists.

The first woman breezed past me, her hands running up and down her arms like she could rub out the cold, her eyes swerving like headlights. She was muttering to herself and trying to speed, it seemed, away from her companion. Up close I could see it was the crazy lady, the one who wandered around here every once in a while. The one Grace was always messing with. I hadn't seen the second woman before but there was something about her, the way she moved, the shape of her face, that felt like I was almost recalling something. Like something I'd read, but hadn't really understood, or maybe paid the right attention to. The second had slowed down as she came past, letting the first gain

ground on her. She was placing her feet in the tracks the woman before her left, careful, lightly, like she was testing out if they fit. She stopped in front of me and gazed after the woman.

“Hey, kid,” she said, quietly. Too quiet. Her companion continued on, nearly invisible beyond the sheet of falling snow.

The woman looked over to me. “Kid?” She smiled without showing teeth. “Whaddya doing hanging around here for?”

I groped for my tongue, my lips, my voice. My mouth unhinged, hung open. There was the sound of metal clanging together, like a chain being pulled, and the woman's body lurched forward. She balanced herself.

“Well I guess I'll see ya,” she said, and then she was hurrying through the snow after the woman who had left her behind.

The storm swallowed them. I closed my mouth. I curled up against the wall and wished I could feel tired.

#

The last time we played Grave Keeper before we left Georgia wasn't long after Rodger knocked me down. Spring had bled into Summer and the heat was hanging in the air thick and damp as clothes fresh out of the washer. We only had three days left there but we didn't know it then.

I had tucked myself safe away at my gravestone and been thinking of trying to take a nap. I would often try to sleep there, but couldn't. Every time I would shut my eyes I would hear something, a twig breaking, branches rubbing together, wind like a howl, and I'd have to snap them wide open again to make sure nothing was creeping up on me.

Or else I'd start to worry that I would sleep the whole night through, that I wouldn't hear Grace calling, or that she wouldn't be able to find me, or even that she'd forget me all together. Sleeping the whole night in a graveyard was the worst thing you could do, cause then you were its, and it wouldn't ever let you go. You'd have to live there.

But I'd try all the same to drift off. The nights were long and humid, and it felt like good sleeping weather that last night. I had my eyes shut tight and my head propped up against the name Hudson when I heard the snapping and the foot falls. I kept telling myself to keep my eyes closed, that I was just hearing the world be the world, and that there wasn't no reason to panic. That's what Grace told me to do; be sensible about it. "You can't just make a fuss about every little thing," said Grace. "Ain't no way to live."

So I kept my eyes shut, and counted off all the things it probably was.

And then the moan came. A moan with words, not like the moan for the game. Saying all sorts of dark things in a half whisper.

I sprung up to my feet and went to run quick as I could but something locked around my ankle. Something was dragging me down to the ground.

I thought of them movies Grace loved, the corpses with their cracked nails and teeth gnashing together, clipping flesh. I screamed. A hand covered my mouth from behind. I wanted to kick, to scratch and fight, honest, but I just went limp and my whole body surrendered. Dampness, down my thighs. Warm, even compared to the hot air of summer.

The hand let go of my mouth and someone started laughing. I screamed again and twisted around to see Rodger, kneeling above me, his mouth twisted up and his eyes like slits. He'd dragged me back behind the grave. The knees on my pants were stained with

mud and one was tore up. I had wet myself. I heard a whole bunch of feet pounding towards us.

“You fucking pussy,” Rodger said, and went to laugh again but Grace closed in and collided with him, knocked him back into the gravestone. It cracked through. He shoved her off but she was back on him in an instance, grunting.

“I was just fucking around,” Rodger squealed. He tried to wedge his knee up in between his body and Grace's. She was on top of him, hands wrapped round his neck.

She raised one hand, made it a fist, and brought it down hard against his mouth. He kicked her off. The other boys had gathered around now and were watching with half interest. One spit on the ground. I could feel the wet between my legs cooling and I scrunched myself up, away from them and their fight and tried to hide the stain from the rest of them.

“Kick his ass,” one of them said flatly. Rodger's mouth was trickling blood. They had gotten to their feet and were grappling. Grace landed a punch to his gut and Rodger doubled over.

“You want to fuck around you fuck around with me,” she said, grabbing his shirt collar. She shoved him to the ground and came towards me. Pulled me up to my feet and brushed me off. She didn't say nothing about my pants, not in front of the boys. She just led me away.

Over my shoulder I could see the other boys laughing at Rodger but helping him up. I caught sight of the crack, running through the whole of the stone, cutting through the woman, her lamb.

Grace stayed quiet the walk home but kept my hand in hers. My knee and my face

stung. I felt like the air was cutting through me. When we walked in the front door mom was sitting up at the table running her hands through her hair and dad was gone. When she saw me, she started tearing into Grace. About my clothes, my hair, a cut unnoticed bleeding down the front of my knee.

“What'd you do to her,” my mom kept screaming. “What'd you do?”

“I ain't done shit. She fucking fell.”

“Don't you cuss at me. I have half a mind to slap those words right out of your mouth. I should never have let you run wild with those boys. You're an animal, just like your father.”

Mom kept fussing over me, turning my head this way and that, pulling at my shirt, brushing grass off of me, trying to smooth my hair and look at my knee. She was a flurry of hands, touching, combing. I stayed still and stared at the ground, afraid to look Grace in the eye.

“Go on up to bed, Lindsey,” Ma told me. I turned to leave and Grace went to follow. Ma grabbed her arm. “Not you, you and I need to have some words. “

I lay in bed listening to the house groan, the low mutters and escaped curses. I cringed, every now and then, when the sound of them became too clear. I thought of the blood wetting Rodger's lip.

I'd never seen Grace lose a fight until we came up here. Not with another kid, at least.

#

The sun was rising, lighting the snow up like diamonds. It laced the bare branches of the trees, hung across the motel awnings and hid in the crevices of the letters for

Candi's Cabaret. The footsteps of the woman had more or less been blurred away by fresher snow. It looked like everything was one big pillow. I was about to pop to my feet and look through the window and see if I could see Grace and my mom when Celeste rounded the corner, a fur lined hood pulled up around her head, her shoulders slouched.

She banged her fist against the door and it swung open. I peered past her legs to see my mother, hair frazzled in nothing but an overly large t-shirt, coffee stained and tore under one armpit.

“Grace,” my mom called over her shoulder and stepped out of the way. In the motel room there were stacks of paper on the floor, scattered. My own face, grainy and smudged. On my mother's legs there were fine patches of hair, stubbled and sticking up, flaking polish on her nails seashell pink.

I watched Celeste wait until Grace stepped out wearing a puffy winter jacket, hunter's orange. A stocking cap was pulled over her head. She looked out of place in the snow, in those clothes.

“Yea?” she said.

“School's closed.” Celeste said. They didn't touch.

“Yea. Saw that.”

“Walk?” Celeste asked.

“I gotta hang posters,” Grace said. “Storm probably tore all of them down.”

“I could help.”

Grace shook her head. “Nah.”

“You been avoiding me or something?”

Grace's mouth twitched. She shook her head. “Nah. Come on then. I could walk

for a little.”

I gazed in the room at my mom, sitting at the low table, turning a coffee mug round and round. Up, at Grace and Celeste, their bodies curved back from one another as if they were fighting some horrible pull. Like magnets with the wrong charge. My teacher had showed us in class, how the right two would snap together. But others, if they didn't go together, there was nothing to be done about it. No matter how hard they were pushed at one another they kept their distance. Kept sliding right past one another.

I was thinking of slipping past into the room when Grace closed the door, leaving our mother alone.

#

Sometimes Mom didn't want me to go with Grace. Sometimes she liked keeping me close by when there was no one else in the house.

“Keep this old girl company,” she'd say. But mostly I would sit in a room by myself. Make up stories. Brush hair after hair on my dolls until the comb was a ratted nest of plastic tumbleweeds, or try to coax my rabbit out of its cage and into my hands. He wasn't friendly, exactly. First day I had him he bit through the pad on my thumb but I hid it, so I wouldn't have to lose him. I kept trying names out on him. I was sure if I found the right one he would stop bunching up in the corner, stop shivering when I went to touch him. Never struck on the right one. I wondered if dad had kept him, when we left. Or if he was out on some highway, trying to cross. Failing. Trying to cross again. I didn't know how to keep an adult company alone, not even my mother, and especially not when she started drinking.

Sometimes she would call me into her. She'd always have something to say.

Once, her eyes bleary, her hair gathered up in a fist behind her head so she could look at me without it getting in the way, she said:

“I don't worry about Grace. Not one lick. Grace'll be alright no matter what. That one, she's got a stone in her. A boulder. Big and hard. But you. I have nightmares about you, you know. You walk around like you're blind. Like you could just float away. You know how scary that is? For me? For a mother? I have nightmares about it. Like you're a balloon.”

“I'm sorry,” I said. She nodded and I left the room.

Up here there wasn't any other room to go to. I would have to watch her, when I stayed behind, watch me. I would have to hear her nightmares.

#

I followed behind Grace and Celeste as they wound their way through the alley of motel doors and round the back of the last building towards the treeline. They were both keeping their mouths wired shut and their arms stiff at their sides like any little movement or sound between them might break something.

Grace leaned up against a tree and blew a burst of breath between her teeth, fogging the air like cigarette smoke.

“Your ma still calling you Grace, huh?” Celeste settled against a tree next to her.

“Gave up trying with her.” Grace sunk down to the ground.

“Your ass is going to get wet.”

“So?”

They went quiet. Grace packed snow between her hands. Squeezed it so it would ooze up between her bare fingers. From the treeline I could see the road just past the

motel, the animals lined up on the side of it sparkling and disappearing and sparkling again. I sat down next to Grace. I wanted to take her hands and push them up against my head so she could warm them in my hair.

“Why haven't I seen you?” Celeste asked.

“Ma's been taking me to and from school. Says she doesn't want me to get nabbed like Lindsey did.”

“You forget where I live then?”

Grace snorted. “Nah.”

“Then why haven't I seen you?” Celeste folded her arms over her chest and turned her head away from Grace. Grace turned her head too, towards the sign.

“Been busy.”

“Busy my ass, you been avoiding me and you know it.”

“Had to hang posters.”

“Whole world's covered in posters by now. You don't want to be with me anymore that's fine. You just tell me.”

Grace heaved herself to her feet and for a moment her hand passed through my leg and I felt a buzz all the way up my thigh into my chest that hung heavy in my heart. Like bee's had been nesting there and now their hive was all made and the chambers all full. Like Spring was coming and I was ready to sting.

And it passed.

“Maybe I don't want to go running around with some whore's daughter. Maybe I don't want your filthy hands on me.” Grace spat. “Maybe you're just like your mother.”

“You better shut up about my mother if you know what's good for you.” Celeste's

arms unhinged and slung down to her sides, her palms balled into fists.

“Nah, I think it’s about time you hear it. Your mother's a slut.”

“And your mom ain't?”

“My ma don't take her clothes off for dollar bills.”

“Nope, she just does it for free.”

They were facing each other finally but both of them were wound up, their arms ready to spring, their lips curling like dogs. I tried covering my ears but it did nothing. I felt muggy, like an anchor of heat had pinned me down. It felt like Georgia even though I could still see the snow billowing and the shining diamonds of the animals trying to tromp across the road.

“You think you're better than me, or something? Think you’re better than her?” Celeste's voice cracked and her body sagged back a little. “You've been thinking it this whole time, huh? Haven't you?”

Grace turned away and leaned against the tree again. “Weren't for your mom, and all them bitches just like her, dancing around and selling their sex there wouldn't be any pervs round here. Lindsey never would have been--” she spat hard enough to dent the snow near my foot.

“You don't know that,” Celeste's eyes were wet, sparkling. She blinked hard. “You're wrong. You're dead wrong, Elliot, and you know it. Whoever took her took her and it ain't anybody else's fault.”

“Sure, you keep telling yourself that.”

“My mom was out there every night looking for her.”

“Before or after she showed everyone her cooch?” Grace half grunted a laugh.

“Ma's a whore, daughter's a whore. Everybody knows it. Bad tree leads to bad seed.”

“You can go fuck yourself,” Celeste said. She stomped off through the snow, her hand to her face. I watched after her. Grace didn't. She stayed, back to the tree, face turned towards Candi's Cabaret.

Soon enough she pulled away from the tree and walked back towards our room. I got ready to follow after when something looped round my wrist.

“Hey kid, I know you.” By my side the woman from the night before was crouched, her face peering at me like I was some kind of painting that got smudged up.

“Yeah, yeah I do. Stick here a minute, why don't you? I got time.”

Down by the motel the crazed lady was sitting by a door fidgeting with her fingers.

“Gosh, kid, you look rough.” The woman said, her lips sagging. “Stick here, just for a minute. Why don't you?”

#

Once:

With the light burned out in the kitchen, my mother standing in the middle of the wreck. Drawers pulled out. Silverware and pots and pans were strewn around her feet. A broken bottle. She was batting at the air desperately with one hand, holding the bridge of her nose with the other. I crouched in the doorway watching and she looked me in the eye. Lowered herself to her knees. Held out her arms.

I climbed through the rubble into her arms and she held me and rocked until she calmed down, chanting, “Your father, your father, your father,” until her breath quieted, and I was caked in her snot.

“You're my best friend, you know that,” she said. Her hand was lined with dried blood. She dragged it over her face, pinched her nostrils closed and sniffed. “Your father, he wanted his son and he fucking got it in Grace. He got her, alright. But you, you're mine.” She clenched my shoulders. “Mine.”

She pushed her face into my hair and wept again and I stayed still and let her.

#

“You know me?” I could feel her fingers round my wrist, the damp heat of her breath against my face. Her hair was long and red and hung like damp weeds around her face. She pushed it back out of the way and took my face in her hands.

“Oh yeah, yeah, I know you,” the woman nodded. “You know me?” She pointed at herself and smiled slightly, angled her face this way and that for me to get a good look at it.

“I'm not sure.”

“Well, maybe you will, maybe you won't. It's alright. You want to walk with me? I hate this part. I hate the waiting almost more than the doing.” She shook her head towards the woman and stood up. She gathered her dress up over her ankles and I saw a chain, delicate and thin as a necklace, wrapped round her ankle, dipping down into the snow and stretching away. “Let's go, girl. Let's hustle. I may have time but not much.”

“Where?” I asked. She reached down and heaved me to my feet by my wrist. She brushed my hair down and wet her thumb in her mouth and rubbed it against my cheek.

“Can't go far, but we can go while we can? Right? Right. Come on, kid. I need a break.”

She took my hand in hers and she trotted me down past the woman, her dress

gathered up in one hand to let her run. She laughed, cold and brittle and howling like the wind. I felt chilled and light. I ran with her, our bare feet missing the ground before springing up again. Like swimming through the air.

#

Once:

Ma, dark circles stretched tight under her eyes. Sitting at the table with her arms thrown around her own body. “What are you looking at?” she hissed. “What do you want?” Her eyes were locked slightly over my head. They were off center, drifting towards each other, the lids fluttering. She had a stack of cans on the floor, empty near her feet. Pa had left hours ago, Grace not long after. It was near morning and neither were back. The house shifted with emptiness. I watched her eyes glaze over me and my hair rose up on its ends.

“You okay?” I asked.

Her face crumpled up and she threw herself down on the table, arms over her head.

“Am I okay,” she said. There was a ring of purple flesh around her wrist. “Am I okay, she says.”

She laid there for some time before rising up and looking right over my head again.

“It's like she can't even see. Like she got one foot planted in some other world.” She laughed and shook her head, rubbed her palms into her eyes. She held out her arms. “Come here, little one, baby girl, come on over here.” I climbed into her lap and she smoothed my hair down.

“You gotta stop dreaming,” she said. She kissed my forehead.

We stopped by the road. We'd run clear across the parking lot but I wasn't winded or anything. The woman was the one who had jerked to a stop, her legs tugging back. Her nostrils were flaring like a colt's stuck up in a fence too long.

“Let's sit on down, yeah? Here, for a while.” She dropped back against the ground, her legs splayed out in front of her. Her dress was hitched up to her thighs.

The possum was ambling across the road. Its back side rose up, lifted, smashed to the ground. Its head cracked.

I sat down next to her and followed a line of lace through the pattern along the neckline of her dress with my eyes. “What's your name?” I asked.

“Last name Andry, never married,” she said and laughed, hoarse and long. Her eyes rolled over to me and she coughed it away. “Just fooling, kid. It's a joke, don't worry about it. You can call me Delia, how about that? Delia Swift.”

“My name's--” She waved me quiet.

“Lindsey, I know it. You're the little one.” Her mouth twitched down again and she reached forward to pick at her toes and then tug at the chain around her ankle. “You been round here long, little one?”

“We came up in the summer,” I said, “Before school.” Georgia came in and out of focus, like it was turning behind a lens. It felt like years.

“Nah, I meant, you been here-here, here where we are, here with the dead. You been here long?”

“No, I don't know.”

“How 'bout before. You know where you were before?” She took my face in her

hand and shifted it towards her. The light was caught through her eyes, washing them out to blank screens, like a shine on a window.

“I don't know, I can't really remember.”

“Do yourself a favor and don't try,” she said. She let go of my face and looked across the way to the animals smashing themselves into the pavement. She twisted her lips between her teeth.

“What are they doing?” I asked, finally.

“Dying, obviously” she said. She motioned to the possum with her hands. “They don't even know they're dead. See? Animals, they don't have a way of knowing. Not like us, not when it's something like that. Some man made death. Sickness? Getting ate up?” Her hand struck out claw-like and dug into my thigh lightly. She turned and laughed at me flinching then looked back to the animals. “Well, they get that alright. But this whole thing.” She waved her hand towards the road. “Well, let's just say the natural world is still catching up to the world of man.” She sighed and rubbed her fingers into her forehead. “It can be exhausting. It can take forever.”

“Mm,” I said and nodded.

“They're all over the place, you know. Ain't one single place on this earth where something hasn't died. Whole Earth is a goddamn graveyard.”

“Can't we get 'em to stop?” The deer was trampling across the road again. Then the deer was bits again, shining, turning into tiny stars, evaporating.

“Nah. They'll reach the other side when they reach the other side.” The chain at her ankle started burning, hot and red. Her lips pulled back from her teeth. Her nostrils flared. She slipped a finger between the chain and her skin. “But you and me, we're the

unlucky ones, huh?" She jumped to her feet and the chained foot started dragging out from under her. Her skin was starting to burn away there. I saw muscle and bone.

She dropped her dress.

"All they got haunting them is their own self. Their own death. It's the living, kid. The living haunting us."

And then she was gone, hopping back across the lot, dissolving. I was alone.

The possum rose out of the snow.

#

For a while after we moved up here there was nothing for us to pick through. No place. No fairy tales. Ma's sister came over and the two of them sat over steaming cups in the morning, growling "that bastard." At night Ma sat outside on the curb with her legs spread out pretending it was hot as home, waving at the men who came in and out of the motel. Some nights they would drop in. Some would ruffle my hair. And Grace, she'd take my hand and lead me out, snarling over her shoulder "that bitch." We didn't hear from our father.

Grace would take me to the tree line and we would wait for the sun to set and whatever man was in our room to leave. There was only one other kid in the motel, Celeste, and we didn't talk to her at first. Grace would just watch her from our spot on the grass, her eyes thin as needles. Then it was all gas stations, dollar stores, miles and miles of country road and animal's crushed up.

"We're trapped here," Grace said. She chewed stalks of grass between her teeth like a cow with cud and spat it up in her hand, smeared it on her pants.

"It's not so bad," I said. "School will be starting."

Grace snorted. Celeste popped out of her door and plopped down in front of it. Shoeless. She began to paint her nails. Her mother came out, placed a hand on her head, and crossed the lot to Candi's Cabaret. Grace chewed her cud.

#

Grace had a stack of posters. I could see my face, my school picture from back before, back in Georgia, plastered on each and every one. She took old tacks out of telephone poles and pushed them through the new paper. She shivered in the cold. Her pants were soaking up the wet of the snow all the way up to her knees. They got caught under her shoes and they were fraying at the ends. She had stolen our father's clothes. Jeans, too big. T-shirts, old and oil stained. I hadn't told. Ma didn't say anything. We let her have them in peace.

“Hey, hey.” I'd been following Grace down the road when I saw the crazed lady coming towards us from behind the club. I froze in place. Grace looked her way and rolled her eyes, kept moving. “One second, just wait a minute, would ya?” Grace kept going but the woman was heading towards me. A shimmer rolled down her body and her teeth ground together.

Delia stepped out and the woman doubled over, retching, shivering. The woman's eyes darted towards me, towards Delia. She turned her head from us quick and her eyes glazed over. She examined her nails and started walking away.

Delia knelt down next to me and shook her head. Sighed: “Still thinks she can just ignore me and I'll poof on off.” Delia had purple bruises under her eyes. Her nostrils flared and I saw crusts of old blood. There was a stench.

“I can smell you,” I said.

“Well, thanks, geeze.” Delia's eyes bugged out and she laughed behind her hand, a wet, whooping one. “Children can be so cruel.”

“I just mean I haven't smelled anything else yet.” Hadn't felt, hadn't hungered, hadn't slept. I lost count of everything I hadn't done that I used to do without thinking.

“Well, I must be super ripe then, but what do you expect.” She reached up and shook out her hair, combed through it with her fingers and came back with a fist full of tangled red strands. She pulled a face, stuck out her tongue and gagged. “It's going to take me a minute to get myself together, kid. You don't look so fine yourself. Let's lay down, yeah? Let's take a rest.”

“I can't sleep.”

“Let's just lay down.” She pushed her palms into her eyes. “Just a little while.” Her skin was so white I could see the veins, blue and bulging, I could see little things squirming inside. I looked down at my own arms. They stayed still and whole.

“How long have you been dead?” I asked.

“Way too long,” she said. “Flesh.” She shivered. “I need to lay down.” She pulled her hands away from her eyes, webbed and rolling. I thought of the nightmare I used to have: spiders in my bed, crawling into my mouth, up my nostrils, my ears. It used to make my whole body tingle and itch. I'd wake up scratching.

I wanted to run off, but she held her hand out, waiting.

“We could curl up under a tree, yeah?” She said. “We'll go together.”