Love Letters to a Future Ice Age: Stories

by

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ABSTRACT

The stories in *Love Letters to a Future Ice Age* use fabulism to explore the varieties of impending apocalypse humanity faces in the form of environmental disaster, technological innovation gone awry, and social collapse.

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"The Cake"

The cake only gets made when someone dies—the baker calls it his mortuary masterpiece. "A recipe from my great-grandparents in the Netherlands," he explains when we ask. "So sweet it expunges the grief right out of you." The first time he brings it to a wake, we think he's crazy—cake can't heal our wounds, erase our sorrow for the town dentist's death. We're pretty sure he was overcharging us for crown work anyway, so we're not even certain it's sorrow we're feeling, except maybe for all the money he'd weaseled from us.

The cake really does all of those things, though—as soon as we eat that first bite, our tears dry, our wails melt into sniffles. Some of us even start to look forward to funerals—fingers crossed it's just our neighbor's great-uncle, someone who's already 85 and lived a good life, but we're not picky. The twenty-four-year-old who crashes his car into a tree is a tragedy, sure, but at least no one else suffered at the hands of his drunk driving.

The cake is black, or sometimes dark gray, depending on how much food coloring is in the icing. "It doesn't take much," says the baker, "just five or six drops." Some of us don't like the icing's anise flavor, not at first: it reminds us of our alcoholic grandfathers, or nosy maiden aunts who visit twice a year. But we come around.

The cake has a slab of almond paste in the middle, a thick, golden mortar that shrivels our tongues and puckers our lips with its sweetness. But almonds take a lot of water to grow, water which has been in short supply for so long, despite some of our efforts to form a resource conservation council and unify the town to save water, which

generally fails. Little water means few almonds, so often we settle for imitation paste, which isn't as good. It has a bit of a chalky flavor simmering underneath. Better than nothing.

The cake goes unmade for three whole months, the entire town in suspended animation like prehistoric mosquitos in amber while we wait for someone to start counting worms. Our nerves get worn down—we're on edge, our patience constantly pressed against the edge of a knife, screaming at our spouses for chewing too loud, and one of us snaps and runs over the dog next door that just won't stop barking. Maybe this will count as a death, we think. We hold our breath.

"The cake isn't for pet funerals," the baker says. "It's just a dog. Don't be silly." A tiny group of us protests outside the bakery, barring our neighbors from buying his baguettes and bagels, until one of us has a stroke smoking a cigarette (made from cactus, of course—who can afford the tobacco kind anymore?) in between angry chants. Dead, boom, and before we've even called the ambulance we spy the baker mixing the icing for the cake. But that's not enough—could it ever be?—and it wears off too quickly, so one of us sneaks into the nursing home and puts a pillow to our mother's face. "Her quality of life is pretty low," the nurse had said just two weeks ago, and besides, now we won't have to worry about the outrageous bills, so that's a relief, isn't it? We all feast, almost choking as we try to slide our slices of cake into us whole.

The cake shuts down the nursing home because soon there are no elderly left; they all die peacefully in their sleep, allegedly, and our population has dwindled from 357 to 302. Who knew there were so many old people in our sleepy, sun-scorched village? At least that's 50 less people using up our water, we think—the old people were the worst at

preserving it anyway, always ignoring our community initiatives, never attending our monthly drought-watch meetings, the only ones who really remember a time when water was unlimited. “Wow, so many funerals lately!” says the baker. “I wonder if there wasn’t some kind of bug going around the home. I read about legionnaire’s disease lurking in the taps. Maybe that’s it.”

The cake is absent from our lives for another two months—we try to go about our days like normal, running to the mall to buy an anniversary card we forgot, taking our daughters to drama club, where they’re practicing *Singin’ in the Rain*, something none of the students can really imagine since it hasn’t rained for more than a minute or two in years. Who has time to sing a whole song when we’re all scrambling for a bucket or empty cup to save some of the water from the thirsty ground? It’s empty words for our children but it’s aggravating for us, a tease, a torment, a temptation we can never succumb to—no rain, no water, and worst of all, no cake. We don’t know what to do. Sure, we could justify murder (if it could even be called that) when it was our dad with Alzheimer’s, or that old man with no family in town with a bad hip (“he was struggling to walk, hadn’t you noticed?” some of us whisper), but how do we justify killing our sister, who runs marathons and has never set foot in an emergency room?

The cake makes us do it—just a couple people, spaced over a couple days, and it’s painless, really, it is. We watch videos of how to snap a person’s neck—in private mode, as if that would stop the government from seeing us doing it, but it doesn’t hurt to be careful—and practice on squirrels and rabbits we trap in our backyards. It’s easier than we think, wrapping our hands around their necks and giving them the quick twist. A few of us read about antifreeze poisoning, drive three towns over on our day off to one of

those hardware stores that sells mousetraps and outdoor lightbulbs and potting soil, and pay cash for jugs of the milky, lime green stuff. We mix it in with the food, drizzling it like caramel sauce over the carcasses of the dead squirrels from our backyard—we can't exactly waste free meat, especially in these ethical times of grass-fed animals with no green grass in sight.

The cake even hooks the mayor and the chief of police—they're brothers, with the same mustache, sharp and poufy like chimney sweep brushes—and start a task force to recreate the cake—"cut out the middleman, he charges too much; we'll run his business into the dirt," the chief of police whispers in the old church's basement kitchen as we slave over getting the cake to be fluffy and moist, airy and dense. Our experiments fail; they're flavorless, or too chewy, or solid like a brick. Pale imitations—we can't settle for this.

"The cake has to be legally required. This is our only course of action," the mayor concludes at the town hall where we vote on a replacement for the recently-deceased, geriatric superintendent and talk about whether to close the post office. "It must be compulsory, a legal issue, a necessity for the town, to help us grieve," says the chief of police. The baker complains every time we see him: "My elbows, my wrists, my calves, they ache. I burned my fingers three times this month." He holds them up, wrapped in grimy white bandages, and we wince, of course we're sympathetic, but it's the *law* now. "Do you really want to go to prison for two years?" we ask, and he shakes his head, sighs, mutters about moving onto the next town, but the police have confiscated his keys to make sure he can't leave.

The cake overwhelms us with guilt: it's not like in the movies, where we wake up in the middle of the night, a pounding heart and a dry mouth. It doesn't turn our eyes bloodshot, veins like fibers of red yarn. It's subtler: we forget about it while we knit a blanket for our pregnant cousins' soon-to-be babies—why you'd bring a child into this desert gulch world is beyond *some* of us—or while we watch our favorite football team play, the one two thousand miles away, since all the ones on this side of the country were dissolved as the players kept collapsing from heat stroke.

The cake—or rather, the guilt about how we got the cake—haunts us just as we finish the blanket, or cheer for the game-winning touchdown. It slams into us. It shakes our organs, sends a tremor through our bone marrow, scrapes its claws against our jaws, and we drop our needles or sink back into our pleather recliners and cry. Some people blame the baker, go to his shop to arrest him, throw him in jail—mayor's new laws be damned, because the madness has to stop and the madness started with the cake. But another group of us, dressed all in black, pulls a prison break and busts him out, and those of us are so proud, feel so connected—if only we had been so united six months or a year ago, when we'd tried to win the state water-saver award, which came with a prize of a million gallons of clean water. At least we're in *this* together: we saved the baker and we need the cake. But we have to stop killing. So we all agree—a silent, community-wide oath—not to do it again.

The cake still calls to us, though. The guilt didn't keep us up at night, but the cake does: we wake up with the taste lingering on the backs of our tongues. We dig in the valleys of our molars, hoping to find a crumb lodged in one of our teeth. Our eyes *do* go bloodshot, our fingernails chewed to bloody shreds, and we don't want to waste water

washing our hands over and over, so the blood runs down our fingers, drips onto the personal day requests we fill out, stains our Casual Friday khakis.

The cake whispers to us at night: "eat me, eat me, swallow me down," and it's starting to drive us crazy. One of us scribbles a suicide note—"rather be dead than alive without it. Have a slice for me, l'chaim"—and ends it, a bullet to the brain, though there are rumors that the angle of the bullet isn't possible if it's a suicide. The *how* doesn't really matter: he's our hero, a brave pioneer blazing the trail. It's one thing to sacrifice a relative—that's nothing, something one of us even did in our sleep, a rage nightmare turned deadly—but another thing entirely to surrender to a world without the cake. We toast him again and again in between bites and notice the shake in our hands, the pinpricks inside our eye sockets, have finally gone away.

The cake begets a new industry: the farewell party, with confetti that shimmers like a disco ball and balloons that gleam like menacing blades until they deflate. We all want a DJ to spin songs about rain—this becomes a new trend, "Purple Rain" and "Africa" and "It's Raining Men" playing in the background as we eulogize ourselves, speaking of our imminent demises in metaphors of downpours, floods, summer evening mists, a reminder of more carefree times if nothing else. But some of us make do without so we can afford to have meat catered: nothing huge, just some chicken nuggets, or, occasionally, little chunks of beef mixed in with some rice. One by one, we throw ourselves a farewell party, trying to reuse the silverware and plates as much as possible so we don't have to wash them repeatedly—just because we're dying doesn't mean we should be wasteful. Some of us even try to start up the resource conservation committee again—fewer people means less water means easier to canvas door-to-door, but results

are still mixed. Maybe it's just the cake that people can rally behind. The richer people—the ones who live on Oakgloss Street—compete for fancier catering, more expensive champagne, trying to see who can afford to run the old fountain at what used to be the country club. We are a community transformed: selfless, noble, sacrificial.

The cake culls the fold, but it's not violent, no wolf incisors piercing wool and bone for sheep flesh. No. It's beautiful: we depart whole families at a time and we can't stop crying—some of us even beg people not to go, saying "you're worth more than cake" (let's not get carried away), but this feels bigger than a dessert. "I'm not ready—I don't want to do this," one of us whispers at a farewell. We don't know what to say to this; we put our forks and plates back on the table—do we just go home, then? But as the whining continues, some of us talk over it, our voices rustling ever louder until the protests are covered, quieted. After all, we didn't come here for nothing. We still want what we deserve.

The cake cuts us—the town, the people—into halves and quarters and slices and slivers, 357—the largest town for miles—down to twenty, ten, five, one. We are one now: walking from empty home to empty home, standing in dusty living rooms and whispering memories aloud. We try to get every word right, fret over every "and" and "I" and "we" from each goodbye speech, practice every person's cadence and delivery until we're a veritable machine of impressions, a party trick with no audience. We are empty-swimming-pool sad, except we're drowning in the wavy mirage heat instead of real water. We are alone, and hyper-aware of it as we raid our neighbor's pantries, dig through their basements in search of their emergency kits' bottles of water, probably

leached through with carcinogens by this point. We didn't know we were capable of such core-crushing feelings. We didn't know how taxing, how overwhelming lack could be.

The cake drags us back to the baker—he's still alive, of course, basically chained to his counter and oven, but we don't—never did—count him in the 357. Outsider, some of us never stopped whispering, it's his fault this happened. But they were some of the first to go, the ones who left because they couldn't live without his cake, or at least that's what their notes said.

The cake is waiting for us on the counter when we—the one of us—get there, frosted and gleaming. He's washing the frosting knife in the sink, and we wince as all that water runs down the drain. "I got tired of waiting for you, so I went ahead and baked it." We blink at the cake—we waited as long as we could to make this visit, ten days, twelve, sixteen, until our face muscles are clenched and our jaw starts chewing reflexively. But now that we're here, we aren't sure. Is this what we want? We're the most whole we've ever felt, but now we're alone, too. No one to share our stockpiled memories with, no one to laugh at the exact way we can mimic our old elementary school principal. And it's all because of the cake. We blink a few tears away, and then the baker speaks up. "I should have known it would be you who outlasted all the rest—that nasty glint in your eyes the first time you had a piece. I saw the scheming in there right away."

The cake observes us. We are confused by this "you," the way he spits it out, the way it tastes in the air—harsh, singular. We are *we* after all, and we open our mouth to protest, but he cuts us off. "Here," he says, brandishing the knife—the frosting knife that's actually a butcher's knife, perfect for severing strands of animal fat or a human neck. "Just get it over with."

The cake gleams at us, or maybe glares, and we lose track for a moment, scrutinizing the perfect, even strokes of the black anise icing, the hefty log of almond paste filling—not imitation like the last eight or nine, we can tell by the slightest variation in color, since imitation is a darker, amber color—but we snap back. We've made a decision. "That's not why we're here," all our voices say, colliding and coalescing in our one remaining throat. "We are here to thank you."

The cake shines approvingly. "Thank me for what?" the baker asks. "My cake—it ruined you, turned you into a bunch of hollowed-out junkies. You killed for this cake, don't think I don't know that." We nod—of course we did, the *old* us. Why doesn't he understand we're different? His baking changed us.

"The cake—it watered our shriveled little hearts. So we wanted to say thank you before we go." We reach for the knife, which the baker has lain on the counter. "Go?" he asks. "You mean *you're* the one going?" We nod and lift the knife to our throat, prepare to make the fatal incision, just like we saw in those videos that we still watched in private mode, just in case. The blade will slide through our skin, smooth as butter, easy as pie. A piece of cake. The baker breathes a sigh of relief. He assesses the cake, running his finger along the edge and licking the almond paste off his finger. "Maybe I can repurpose some of this and make some letterbanket." We don't think he's talking to us anymore. "I'd hate to see this paste go to waste."

The cake catches our gaze—just the corner of our eye—as we begin to press the knife into our skin. We pause.

“The Bread and the Bird”

We suspend the bird above the oven, the place where it came from, in a cage built of wooden spoons and metal spatulas. As I drop the last scoop of flour—the brand with Aladdin on the front, his name in the curling, whooshing Arabic alphabet I can’t read—into the big silver mixing bowl, the pigeon warbles and burbles. I nod at it, to acknowledge I’ve heard, though that doesn’t stop the bird from singing. I open the oven door. The pita inside is perfect as usual, a flaky, browned piece of bread.

I tilt the loaf toward my father for his inspection. “Must-go,” he says, eyeing the pigeon. “I told you you weren’t using the rolling pin right. You have to *flick* your wrist, or you bunch the dough. And then it’s fucked.”

#

Even before the bird appeared, the bread had always been our biggest seller, but my father hadn’t been able to achieve consistency. His loaves were too often undercooked and floury. “It’s the oven’s fault,” he said. “We need a brick-and-fire one like they have in the desert. Not this trash electric shit.”

When the bird started helping us make loaves, perfect every time, word of mouth drew a winding line of people to the bakery every day. My father phased out everything else to make room for the demand: no more sheet cakes or doughnut holes, only the pita bread, the family recipe from Lebanon. The bird helped him churn it out with ease, cooing when the loaves were ready to leave the oven; he’d grab the loaf barehanded, hollering about the heat, before tossing in another. He was like a small factory all his own.

#

Habitual perfection has made my father pickier. The loaf I just pulled out is on the small side and not shaped properly, more a lumpy heart than the oval that has become our standard. “I thought the pigeon was never wrong,” he says. He doesn’t want to trust the bird’s judgment, though he doesn’t have much choice. When he made the bread himself, he was suspicious each time he heeded its song. But if he ignored it, even for a second, the bread was charred and smoking, flat and hard, more fired brick than pita. He wanted nothing to do with the bird; sometimes, he left the oven door open on purpose to roast the pigeon like a pig on a spit.

Unlike my father, I trust and rely on the pigeon. As I slide the last loaf of the morning’s fifth batch into the oven, it turns its head to me and clicks its beak. I don’t know if that’s a sign of something else. I only know how to interpret the cooing. I lose my grip on the door and it clangs shut. The bird startles and I shush at it. My father glares from my peripheral vision, leaning against the refrigerator for support.

He still runs the cash register at the store because he wants to be the face of the business, though his own is by turns bloated and ruddy or ashen and hollow. He is careful never to mention the pigeon to customers. “Do you want the health board to shut us the fuck down?” he screamed at me once, slapping his hand into my back after he caught me telling a customer about the magic bird that told us when our bread was done.

Now that customers line the sidewalk every day, I sometimes suggest a new logo, maybe something with the silhouette of a bird and a loaf of our pita, a tribute to the reason for our success, that we could emblazon on our bags and make ubiquitous online.

He only scoffs. “Yeah, because I want to give all the credit to that little feathered piece of shit.”

He watches from the corner as I work, silent as I set the must-go loaf on the counter to cool. I pour the condensed milk, can double-perforated—just like I’d been taught, to make it empty faster—into a puddle atop the mountain of flour. I break the cube of yeast with a fork, swirling it into the cup of lukewarm—piss-warm, in my father’s words—water, with a sprinkle of sugar. I imagine the yeast as a million hungry mouths, surging upward to consume.

He doesn’t start growling corrections until I begin to mix and knead. “You should have folded by now. Too late. Just flip it again.” I lift the mass of dough, fingers draped with sticky hunks—the air is humid, so I need to add more flour—and lose my grip. The dough falls back into the bowl, its silver metal ringing. The pigeon pecks at one of the metal spatula bars, beak pinging, a quiet echo of the bowl. My father cracks his knuckles. “Your damn bird.”

#

He always calls it my bird, like it’s my pet. What he means is he thinks it’s my fault the bird exists. When I was younger, he only allowed me to help with one part of the process: he’d grab at the tumescent bulge of dough from our giant silver bowl, tearing into it with the teeth of his serrated knife, then hand the lump over to me, where I’d tuck down the jagged edges into a smooth loaf, no cracks in the surface.

He grew sicker each year, his body swollen with fluid, heart too weak to pump. As I got older, I had to take on more as he could do less and less. The pigeon appeared the first time I was ever told to put a loaf in the oven. I laid it on the metal sheet my

father had purchased from a scrap dealer, flinching as the far left edge of the dough wrinkled, a sign the loaf would bake crooked, lumpy. After we turned our backs, we heard a banging, and when we opened the door, the bird flew out at us, wings tipped with fire, leaving an empty oven in its wake. The tiny flames that burned on its wingtips snuffed, plumes of smoke rising from its plumage. Its feathers were gray, with soot-black tips. Its neck shimmered iridescent green. Its legs were scaly and pink, skin ridged and bubbled like freshly-baked bread.

#

Now every step of the process is mine. He offers me no assistance, first feigning choice—"My mother let me bake my own loaves when I was nine. Why should you need any help at seventeen?"—and then being controlled by circumstance, since even bending down to remove a pita from the oven would leave his body racked with a coughing spell.

I sprinkle another cup of flour and work it in, smoothing it across the dough's surface before folding it in, the bleached white disappearing into the corpselike, fleshy mass. I try to peel off the gobs still stuck to my fingers, but it matches my skin tone so closely it's hard to tell where dough ends and I begin. My father's skin is darker, more like the finished product. I am only half-Lebanese, as he likes to say.

Before the pigeon, the only customers were neighbors, old women who babysat me or my father's classmates from high school. They all spoke in Arabic, throats catching as they spun conversation like gold while I stood in the corner, unable to understand. After, the customers came from all over, men with blonde hair and hairless chests, women in cowboy hats and aviators who only speak English. My father pretends that he

only speaks Arabic to scare them off. He wants to go back to only the old clientele, I think, the quiet effortlessness of baking their bread.

While I work, I can hear the ragged rising of my father's lungs and the rustling of the pigeon's feathers, though sometimes it's hard to separate one from the other. The clock says it's eight minutes to six—we open in an hour.

#

When the pigeon escaped our oven, I thought my father would grab it by the neck and twist until the bones cracked, but it moved too fast and perched atop the cabinets. My father's hands needed to grab something, so they wrapped around my neck instead and pushed my head toward the still-open oven door. My skin felt as though it would ripple and warp in the heat as I listened to him scream, demanding an explanation for how I snuck a pigeon into the oven. I did not answer, did not struggle, until it was over. By then, I had learned not to.

When he was done, he placed another loaf in and closed the door, staring at the bird over his shoulder, threatening to find a broom to beat the life out of it. The first time the pigeon cooed, still hiding above the corner cabinet, we didn't understand until it flew itself into the glass of the oven door. My father tried to grab the bird but it eluded him again; I opened the door and saw the loaf, nearly glistening in the oven's wavering heat.

#

The pigeon coos from its cage as I punch the dough, my knuckles trying to wake the yeast, to leave pockets of air so the loaves will be thick and fluffy and easy to separate. I move fast, since the window of perfection is short. I pull the last pita out. It's a good loaf, I can tell, but I still tilt toward my father for final approval.

He nods. I carry it to the cooling rack. “Grab that must-go,” he says. “I want a taste test.” I pick up the misshapen heart-shaped one, rend it in two. Though it has been cooling, steam still rises and swirls around my fingers. I hand him his piece. The muscles in my shoulders twinge as I tense up.

“What, no butter?” he asks, but all we have is garlic sauce and hummus, neither of which he wants. He sighs. Years ago, even this small thing would be reason enough for him to yell, to color the kitchen with inventive curses and the thudding of fists onto flat surfaces. I wait for him to inhale raggedly, to tighten his diaphragm, but it doesn’t happen. “What number loaf is that?” my father asks. “Thirty-nine?” He’s letting it pass. “I’ve lost track.”

I nod and nibble at my piece, making eye contact with the bird, who watches hungrily.

He takes a bite. “Mmm. Hot.” He sucks his breath in as he tosses the bread from hand to hand, heat pouring from his mouth as he chews. He swallows. “Are you skimping out on the salt again?” He shakes his head. “People like salty bread better. I know I’ve told you that before. Do you know how to listen?”

Perhaps it’s true our decades-loyal customers like it that way, but salt is out—some of our new customers complained about it, wishing we had a low-sodium variety, or maybe something gluten-free, though I won’t deign to change the recipe that far. Leaving out a few extra salt crystals is okay, though. Even my father’s doctor has tried to explain this to my father, pointing to his swollen ankles his feet barely able to squeeze inside the white leather boat shoes he only wears when he leaves the kitchen, which is almost never as we bake and bake and bake the loaves.

I don't look at him, only watch the pigeon from the corner of my eye. It shuffles along its perch, sharp little toes wrapped around the splintery wooden spoon handle—it will not be dislodged or moved. This kitchen and this cage are its home.

My father takes another bite and spits it out. "This tastes cheap." This is an accusation he's made before, that the bread is missing something, that we're skimping out, though I don't know on what—the love? The passion? His own sweat, dripping off his face into the dough as he mixed it? To me, my altered recipe doesn't taste better or worse, just exactly the same.

He walks to the oven and shakes the cage. "Is this your fault?" The bird flaps its wings and tries to fly toward the top, away from my father's hands, but the cage was built too small. There's no room for escape. My father rattles the cage harder. "No, it's not. It's his."

#

When I was young and the pigeon was new, sometimes I'd sneak into the kitchen at night to visit the bird. I cooed at it, trying to elicit a conversation, even if I didn't speak its language. Once, I even let it out of the cage, letting it stretch its wings, but that time, I got caught, my father cuffing me behind the ear. "We can't let this pigeon go," he said.

"But you hate it," I said. "You called it a fucker this morning."

He slapped my face, two fingers clipping the corner of my mouth. "Don't ever let it out again."

#

He lets go and grabs a saltshaker, crystals sprinkling down. "Much better," he says, mouth still full. After he swallows, a cough starts up, so heavy that he grasps the

counter for support. I can't decide if he's choking on the bread or if this is just a normal cough, and it makes him furious when I ask. "How the hell can I answer if I'm in the middle of coughing?" he said once.

He lumbers to the sink to spit up whatever phlegm or fluid or chunk of bread has worked its way out. In between gasps, he wheezes some words in Arabic, words I cannot understand, words he will not explain. I'm not even certain if they're swear words or pleading. I step closer, hands outstretched, then step back again.

#

"This bread is my life," he says each morning, laying the loaves out one-by-one, still warm, though he hasn't made the bread himself in three, almost four years. He holds out his fingers to show me the dark burns where his flesh kissed the insides of the oven too many times. Trying to keep up with the demand is destroying him, even just standing on his feet all day to watch me when he should be sitting.

#

I watch him for a few seconds more as he gurgles and gasps, breath hitching, knuckles white, before I toss the rest of my piece of bread into the cage. The pigeon falls upon it, beak sharp and ready to destroy, pecking out little holes and gnashing the bread, crumbs scattering along the floor of its cage. It's a violent display—I can sympathize.

I go back to the ball of dough, throwing my fists into it as hard as I can, while my father tries to catch his breath, no space in his lungs for air. Perhaps today I'll have to open the bakery, run the whole operation, all by myself.

“Fog”

I tried to read the street sign through the fog, just to double-check—Kaliningrad, it said, the “Avenue” obscured by a haze of undulating mist. “Turn left in three streets,” I said. My brother Wafiq counted the luminous clouds around the shrouded streetlamps aloud, then yanked the wheel sharply.

Our passenger woahed from the back, flashlight clunking to the floor of the vehicle. “Ouch! Dammit!” she shouted. It must have taken a detour onto her foot.

“Not so sudden next time,” I whispered. “Our reviews went down a quarter of a point last month, and you’ve been driving like a maniac.”

We passed another streetlamp and in the glow, like in a shadow play, we saw two men kiss and come apart. By the time we passed, there was only one man standing there, fumbling with a taxi flare.

“I should call the police,” the passenger said. “I mean, it’s disgusting I have to be afraid I’m going to bump into people like *that* hiding out here every time I try to walk down the street. This damn fog just makes it so easy for them. Makes me sick.” She paused. “You—you guys don’t pick *them* up, do you?”

“No. Well,” I said, “hard telling sometimes. They get sneaky about it.” My gaze drifted to Wafiq; I could see the sharp line of his jaw move as his teeth clenched. He ran his fingers through his tall, over-moussed pompadour, but didn’t speak. “We try not to, anyway.”

“Thank goodness for that,” she said. “My wife might kick me out if she thought I’d taken a ride in a fairy ferry.”

I knew how she felt. I was playing with my own wedding ring, thinking about which passengers I glossed over when I talked about my day.

"Uhh…" said Wafiq, voice rumbling like an engine that couldn't start. Something was building, some torrent.

"Don't tell me I hurt your *feelings* somehow," the woman said.

Wafiq tightened his grip and made a sudden right down an alley. I clutched the seat as I rolled my eyes: he'd taken another "accidental" wrong turn, something he loved to do to passengers he didn't like, a secret punishment for people who expressed sentiments like this woman's. Like always, I'd have to play along.

"I said *left*," I told him, loud enough for the passenger to hear.

"Oh, shit. Sorry, Sarah." He smiled at me without taking his eyes from the road.

"It's okay, it's fine, just turn left at the next street, and then left again, and then right, and we should be back on track."

But there was a car stopped, brake lights glowing like embers in the mist, presumably one in a line ahead of us, though visibility was so bad it was a struggle even to make out the license plate directly before us.

From the backseat, the passenger grumbled. "Sorry, but are we almost there? My meeting is supposed to start at two."

"There's a bit of a traffic jam," I said. "If we can inch up to the next road we should be able to avoid it." I turned to face her. She was trying to grab her flashlight without unbuckling the seatbelt, but she was an inch shy of reaching it. She flung herself back with a groan and the seatbelt locked in place. I reached for the flashlight and handed it to her. "Hopefully not more than an extra minute or two."

"What street are we on?" she demanded.

"Liberty," I said.

"So you expect me to believe we 'accidentally' turned onto the busiest thoroughfare in the city in the middle of lunch rush? I mean, seriously."

"I'm sorry?" I said.

She scoffed.

"It really was an accident—" I said.

"Jesus, lady, it's not like we're trying to scam you," said Wafiq.

"Oh, I bet. Assholes."

"Fuck off," said Wafiq. I turned to face him, neck stiff with anger, but he wouldn't catch my eye. He drummed his fingers against the wheel for a few seconds before speaking again. "Look, the traffic's moving." The car ahead of us released its brake lights and slowly disappeared again, sucked into the swirling abyss of low-hanging clouds.

"Nope, that's okay. Let me out," the woman said. "I'll fuck off, like you said, and just walk from here."

The car, which had just begun to slide forward, jerked to a stop and the woman slid her card through the meter. The little panel beeped as she entered a rating. The lock clicked open.

"Wish I could have given you zero stars." She exited the vehicle.

"You're still about three blocks away," I called after her, but she'd already slammed the door and stomped off in the wrong direction. The beam of her flashlight

blinked as she went, a pulsing strobe that bounced off the rusted-shut mailboxes and empty garbage cans along the sidewalk.

We rolled forward in the fog, my mind mapping the streets as we passed them.

"*She* probably didn't leave a tip, huh?" Wafiq said.

"Okay, can we talk about how you went down the wrong street?"

He grinned, the big, shit-eating kind. "It's not like you wouldn't have been able to steer us back on track. You're the best mapper in the city! It was one wrong turn."

"Yeah, down a one-way street that leads to a grid of one-way streets. It would have taken us…" I pause to calculate. "Fifteen extra turns."

"You said it was going to take three extra turns."

"I lied! I was trying to keep her from freaking out!"

"Not like she didn't have the money! Did you see that bag she had? $450, easy."

"Fiq," I said, slamming my head against the headrest. "That's not the point. How do you expect to stay in business pulling shit like this? I mean, customers are going to realize—"

"Are they, though? We could pull up and say 'oh, we're still ten minutes away,' then just go around the block a bunch of times, and none of our customers would ever know!"

He was right. People had been so dependent on their phones to get everywhere that when the fog settled in, everyone got tangled in its twisting tendrils. It's why every taxi driver needed a mapper like me, who memorized the layout of the city's roads, in the car with them at all times.

"But it only takes one person who *does* know the city, some geezer who remembers where things are, and you're fucked! They leave a bad review, tell everyone what happened, and suddenly our little review panel says 1.0 average rating. Then we're dead, no one gets in our cab. That woman caught on. She gave us one star!"

"All the cabs do it—everyone has shit reviews, everyone's onto the game, just like that lady said. It's not like we'll all be out of business. Everyone needs us." Wafiq toggled the turn signal up and down as he drove, perpetually not turning left.

"Who's to say they can't just become cab drivers themselves? Isn't that what we did?" I asked. "If we can't stay on top of the game, then we're out of the game."

"You make it sound like it will happen overnight. Getting a fog license is *hard*."

The west wall of my living was *still* covered in a giant city map, and I studied it after breakfast at least three times a week, tracing my fingers down streets, saying their names aloud as I went. Wafiq had to take a driving test every three months to make sure he practiced proper safety protocols.

"But it doesn't have to happen overnight. It just has to happen. And then we're fucked." I'd had the last word, as usual, though I never knew if it was because I'd convinced him or because he just wanted me to shut up. We drove a few blocks, gliding to a stop now and again as a car emerged from a street corner. After we'd passed the fifth flare, red, burning so hot that the fog around it evaporated, I spoke up.

"Hey, dumbass. Are you paying attention at all? You just missed a ton of customers." Before the fog had set in, taxis could just get pickup requests pinged on their phones, but the roiling blankets of moisture confused the GPS signals, refracted the beams of radiation in a hundred different directions with no rainbows to speak of.

"Oh." He pressed the brake and the car rolled to a stop along the curb. It was a purple flare—the cheapest were red, but some people showed their money with other colors. They thought, I supposed, we'd be more likely to stop, but they never tipped us any better. This flare was just the first one Wafiq didn't pass.

The door opened and a younger guy got in, dressed like a tech exec, with a satchel instead of a briefcase and neon blue sneakers. He had a beard, neat and trimmed, and a company logo had been lasered into his hair—I hoped it was the company he worked for, and not some sort of advertising deal he'd signed for quick cash.

"I need to go to Laurel Fountain." He coughed out the last two words, trying to hide them, and switched his flashlight off.

My insides squirmed. Now was my chance to say "no," to tell him we didn't do drives that way, but Wafiq answered first. I crossed my legs, foot thumping against the glove compartment.

"For sure! Sarah? Lead the way."

The door locked before I had a chance to say something—he was officially a passenger. We were complicit now. "Okay. Um…turn left in four streets."

Wafiq adjusted the mirror a bit, an excuse to check out the tech exec.

"How long will it be, d'you think?"

"Uh…maybe twenty minutes? Twenty-five?" I said.

He nodded. "Okay. Yeah, that should work. Where's the flashlight holder back here, by the way?" he asked, brandishing his—it was heavy, made of iron, I guessed.

"Oh. We don't have one, I'm afraid," I told him.

"No worries. I'll just hold it. I usually forget it in the holder anyway." He pulled a cross-stitched throw pillow from his satchel and laid out across the back seat, pillow beneath his head. It squeaked against the leather as he tried to get comfortable. He held on to the flashlight with his left hand.

I drew the map of the city in my mind: we had just passed Rue Verité and the fountain was on Rue Verre, which was nearly forty blocks away, through three roundabouts and across a bridge. The bridge, in fact, used to be the old hotspot, but the police caught on and lurked there day and night, pressed up against the mossy arch, waiting. So everything had moved to the fountain, just like it had moved from the abandoned post office and the gazebo at the park before that.

"Turn right at the next street," I said.

Wafiq took it slowly, the wheel spinning lazily in his grip. I could tell he was interested in our passenger by the number of times his eyes flitted to the reflection in the rearview. I caught his gaze and shook my head—*No.*

"Do you, uh…" Wafiq said. "Do you visit the fountain often?"

The tech exec did not respond.

"We've had a lot of passengers headed there lately. Seems like a weird place to take a lunch break. All that fog's enough to make a sandwich soggy." This was one of Wafiq's games, to pretend he didn't understand what Laurel Fountain was, why people would go there, but I knew he had been there himself, had haunted it and ten, twenty other locations.

But the passenger did not answer. Wafiq spoke again. "Hey, you look familiar."

The tech exec shook his head. "Sorry."

"I swear I know you. Maybe you're a passenger we've had before."

"No, probably not."

"Hmm. No, there's definitely—something about your beard, maybe. Hard to forget a beard like that. So thick and scratchy."

I coughed as hard as I could, an interruption, a warning. "Left turn in two streets, then a right, then a left three streets after that."

"You sound like you know your way around beards," the tech exec said.

Wafiq laughed and made the left turn. The wheel grazed the curb. "Just as well as you do, I'm sure."

The tech exec turned to face the front of the car, pillow squealing with his movements. "I don't know what you mean."

Wafiq laughed again. "Oh, c'mon. You must have recognized me by now."

The passenger shook his head. "No."

"Right turn here," I whispered. I uncrossed my legs and drew them up onto the seat, the way I used to sit when I was a teenager.

"I told you three times," he continued, "I have no idea who you are. I'm sure you have no idea who I am, either."

"And left in three," I said.

Wafiq bounced his left leg, the material of his tracksuit susurrating against the door. "Oh. I was sure I recognized you." He was, I noticed, practicing his anger breathing, but he had shifted forward in his seat and white-knuckled the wheel. Road rage mode.

"Look, I'm sure you guys stopped to pick me up because my flare was purple. I get it. You think if you're extra friendly, I'll be tricked into giving you a bigger tip. But I'm not flattered by you telling me you like my beard. I'm fucking creeped out. I'd rather you just stop talking to me the rest of the drive. How's that? I'll even pay double fare. Is that fair?"

Wafiq's features petrified. "Sorry, sir," I said. "Yes, that will be fine."

"How far away are we now?" he asked.

"Still…" I continued mapping our trajectory—Calle Catorce was closed for construction, the whole street lit up with giant heat lamps so the workers could see, so we'd need Avenida Once de Junio, which was out of our way. "Probably still twenty minutes."

I heard a rustling from the back seat as the tech exec rolled onto his opposite side, away from us.

"Turn left here," I said. "Park Boulevard."

We turned, but before I could give the next direction we were already trundling down a side street, and then another, zigzagging through some one-ways. I punched Wafiq's thigh and mouthed "What the fuck?" He didn't even look over, so I closed my eyes, visualizing my big wall map, imagined my fingers tracing the interlocking grids of streets, desperately trying to keep up with his turns. Left on Zadie meant we were on…Seoul Street? Rua Augusta?

"Go right here—no, left," I mumbled, but he kept going straight. I was fairly certain this road was one way in the wrong direction. I clenched my fists and opened my

eyes, convinced I'd see headlights shining through the fog at us as another car barreled down the road, but Wafiq took a sharp left.

I heard the passenger's satchel slide to the ground, but he only grumbled in response.

Wafiq pressed down the gas pedal. We were going well above the fifteen mile-per-hour speed limit, and it had been so long since I'd been in a vehicle moving that fast that my eyes couldn't focus on the street signs as we passed them, streaks of green and white flashing past my eyes. In the halo of a halogen lamp, I saw a sign for Otome Street, a street I'd never even heard of. What neighborhood was this? What streets had we taken? Wafiq had gone too fast.

I was lost.

"We're here," Wafiq said, though we certainly weren't. He'd pulled into a giant parking lot, one that had had its street lamps gutted for use elsewhere. All we could see was what our headlights illuminated ahead of us: nothing. And then Wafiq switched them off, and we were in darkness.

"Finally," the passenger said, sitting up.

"No, we aren't here," I said. "We're nowhere. Where did you take us?"

"I brought Darryl to the grocery store. Where we used to meet."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the passenger—Darryl, apparently—said.

"So you're not Darryl, the owner of a tech startup, the one whose logo you got shaved into the side of your fucking head? Darryl, who I used to suck off Wednesday

nights for two months, three months?" Wafiq turned the interior lights of the car on and turned to look at him.

"Wafiq," I said. "Stop."

"I have no idea what you're talking about—" Darryl flinched under the lights, moving the pillow to cover his eyes, or perhaps his face.

"Oh, quit it, for Chrissake. I used to bury my face in that beard while you had me pressed up against the door of this fucking car."

The passenger didn't respond.

"Sir, I'm sorry," I said. "We'll take you to Laurel Fountain—"

"And I get it, we have to keep it secret—I keep everyone's secrets and they keep mine, but we're safe right now, we don't have to pretend," Wafiq said. He undid his belt and twisted, grabbing the pillow and throwing it so he could see Darryl's face.

Darryl sat up and leaned forward like a backseat driver, his head poking between our seats. "Except your fucking mapper is *right* there. You fucking used my name, asshole—"

Wafiq's spittle flew into Darryl's beard as he talked. "But you don't just get to ignore me or forget me, not after all the shit we did, the near-miss we had with the cops where we had to pretend I misunderstood which grocery store you meant, that I had no idea this place had been converted, 'corrupted—'"

"Why do you think I should remember your face, or any face? You're one of thirty, or forty, or a million. It's anonymity, it's obscurity, it's a merry-go-round of rushing bodies. That's how it is for us now. For all of us."

I squinted: in the distance, drawing near, were the super-bright lights of a police car, blinking red and blue lights sweeping the lot for lovers.

"Guys, there's a car over there—" I pointed, hoping they'd break off their arguing and pay attention.

"It's fine," Wafiq said. "This parking lot is huge. Usually takes a full hour for them to sweep. If they head this way, I can be out of here before they find us."

"That's what you said the last time we met up here," Darryl said. "The time they found us. Drive."

"So you do remember me!" Wafiq clicked the lights off and turned back into his seat.

"No. I remember being caught. I always remember being caught. How much I want to stop doing this every time I'm caught, how my teeth feel like they're going to melt as I struggle through a lie or ten lies to get the police to leave. I don't remember *you*. I remember being here, and I remember wanting to leave."

"Oh, bullshit!" Wafiq said. He slammed his fists into the steering wheel, or tried to: his left hand missed the wheel completely, hitting instead the dimmer switch. The lever shifted forward and the high beams glared into existence. "Fuck."

In the fog, of course, bright lights were ineffective—the way they shined straight out, fiery and intense, wasn't compatible with all the moisture in the air. It was like looking right into the beam of a flashlight, or taking a picture in the mirror with the flash on, a blinding radiance.

And it was the signal taxi drivers were supposed to use when they took passengers to these meeting points, the fountain and the grocery store parking lot and the old gazebo.

A lighthouse beacon guiding the police to us, to our illicit, illegal men. We weren't supposed to drive them to these secret places, except to turn them in. Some of us ignored the rules out of protest, furious with the ban. Most of us paid no heed because the money was money, regardless of destination or intent.

But Wafiq had done it, by mistake, with a police car less than five hundred feet away.

"You stupid shit," Darryl whispered.

Wisps of fog twisted and snaked around the front of the vehicle as the cruiser approached.

"Fuck," he moaned. I could hear the water in his eyes.

He released a tumult of excuses as they dragged him from the car, fingers clutching the seatbelt and the door as they pulled him out. He howled, accusing us of setting him up, throwing out Wafiq's name again and again. I saw Wafiq open his mouth, to defend himself or maybe the passenger, but he didn't speak so I never found out which one. I swear I heard Darryl's head crack against the pavement as he struggled, but maybe it was just the sound of a Billy club trying to knock the air from his lungs. I didn't look.

"Thanks," said one of the officers after they'd locked Darryl in the car. "We'll fry all this nasty shit out of him."

Wafiq, normally so tan, was pale. I nodded silently. The officer tapped the hood of our SUV and walked off. I turned to look in the back of the vehicle: Darryl's flashlight rested on the hump of the middle seat. I undid my belt and reached for it.

"Here," I said, dropping it in Wafiq's lap.

He jerked forward with the pain but did not cry out.

“Do you think they’ll take our taxi away?” I asked. The officer had written down our license plate before he left.

“No. I’m sure we’re on some sort of hero registry now. We’re protecting the country or something,” Wafiq said. His voice sounded like glass in a rock tumbler, from the pain of the solid metal flashlight crushing his lap or from fear, or both.

“But he kept screaming that you were one of them, too—he outed you right in front of the cops.”

“Don’t you think you’d say anything in the world to stop them from taking you, or to stop them from taking you alone? They probably won’t believe him.”

“But you didn’t even say anything. They have your name, they have our plates. You didn’t even try—”

His voice had solidified. “I didn’t hear you trying to defend me, either.”

“What was I supposed to say?”

The conversation died, so I started it up again.

“Besides, what did they say they were going to do, shock him? That—that’s not *that* bad. He’ll be…fine.”

“I don’t think you understand what shock therapy is. Or that it’s not all they do.”

“Oh.”

Wafiq yanked the gearshift into drive.

“Do—do you know where you’re going?” I asked as he exited the parking lot, turning left. “I—I don’t know where we are.”

Wafiq swallowed hard, and his voice came out much brighter and fuller. “I do, remember? I used to come here all the time.”

"And you know how to get back?"

"From here to Laurel Fountain? The route is basically tattooed on my insides."

I squirmed and adjusted the vents so they blew their warm air away from me. "Do you really think going to Laurel Fountain is a good idea after…all of this?"

"Can you—can you just let me pretend things are fine?" He tapped a fingernail against the digital clock. "It's almost the end of lunch hour. Probably a passenger or two trying to get back to work. Maybe we can get a carpool or something, make double cash."

"I just don't know if that's a good idea, Wafiq."

"Why? If I flirt well, we could get a bigger tip—"

"You mean like how you tried to flirt with Darryl? No. I think maybe it's time we—maybe we should get serious about not picking up passengers like that."

He was silent.

"I mean, okay. I just—we've been doing really well with this taxi thing. A lot better than we did as musicians or seamstresses. I've always stuck by you, taken care of you, worked job after job with you, left when you did—when you get fired—for being so damn angry. I am—*we* are—comfortable. And I want to stay comfortable. But you keep fucking that up. Taking extra turns—"

"Everyone does that!" He eased his foot onto the brake and we slowed down, turning through a roundabout.

"I don't care if everyone does that!" I screamed. "You know what our review average is? 2.7. That's almost 50%. That's trash. Total fucking garbage. No one's going to get in our car if we keep our ratings that low—it's on a sign right on the fucking side of the car! On *my* door! Not to mention you insist on ferrying people to and from their

liaisons at Laurel fucking Fountain—it feels like you're doing everything you can to get us shut down."

He sped up again as we exited the traffic circle. "Sarah, I can't just let my fellow—"

"I know," I whined. "You want to help your 'friends' out. I get it, I really do, okay? And so I'm quiet about it, I let you do it, I never complain, I don't stop you, right? But, Jesus, we just got some guy arrested because *you* had a temper tantrum that he didn't remember you."

"We were *intimate*—"

"And to him, that clearly means nothing." I almost told him to turn left before I remembered I didn't know where we were. The streets had started to sound familiar but I was still shaken, my mental map foggy.

"But shouldn't it? Is it—is it too much to ask that I not be shut out and erased even by the people whose dicks I've sucked?" He took a right so fast that he had to clutch Darryl's flashlight to keep it from falling from his lap.

I let the question die. It wasn't one I had an answer for. It wasn't the problem I wanted to address. "We could be for real with this job, for maybe the first time ever. Not lip-syncing to some dead singer and taking the credit, not hot-gluing clothes together since we don't actually know how to sew, not fucking taking fifteen extra minutes to get someone somewhere so they pay twice the actual fare. I took months and months to learn these maps, to remember every intersection, so we could be legitimate—"

"And yet, you're the one who's lost right now." He put his signal on and made a right. "But I'm not."

"We're done, okay? We're done going to Laurel Fountain, we're done picking people up who are going there or coming back from there, or if we're not done then we're turning them in, and I don't want to do that either, so we're just *done*."

But even as I said it we were approaching Laurel Fountain, the neon lights of all the shops burning red and pink and green and blue. They were the only lights that didn't go smudgy in the fog, the letters clear and bold—Hunt & Gather, Exquisites, Bilman's, all announcing themselves. If we went through the last roundabout, we'd be taken off the main road to where the fountain was.

Wafiq didn't even slow as we hit the traffic circle, going almost all the way around and turning down Rue Verre. He really did know this route by heart. We were three blocks away, flares dotting both sides of the street—no one was stupid enough to light a flare *at* the fountain, so they scattered across a few blocks, waiting for pickup, but we passed them all.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "Why are we here?"

The fountain, too, had no streetlights around it—why light up a fountain that didn't run?

I squinted. "Are you supposed to meet someone here? A prescheduled pickup you didn't tell me about? You come here to fuck the guilt away?" I played with the window switch; the window rolled down a millimeter and fog snuck in, little tongues and fingers of it. I rolled the window back up and waved my hand to disperse the fog.

"So what if I did?"

"How does that fix anything? You're just putting yourself in more danger. I mean, I understand you're upset, because you're always upset, have *always* been upset—"

"Don't you think you'd be upset if this is how you had to live?" he asked. He grabbed at my wedding ring, and reflexively I clenched my fist so it wouldn't slide off. "You got to keep what you had. You get to have a *wife*. They didn't make you illegal." He tightened his grip and I winced.

"They almost did," I said. "It was close."

"But they didn't." He let my hand go. "You know how many of the guys I meet I see again? Almost none. They get caught. They get shocked. And whatever else. And they don't come back. And you get to go home and live a normal—"

"*Mostly* normal," I corrected. There were still plenty of people who wanted to make us illegal, too—I found a sign taped to our door last month, "dykes not welcome"—and maybe they would one day.

"It doesn't matter. I fucked up. I destroyed someone because I got angry."

I massaged my fingers—I was sure a bruise would bloom from how tightly Wafiq had squeezed them. When I looked up, he was crying. I softened. "It's not *just* your fault, what happened today. You didn't make him guilty. That's something he—that's something he chose."

He wiped at his face. "I did bad things today, but liking men isn't one of them. That doesn't make him guilty. It doesn't make me guilty. What part of you isn't on board with that?"

"You know I support—"

"You used to support," Wafiq said. He picked the flashlight up and pointed it at me. "Before it was illegal. Today alone, you've tried to undermine everything I do to help

my brothers-in-arms. You said it was just another problem, another roadblock to your stability. You told me I was guilty for *existing*."

"That's not what I—" I started, but fell silent. It *was* what I'd meant. When the law that became the ban bounced around the legislature, I even thought of myself as guilty, listening to testimonies of perversion and corruption for days on end.

"I'm sorry," he said. He undid his belt and opened the door. The interior lights clicked on and the car dinged. He juggled the flashlight from hand to hand.

"What are you doing?"

"Being guilty. Getting out of your way."

"No—" I said, but it wasn't in earnest, and he could tell.

He took my hand again—gentler this time—and guided it to the switch that controlled the bright lights. "Just flick these on and let them find me."

He exited the vehicle, slamming the door behind him and walked deeper and deeper into the writhing curls of fog. Darryl's flashlight strobed and pulsed, illuminating Wafiq like a stop-motion film with frames missing. He stumbled onto a throng of men, naked bodies entwined, and they dispersed quickly, limbs flickering in and out of view before disappearing completely. He did not pursue them, only took their place, and turned the beam up at himself like a spotlight.

I waited, keeping time with the blinking of his flashlight by tapping my hand lightly against the controls, gold ring clacking against the black plastic.

"The Four Seasons"

I. Silent Spring

"I don't think I want to plant a garden this year," my mother said. "Too much work—I don't know how Dad did it those last two years. Let's just seed it with grass."

I groaned. "Can't we put something useful there instead?"

So we bought packets of wildflowers at the local greenhouse, plus lilac and fennel and coneflowers from the farmer's market. "Plant these for the bees!" the vendor said. "They need things to pollenate if we want to keep them around." She buzzed and wiggled.

My mother just scattered them into the pots that lined our back porch, but I sowed my seeds with a ruler—twelve inches apart, two inches deep, just like the packaging said. I think we planted them too late, though; they didn't rise from the dirt until late July, orange and red blooms sprouting up ridged like petticoats, pink and purple blossoms unfurling like skirts.

They bobbed and bent on their stems in the wind, but no bees came.

II. Clay Castle

My dad had the back of our house ripped off so he could build a new kitchen with a matching basement. The construction people scooped out the earth and dumped it in our yard. It was mostly clay, brown and red like blood pooling and drying, with scraps of old trash—chunks of old china and the remnants of a marble fireplace—and bits of the house

mixed in. The other neighborhood kids helped me carve the mountain into a castle, steps and a throne room to play pretend in.

We'd wait for the rain to soften the surface, run to the hill with our plastic shovels to scrape out stairs before the sun baked on its seal. "Can I help?" asked of the neighbor boys, and I handed him a trowel. He slipped on the slick clay trying to dislodge a sharp stone, and the side of the blade sliced the step he'd been making.

"I cast you from the tower!" I said, shoving his shoulders so he lost his balance—I was the king, after all, and this was my castle. He fell—it wasn't far, maybe two feet—only narrowly avoiding impalement on a near-rotted board with the rusty nails sticking out.

III. Fragility

"Can't you go help her rake?" his father asked. They stared out the window at her, scraping leaves into tiny piles, which snapped into small yellow and orange fragments like refracted sunlight under the red plastic prongs.

"You know I can't." He shook his inhaler, squeezed out two puffs. "I'm sure she understands." He drew a breath in, wet and rustling. "It does suck that she has to go to work tomorrow, too."

His father shook his head as he switched batteries for his mechanical heart, which could be heard whirring with one's ear was pressed against his chest. "It's just not right." Agitated, he picked at the corner of the bandage she had changed an hour before. "We should be the ones out there doing that stuff, not trapped in here."

Across the street, their neighbor slid chocolates into his mouth, staring out the window, neck ensconced in a brace, watching his daughter cut the grass, leaves whirling around her in a storm of dead, crisp shards.

IV. Sacred Heart Hill

Inflatable sleds went at least twice as fast, he was certain—triple if his dad pushed him at a running start. The air burned his face, but he refused to wear the ski mask, since snow got stuck in the mouth hole, which burned worse.

"When I used to come here as a kid, there was an iron fence at the bottom, until some kid smacked into it and broke both legs," his father said.

He flinched and his legs tingled as he imagined the impact, the snapping of bone. "What's down there now?" He squinted into the distance, but the hill was so long and the night so dark he couldn't make out the end. Perhaps it stretched on forever, except he could hear the occasional car gliding over the ice, rubber on slick pavement, on the road that punctuated the hill.

"Nothing's down there, I don't think."

"But won't I go into the street?"

"Nah. You'll slow down by the time you get down to the end of the hill. You ready? Legs up!"

He laid himself stomach-down on the sled and raised his legs. His dad's footsteps crunched in the snow as he rushed forward. He gripped the plastic handles as his dad's hands connected with his ankles.

The sled blazed down the hill, the tears in his eyes freezing into streaky icicles. He hit a bump—a ramp some other kid had built, packing the snow into a camel hump—and the sled spun, a sharp spiral, until he was facing backward, staring up at the top of the hill, racing toward the maw of the street below.

IV. Accelerated Ice Age

Everything shimmered with heat, all the parking lots and skyscrapers rippling and wavering, until the earth panicked and set off a new ice age. Our windows constellated with tendrils of ice and our roofs buckled under heavy curtains of ice that hung over our back patios. We burned the Adirondack chairs we kept out there since we'd never need them again.

"See?" The politicians crowed. "Just like we said! No climate change, just a standard pattern of warming and cooling." But they were old and had wanted for nothing before the ice age set in, so they were the first to go, their bodies unprepared for the brutality of even the slightest breeze. They died of exposure, lips blackened with frostbite.

III. Windswept

They abandoned the plains when Tornado Alley widened into Tornado Six-Lane-Highway, grasses growing tall as buildings shrank, upper stories sheared off by passing cyclones until they were nothing but foundations and basements, gaping maws reaching out of the ground. From above, it looked like an abandoned beehive, each building an empty honeycomb.

The people who stayed behind moved underground, old nuclear bunkers with rusty hinges the new luxury townhouses. They were amazed with how boring even tornadoes became when they were part of the daily routine. They laid in their bathtubs with mattresses in place above them, waiting for the roar overhead to pass like airplanes in the night.

II. Clean Air Act

They finally cleaned up the air—removed every extraneous toxin, every particulate of pollution—and we all thought it was safe to breathe, to finally take off the government-issue gas masks. No one factored in evolution, though—we'd spent generations building a tolerance to the thick, choking ether around us. When we sucked in this new air, it scorched our lungs, our alveoli withering. The trees, meanwhile, sprouted new branches with emerald, rustling leaves anew.

The government formed a task force, a focus group, and panel to debate solutions; ecoterrorists threatened to burn warehouses of asbestos to taint the air, hackers threatened to hit launch on the nuclear bombs to render everything radioactive, and long-retired hair-metal singers emptied their dozens of rusted cans of hairspray in protest.

"Try smoking," they finally proposed. And then there was a run on convenience stores, on gas stations, on hookah lounges, as we rushed to fill our lungs with smoke, to coat our insides with tar to take the sharp edge off the clean air that crackled all around us. The tobacco manufacturers couldn't keep up with demand, since the regulations on them had grown so tight that they were only legally allowed to produce a fraction of what they used to.

Nobody noticed that the scientist whose research proved smoking was the solution was on the payroll for two different tobacco companies, whose coffers were one last tiny hemorrhage away from empty.

I. Flakes

Christo craved winter ever year: the swirling snow, his breath crystallizing in front of him. “It just doesn’t get cold enough,” the weatherman had told him. “Global warming, man. Would you please stop messaging me?” No one understood how he missed the way his skin felt in the cold, like burnished copper, sleek and glowing as his warmth surged through his pores to keep him alive. When the volcano two towns over erupted, ground rumbling, buildings shaking, the sky dark with smoke, he ran outside without a shirt to let the flakes fall on him, hot gray ash that stung and made his skin bubble—it was almost the same as snow.

"When All the Ketchup Turned to Water"

When all the ketchup turned to water, Peri thought the plant would close down. But it didn't: they actually put out a notice that they needed thirty more people to work. The hiring was a show of force, Peri figured. The opposite of a scare tactic. I'm still safe, she thought, when she heard. She checked and double-checked the little appointment card she'd been given by the plant's dentist—two more weeks. Hopefully the plant would stay open two more weeks. Or two hundred more weeks.

So have you gotten tired of this yet? said Celisse, her roommate and neighbor on the line.

For a brief, shining moment, Peri was a viscologist, making sure all the ketchup was the same, perfect consistency, so she was qualified to make such an assessment. But she had been demoted back to the assembly line. Now she screwed on lids.

Peri looked around to make sure Jessa, the foreman, wasn't around before she nodded.

Must suck compared to what you used to do, said Celisse. She yawned. So boring in here.

Before the ketchup was passed into the bottling room, and then the labeling room, and then the capping room, where she'd been sent, the viscologists stole away tiny dollops of red from the batches and subjected them to viscometers and gravity. They agitated each blob with a toothpick, checking to see if it wiggled the right way, if the sharp wood could slide easily into the gelatinous membrane.

That was the secret to a good ketchup, that it should be almost as solid as a jelly, thick and smooth so it could be scooped up by a French fry with ease, so the excess could drop off and splat on re-entry. The bottle engineers had designed the container to work with their perfect-viscosity substance, not whatever they were putting in there now.

Celisse reached out to put a cap on the next bottle coming down the belt and knocked it on its side, water glugging onto the floor. Shit, she said. In trying to pick it up, she lost her grip and the bottle fell to the ground.

Peri shook her head. That was the fourth bottle Celisse had dropped in less than two hours. She was about to yell at Celisse for being so clumsy—she dropped bottles every day, so Peri had started to suspect it was one of her tiny acts of defiance—when she saw Jessa speedwalking to Celisse's side. Peri inhaled and held her reprimand in, flinching at the pain—there were definitely two cavities growing in her mouth now, she could tell from the double eruptions of sensitivity when she sucked in like that.

Everything okay over here? You've been awfully droppy today.

Celisse grinned in apology. Must just be tired, she said.

Then I suggest you get more sleep.

For a tense moment, Peri thought Celisse might do something fiery: crack a rude joke, disagree, maybe even spit in Jessa's face, but she nodded and apologized. Peri was disappointed.

Some resistance leader you are, she whispered once the foreman had walked off. Just two nights before, Peri had watched Celisse make posters urging everyone to dismantle their oppressors; when she left to hang them in the bathroom, Peri's guts churned and her limbs buzzed electric.

Not the right time, Celisse said. You have to plan things carefully.

The belt came to a halt. Quarter to seven, so they were done screwing on lids and had fifteen minutes to clean up. The puddle from Celisse's most recent bottle had inched across the grooves of tile and cracked beige grout.

Peri bent down to pick up the bottle, and as she rose, she said, Do you ever get scared they'll shut us down? Every time that belt turns off, I wonder if that's the last time we'll see it run. I just don't understand how they can keep going if this is what they're selling. She tapped the tips of her toes in the water. It rippled.

Celisse sloshed the mop through the spill. Fuck 'em. Who cares if they close?

So, what, we don't have jobs? I know you hate it here, but—

Celisse shrugged. At least we'd be free of our contracts. Of the debt they use to keep us employed.

You think our debt would just dissolve? Peri asked. She imagined the money she owed the plant crumbling like the powder the dentist mixed into the water to numb her gums before a filling. When employees signed up with the plant, they got a signing bonus that covered a quarter of their room and meals premium. Almost everyone here still owed half their total, even after almost five years on the job, and no one could leave until their debt was paid off.

Who knows, Celisse said. But we could find something. Someplace that pays real money.

This was one of the jokes among the workers, that the money wasn't real because every penny they made was funneled back to the plant somehow. Plant dollars, some people called them, which made Peri think of money made from seaweed.

Or, like, continued Celisse, we could farm. Quit the plant life. Start a commune right here on the land, grow our own tomatoes.

Peri imagined a sea of tomato plants with their prickly white hairs and the smell of manure drying in the pink morning sun. Things could never be like that.

Not that the ground is probably even good for growing anymore, Celisse said, before Peri could. I wouldn't be surprised if they've been pumping the soil full of all kinds of shit. Benzo[*a*]pyrenes and naphthalenes and stuff. Still. It's nice to dream.

I guess you're right, Peri said. She let the statement disperse in the air like a radon leak.

Me? Right? Peri, you must have lost your damn mind, or else I'm rubbing off on you.

You aren't stupid, I mean, said Peri. I wasn't sure at first, but you aren't dumb like everyone else. It seems like it's mostly the stupid ones who get obsessed with leaving this job, or sticking it to the man, or whatever. But you're pretty smart, I think.

Celisse laughed. Thanks, I guess. Tell me, do the workers up there have fantasies about destroying the plant, too? She looked toward the ceiling.

Peri didn't correct her when she said it like that, up there: everyone on the belt believed that promotion meant upward in the building, but the viscosity lab was actually on the same floor. It had to be for the manufacturing line model to work. Upstairs was just corporate offices—it's where she'd had to go for the interview.

She didn't *want* to correct her, because every piece of knowledge she had was a souvenir from her three months in the labs with the maroon plastic chair and the white Formica counters with the sleek gray plastic edging where the air smelled more tomato-

and-vinegar than it did on the belt. Here, the air smelled like oil and rust and sweat. She sucked in again to feel the air breeze through the holes in her teeth and she mourned the loss of her upgraded dental plan.

These clowns, Celisse said. They're scared of us. Why do you think we work seven to seven? Burn us out, keep us from talking.

Talking about what? asked a passing coworker.

Peri could never remember his name. Her heart pounded.

Just girl stuff, Celisse said. How expensive tampons are in the store.

He nodded. My girlfriend said her feminine products have probably added another two years to her contract. He shook his head. Fuckin' stupid.

Who's your girlfriend? Celisse asked.

He pointed to someone, Genevieve, Peri thought her name was.

Tell her she can always stop by our room sometime if she needs to bitch, said Celisse.

He nodded and walked away, pushing a bucket of dirty mop water with him. Peri's heart sank again—she wanted to see Celisse charm someone into her way of thinking the way she'd been charmed herself. She wanted to see it in action, to make sure she wasn't being foolish.

See? Celisse said. Just stirring the pot. Getting everyone fired up. She winked.

#

After all the ketchup turned to water, they moved Peri back into a two-person room. There wasn't even a waiting period: the day she got demoted, they moved her.

Your salary on the belt just isn't big enough to support the kind of luxury your viscology job provided, the woman from housing told her. The increased monthly payment had been balanced out by her wage hike, which meant her net gain was zero.

Luxury was maybe not the right word for it—the one-person rooms were small, not even half the size of the two-persons, with only a bed and a two-drawer dresser. The privacy had been nice, but it was not luxury like, say, the executive mansions on the plant land's far corner, of which Peri had only heard tell. So they shipped her back to the hallway whence she'd come—she wasn't sure if it was the tears in her eyes, but the lights even seemed dimmer here.

She tried to unlock the door to her new room and her bag fell off her shoulder. She caught it with her elbow, her frame rocking. It was so heavy, mostly full of toiletries, which were far costlier than clothes; she could have purchased four new sets of overalls, cheap and efficient, for the price the plant store charged for one bar of soap. Peri had made her choice—she'd much rather feel clean in plain clothes than dirty in fancy ones, especially since what passed for fancy at the plant was hideous floral patterns that looked like roadkill smeared across the pavement.

Hi, said the woman inside the room. Celisse McAlpin. She had been sitting at the desk—Peri did not understand why they put a desk, but just one, inside these two-person rooms—scribbling on some paper, but when Peri came in, she shoved them under her pillow and stood with her arms spread wide. I'm a hugger, she said. Sorry!

She grinned. Her teeth were a crooked mess, the bottom incisors and canines occluded, twisted and wrapped around each other like tomato vines clinging to cages. But

they were healthy, brilliant white with no signs of cracks or pitting or gum recession. No cavities. Peri closed her own mouth, embarrassed.

Celisse wrapped herself around Peri, bag and all, squeezed tight, and stepped back.

Not a hugger, I take it. That's okay. I'm cool with everyone except gassy people. You aren't gassy, are you?

Peri shook her head but her gaze was focused on Celisse's pillow and the papers peeking out underneath.

I just hope we don't get sick of each other too fast. Line buddies *and* bunk buddies, said Celisse.

Peri nodded, then said What did you just stuff under your pillow?

What? Celisse twirled her hair.

The papers you just hid.

Don't be so nosy! She laughed, but it was fake.

You just asked me if I'm gassy. I'm allowed to be nosy back.

They stared at each other until Celisse blinked and looked down. It's just porn. Is that what you wanted to hear? You caught me with my wild, crazy, dirty porno collection. Women fellating condiment bottles. *So* hot.

No, said Peri. They weren't pictures.

Celisse sighed. It's my diary, okay?

You keep a diary?

Always have. Lots of juicy stuff in the older volumes, but those are still buried under the floorboards at my parents' house. Assuming they haven't sold it and moved. Haven't talked to them in a while.

Peri nodded. Phone calls to people outside the plant cost eight dollars a minute. Fifteen minutes of nattering and chattering would be almost a day's wage, and money was already tight enough. She felt bad not calling her mother for an update on her breast cancer (it had popped up in the other breast six months into remission) but she needed to chip at her plant debts, too.

Anyway, s'cuse me a sec. Need to take a leak. Celisse stepped out of the room.

Peri set her bag on the bed and waited a few seconds—when she was sure Celisse was gone, she fished the papers out from under her pillow. No way it was just a diary. Maybe she could find something treasonous, turn this woman in, get right back on the company's good side and turn a profit, too.

It was a list, probably twenty copies, all written out by hand. A manifesto: Forty Ways the Plant Does Us Wrong. Celisse's handwriting was neat, and the illustration of a boxing glove smashing into a plant was perfect in its comic book corniness.

The door clicked open. I knew it! said Celisse. I knew I couldn't trust you.

Peri didn't care that she'd been caught. What were you planning to do with this? she asked. Her eyes skipped from one item to the next. Number three, criminally low wages; number twenty-eight, unnecessary inflation of prices in plant store; number seventeen, gross food options.

Well, I was going to *accidentally* leave them in the cafeteria, but now that you've snooped, I guess I should destroy them. Celisse reached for the stack as Peri's gaze

drifted to number forty: opaque promotion and demotion practices. She tightened her grip.

Why would you destroy them?

So when you inevitably snitch, there won't be evidence.

Why would I do that? Peri shrank her mouth and widened her eyes like a baby animal.

Celisse rolled her eyes. For real? Acting like you don't care about the snitching bonus. Hell, I'd probably tell on myself for an extra six dollars if I was strapped for cash. She wrested the papers form Peri and started ripping them up, bits falling like snowflakes into the trashcan. And I worked so hard on that little cartoon, she said.

What's the end goal? said Peri. You know you'll never get a group together. You'd all just snitch—that's the point of paying people to do it, isn't it? Incentive.

I just want to stir the pot. Get some dissent brewing.

For what? The plant pays us, at least. We have beds and food. I was homeless before this job. And my mouth was a black hole, she wanted to add, but didn't—she got shivers every time she remembered how seven of her teeth had rotted to the nerve endings because she couldn't afford a toothbrush, much less a dentist.

The same could be said for prisons, except we don't have to go into debt trying to stay here. Celisse raised an eyebrow—a challenge.

I just think you're being ungrateful. I'd rather be here than unemployed. Peri pushed her bag to the far side of the bed and sat.

Celisse scoffed. You're one of those. A loyalist.

Perhaps, said Peri. Or maybe just opportunity-minded.

What opportunity?

They promoted me once already, Peri said.

To *this*? Celisse snorted. I can't even imagine where you must have been before if this was up. Sorting the tomatoes that come on the trucks? I thought that was only for people who can't be demoted any further.

No. Viscology. Peri drew the word out. She doubted her roommate even knew what it meant.

The liquid thickness people? she said. And you couldn't make it last? Or….

I don't want to talk about it. Peri crossed her legs.

Celisse's eyes glowed. No, she said, you absolutely have to. We could have you write a confessional—anonymous, obviously—and distribute it. Fuck my manifesto. God! This would be, like, a thousand times better.

No, said Peri. I'm not going to do that.

Why? Celisse slumped her shoulders.

Why should I? What good would it do?

You could expose all the stupid bullshit the plant puts people through. You could stop other people from enduring what you did!

Peri hesitated. She had wished someone had warned her how fast she'd be chewed up. I, she said. I don't know. I feel like I should stay loyal to the plant.

For what? Celisse said. So they can take further advantage of you?

If I don't have loyalty to the company, what else have I got?

Celisse dropped the remaining shreds of paper into the garbage can and straightened out the stack of blank sheets on the desk. I'll be here if you change your mind. It's always good to vent, at least.

#

Are you going to dinner soon? Peri asked.

Why, you actually gonna go with me this time?

They'd been living together for three weeks and Peri had turned down Celisse's invitation to the mess hall sixty-two times. Mostly, she wanted to avoid running into old coworkers, people from the plastics-melting room where she'd worked before her promotion. Peri had burned a lot of bridges when she'd found out she was moving, telling Dara she was the stupidest person she'd ever met, or Geraldo that his son—who he hadn't seen since he started working with the plant—was actually very ugly, almost giraffe-like in all the pictures he carried in his wallet, or Denicia, whom she'd told off for sneezing too much. Today, though, she didn't care if she saw them. Celisse's fuck-all attitude was infectious.

Yeah, she said. I'll go with you.

Celisse shrugged. Okay.

The tables were long, with attached, backless benches. As soon as Peri sat, her back tensed—she missed the tables reserved for the specialists with pullout chairs that offered at least some lumbar support. As she tried to stretch and roll her spine, she grabbed one of the ketchup bottles on the table and squeezed it onto her tater tots. She groaned as a stream of water came out and soaked them.

You forgot, didn't you? asked Celisse when she'd stopped laughing.

It's just automatic, I guess. So used to using ketchup all the time.

I don't know how you don't get sick of it.

We don't even work with the actual stuff. We just do the lids.

Still. The idea of ketchup just makes me…bored, I guess.

Peri shrugged and reached for the empty glass she'd carried on her tray. She squeezed the ketchup bottle until the cup was half-full.

What are you doing? Oh my God.

Peri drained the glass and refilled it. We have to use the ketchup somehow, y'know?

What are you talking about?

You know, letting the plant know we use the product.

Do you really think they pay attention to that stuff? Celisse said.

She did; she suspected her devotion to the brand, her constant verbal praise and use of the product itself was part of why she'd been tapped for an interview in the first place. Peri shrugged. I guess it doesn't matter. She sipped at the glass anyway—it was still water, after all, and free, better than the four-dollar glass of soda she'd intended to buy. And it was room temperature, so it didn't send chills down to her tailbone when it hit her cavities.

Smart move, said Vihaan, one of the men that worked on the line with Peri and Celisse. I'm never gonna pay off my contract if I keep buying these eight-dollar cups of coffee.

Peri smiled and nodded, but didn't know what else to say, so she pushed a fork through her green beans. He, Celisse, and Aarav, another guy from the line, started

talking about a movie that had been shown the night before at the plant theater, an animated one about birds, or maybe pigs—Peri wasn't really paying attention.

I guess they're just trying to appeal to everyone, but it's not like there are kids here, said Celisse. Would've been nice to see something *sexy* or *funny* or sexy-funny, y'know? When's the last time they showed anything with boob in it? Or dick?

Honestly, Aarav said, I'm surprised they didn't put on those old cartoons with the religious vegetables. Isn't a tomato one of the characters?

I think so—God, it's been so long since I saw those. I totally forgot they even existed, said Vihaan.

They all fell silent. Peri shoveled mac and cheese into her mouth. It was the kind of cheese that got gummy if it wasn't eaten right away and Peri could feel it sticking to her molars. She filled up the glass with more ketchup water and drank, trying to use her tongue to release the residue.

Are you ready— Peri started to say, but one of the other people from the bottle-capping room, Mercutia, elbowed Peri.

Did you guys hear?

Celisse shook her head. Obviously not, dipshit. Just tell us.

Mercutia grinned and Peri recognized the joy in her face of relishing the power of information. It's *all* the ketchup companies. Not just ours. I guess people are boycotting. Stores only have…whatever you wanna call this shit.

There were no televisions or internet at the plant, so Peri always doubted information about the world. Two years ago, someone had started a rumor that war had broken out and, panicked, people had emptied their savings accounts to call a family

member or old friend on the outside. It wasn't true, of course, just a nuclear test from another country, but everyone got trapped talking for twenty minutes, sucked into you should call more oftens and I miss our talkses.

How do you know? Vihaan asked.

It's just what I heard, said Mercutia.

I heard that too, Aarav said. We were all talking about in on our way down.

I don't know who found out, or how, said Mercutia.

So now what? Peri ran the edges of her fingernails along the ridges of her molars. Was this dip a new cavity? Was this valley a filling that had fallen out?

Well, if they were smart, said Celisse, they'd rebrand. I mean, I know it's been awhile since we've been out there, but don't you remember how it used to be? Organic, all-natural shit. How hard would it be to say we've removed all the artificial colors and flavors? Jeeze, the first person in marketing to suggest it would probably get promoted to VP.

Peri slid her finger from her mouth and wiped it on her denim overalls. You think? That easy, huh?

Mercutia shook her head. Who cares about those assholes. Plant folds, they'll be fine, sitting on their thousands or millions or whatever they have. It's us I'm worried about.

It's ridiculous how good they have it, Aarav said. Pisses me off.

Hey, didn't you get promoted? said Vihaan to Peri.

She shook her head. Oh, I don't wanna talk about it. Wasn't for me, I guess. Celisse crushed her heel into Peri's toebox but Peri remained silent.

The others shrugged and launched themselves into an ongoing discussion about scrunchies and Aquanet with the rest of the table.

That could have been your chance! Celisse hissed. You could have exposed the truth right then and there! Laid it all out on the line!

Peri waved her off. Do you really think calling the ketchup organic would be enough to trick customers? To get promoted all the way to the top? It seems too easy.

Celisse rolled her eyes. Yes, I do think it's that easy to fix this whole dumb crisis. But you know how stupid those people are up there—they'll never think of the idea, or not until it's too late. Remember when they tried to bring back right-side-up bottles as a vintage collectible? The upside-down bottle was the greatest condiment innovation of the last century. Fuckin' stupid.

Peri nodded. I do remember that, she said. And then she saw Jamie.

He was carrying his tray, nothing but tater tots since he was vegan. Peri tried to look away but he made eye contact and walked toward them.

Shit, she whispered.

What? said Celisse. She looked over her shoulder, but she didn't know who Jamie was, didn't know to sort him from the crowd.

The man who got me demoted is coming here.

I didn't realize it was specifically someone else who— started Celisse, but Peri hushed her as Jamie neared.

He hovered over them, casting a shadow over Peri's tray.

The administrative people said I had to check to make sure you didn't leave anything behind after you got demoted. All I could find was this pen. I think it's yours.

It was a ballpoint, the kind that clicked, embossed with the ketchup plant's name in white paint that was already starting to chip. It could have been anyone's pen—the viscosity lab kept them all in a cracked white mug—but she took it anyway, because she wasn't sure how to turn it down and maintain some kind of dignity.

Took you three weeks to find a pen? Peri said. She snatched it and started clicking furiously.

I just wanted to say I'm sorry, Jamie said. I know it was shitty that I put your name down on the form.

What form? asked Celisse.

Nothing. Just a departmental report we had to turn in, Peri said.

And it got you demoted?

There was a bit of a witch hunt going on, said Jamie. They needed a name. Peri volunteered.

No. I *was* volunteered. Passive voice. I was an object, not a subject.

Celisse rolled her eyes and waved her hand in Peri's face. Okay, we get it, you understand how grammar works.

Peri glared at Celisse. You aren't involved.

But I want to be.

To be honest, Jamie cut in, I think it's above your paygrade.

That's right, Peri said. It's above all our paygrades. They saddled me with—it doesn't matter. It's done.

You know I don't think you *did* anything, said Jamie.

That's because we both *know* I didn't. Son of a bitch.

He sighed. I know. But someone—

Oh, fuck you and your someone.

What happened to going quietly? Jamie said. He popped a tater tot in his mouth.

Things changed, Peri said. She looked at Celisse.

For the worse, clearly. Anyway, Jamie said, just wanted to let you tell you that Maurice scheduled his cataract surgery.

Lovely. She rolled her damp tater tots around. I wish he had gone blind.

You don't mean that, Jamie said. He walked away.

Celisse slurped at her soup before she spoke. That felt significant. Wanna fill me in?

Peri shook her head.

Celisse scrunched her face. Why? It sounds like you got *fucked*.

Peri threw her napkin on top of her tray and stood—her back muscles unknotted as she rose. I did get fucked, she said. Hard.

#

When all the ketchup turned to water, the plant rerouted the customer service complaints to the viscosity lab. There was a phone mounted to the wall, a cream-colored, corded contraption that hardly ever rang. In the first two months that Peri worked there, it rang twice: both times, it was someone in the rat lab telling them to ignore the batch that was coming through for testing, since they'd discovered it violated the legal amount of rat feces parts per million.

But when all the ketchup turned to water, complaints trickled in, customers finding bottles full of something thin, clear, flavorless. Sending the calls to viscosity was

a punishment, one that the other two viscologists foisted on Peri as the most junior member.

Her last three weeks in the lab consisted exclusively of saying hello to a growing stream of angry customers, What the fuck is wrong with your ketchup and Twenty years of customer loyalty, lost, and where's my refund? She apologized and thanked them for their call.

Is there a form I'm supposed to be filling out for these? she asked her colleagues.

Jamie shrugged.

Thanks, she said. That's helpful.

You'll forgive my impatience, he said. You're the one who fucked this up.

For a moment, Peri thought maybe it was a joke. Screwed what up? she said. She automatically censored herself because she thought it made her seem more affable—maybe that had helped her land this promotion.

You fucked up the ketchup. His accusation leveled, he looked up from his workstation at her. His nametag had a few drops of water on it, like a flower dotted with dew, the M and I distorted by the refracted light.

What? She laughed, but he didn't.

Well, it has to be someone's fault. We're the last room before the ketchup gets bottled. It's not like they'll find a reason to blame the bottling room—how do you fuck up ketchup just putting it in a bottle? But they can say it's our fault for not notifying them. That we should have been the first line of defense as our ketchup got thinner and thinner.

But it's not like it was getting thinner and thinner, Peri said. It just turned into water!

I know that! But they're already on our case twice a week to make the ketchup stop separating if it's not shaken before squirting. You know how many calls the customer service gets every week about *that*?

Peri rolled her eyes. It's just a normal density separation—

Save it, smartass. We all fucking know. But think about it: if they already know that's a standard issue, and all the ketchup has mysteriously turned to water, then don't you think we'll be the first place they're going to come investigate?

But why specifically is it *my* fault?

Because you're the newest here. The new ones are the most likely to fuck shit up.

But Peri knew that was statistically untrue, that it was the tired, haggard, ragged, workers who would get forgetful, distracted, or spiteful, screwing things up on purpose.

You know that isn't right, she said.

It's right by their standards. Everything is someone's fault.

But why does it have to be my fault? She hated the whine that crept into her voice. I just got here. I worked so hard! Why can't we blame Maurice, she suggested, her voice dropped to a whisper, but it was half-hearted and she regretted saying it. The old man had developed a cataract in his left eye and struggled to operate the viscometer or read the results the machine gave in its teal analog digits.

Look, Jamie said. I understand the excitement of moving up. The pride, the privilege, the novelty of a new set of tasks. It wasn't that long ago I was working in flavor-mixing, trying to get that perfect vinegar ratio. How old that got.

It was those things for Peri, of course, pride and novelty, but the list was missing her biggest two: the superiority she felt, and the security knowing that her dental premiums had gone significantly down since taking this job. As Jamie spoke, she ran her tongue across her teeth, feeling the cracks and crags in her fillings, plus the new cavity that had bloomed almost overnight. She could barely keep her head above water paying back the plant dentist.

But you have to remember, he continued, you're young. How old are you? Thirty-three? There's plenty of time for you to get promoted here or somewhere else, even better than here.

She shook her head. Forty-seven. I'm forty-seven.

Jamie shrugged again. And I'm fifty-six.

So when do you think I'm going to make time to get promoted again, exactly?

You're on their radar—that's what important, Jamie said.

And you're trying to stick me on their *shitty* radar, Peri said. She didn't bother glossing over the word with *bad* or *crappy*.

Better than being invisible.

I'm just trying to stay ahead, No—to get caught up. I can't do that where I came from, or wherever they're going to put me. I have a dentist appointment—the plan they give us here—

You don't have to lecture me about the insurance plans. Why do you think I'm so keen to protect Maurice? He's been saving up for cataract surgery for, God, I don't even know how long. If I put his name on the report, they'll demote him Lord knows where

and he'll be at square zero. That operation is one-eighth the cost here, and he's still been saving for it for forever. He'll never earn enough money somewhere else.

But my teeth—

Do you think your teeth are more important than someone's vision? Planning to win a beauty pageant with that smile?

Peri sighed. No one ever understood that it was the pain, the constant fear of decay, that motivated her. Teeth were functional, just like eyes. She needed them.

Fuck, Maurice shouted from the other corner of the room. The viscometer was blinking, the numbers flashing zeroes like eyes opening and shutting. Can one of you lazy shits help me? he asked.

So there's nothing I can do, she said. No process of appeal, no report I can write up to prove I'm faultless.

No, Jamie said. But you can go quietly.

Why? Why shouldn't I put up a fight?

He grimaced. I'd hate to have to document your belligerence in my report. That's the sort of mark that never goes away. A permanent discouragement from future promotions.

Peri bit her bottom lip. She felt a film of mist on her eyes.

Can't you just do your part, said Jamie, rising from the chair to help Maurice. I'm just trying to look out for the older workers. So what if your teeth fall out? They make dentures.

#

Let's do it, Peri said when they returned from the mess hall. Get your pen. Let's write that confessional.

For real? Celisse said. Peri told the whole story and Celisse scribbled it down, laughing when it was finished.

Yes! See! Amazing. God, it's like dynamite made of paper. This would literally blow the plant apart!

Peri nodded, then hesitated. Can I ask you something?

Sure, Celisse said. She was running through the paper, correcting spelling errors, deleting extraneous words.

Am I the only person you've tried to…I guess the word I want is convert?

What? She scribbled out an entire paragraph.

At dinner tonight, or with that guy on the line earlier…I thought maybe you'd tried to evangelize people. But you didn't. All these opportunities and you just let them go.

Celisse looked up. Oh, is that what you mean? I just don't *trust* these people.

But you trust me?

Of course I do. You didn't tattle on me that first night. I waited for days—I figured I was shitcanned and toast, but you…you didn't. I figured something about that manifesto must have resonated. I knew I had an ally in you.

Peri nodded. Okay. She gulped. Sign our names on there.

What?

Put our names on there. Let them know. They fire us? Fuck 'em. That's what you keep saying, right? We're in it together. It's not going to mean anything if it's

anonymous. People are going to think it's fake. They're gonna start trying to pin it on each other for that snitching bonus. If we take the fall, there can be a *movement*.

Celisse shook her head. I don't think we should—

Sorry, but have your methods of random, anonymous distribution changed things? We might not be able to start a whole revolution but we can be figureheads, at least. You've been distributing this shit for, what, months, years? This is just one extra step, just a name. Scrawl it on the bottom.

Calm down, nutso, Celisse said. She smiled—her teeth gleamed.

What, too chicken? A few seconds of silence. How am I braver than you right now? Peri said. Sitting here almost every night while you go distribute pamphlets and postcards, calls to arms—

Celisse went back to editing.

Fine. Then give me the pen. I'll sign my name. Not yours. Just tell me how to disseminate it. The best time, the best place, the best method. It's all on me. I know I've got your support. That's all I need.

Peri…I've never distributed anything. Celisse set the pen and paper down.

What? But just the other night. You made posters! You said you were going to hang them in the bathroom—

I flushed them. I was never going to put them up. Do you think I'm an idiot? It's just venting, Peri. Getting it out of my system.

She ripped the confession in half.

See? Don't you feel better? You just gotta get the anger out—

No, I don't feel better, Peri said, because we didn't do anything.

If we did something, we'd be out of here, Celisse said. Not just demoted. Fired.

Isn't that what you want? You hate it here.

Celisse ripped the confession in half again. I can hate it here and still need a job.

We could be CEOs. We could be farmers. We could be revolutionaries! That's what you keep saying, Celisse.

It's just bullshit, Peri. That's all it's ever been. She dropped the confession into the garbage and sat on the bed. She rubbed her temples. I thought you knew that. I thought you were smart, that you could see I was just trying to get my anger out somehow. I'm not trying to orchestrate the downfall of a company! I'm just trying to make some money.

Peri's gums throbbed. Fuck you, she said. Fuck you for pumping me up. For pumping my head full of garbage. She opened the door.

Where are you going?

I'm tired of doing nothing, Peri said. I want to make something happen. If you won't help me take down the plant, then I'll build them back up.

By doing what, exactly? They used you once, as a scapegoat for the thing that's going to bring them to the fucking ground. You're the last person they'll want to see.

If they made me a scapegoat, Peri said, they can make me a savior, too. I had a great idea in the mess hall for how to fix this whole mess—organic ketchup.

That's my idea, Celisse said. I said that.

And you probably won't ever make anything of it.

They won't listen to your idea, Celisse said. To my idea. We're ants to them.

Then at the very least, Peri said, I can snitch on my conspiracy-pushing roommate. She grabbed the pieces of her torn-up confession. I'll show them this. I could use an extra six dollars.

You wouldn't.

I will.

She slammed the door behind her and headed for the steps up to the corporate offices.

#

Before all the ketchup turned to water, Peri had an interview to get a promotion. She climbed the three flights of steep, winding stairs to get to the corporate offices, her ankles cracking and crying with every step. She practiced math questions in her head as she ascended.

Hourly wage of $2.40 means weekly pay of $96 means yearly salary of $5,992, no, $4,992. Hourly wage of $2.73 means weekly pay…$109.20, call it $110, yearly salary of $5,7…20? 30? Her brain wanted to give up.

She waited a minute before knocking on the corporate meeting room door—one of the great things about this interview process, the administration had told her, was that she got interviewed by the CEO herself, the woman whose story they made you memorize, that they quizzed you on during the interview, but Peri knew it all by heart: the small tomato farm the CEO started not twenty miles from here, her career as a lobbyist to reverse the trend of automation in the workforce, her stint as a politician to defend the rights of the blue-collars.

She hoped that if she paused, she might overhear them discussing her. She entertained the fantasy sometimes that she was being preened to be take on a really high position of power, that the years she'd put in were all part of some insane endurance test to prove she had what it took to work up here, in the world of pantsuits and pencil skirts. How else could it be explained?

Peri hadn't applied for a promotion—nobody ever did, that's not how they ran the business—so they must have seen something in her, some glimmer of her future greatness. And she had paged through the employee handbook, had pored over the tiny charts that detailed insurance premiums and coverage caps; this job might finally allow her to catch her breath, to pull out her rotten teeth, to fill in the holes. She put her ear to the door.

They were talking, rather boisterously, a heated debate about some additive or other that they wanted to put in the ketchup—she heard something about the words untested and cheaper volleyed back and forth, and she went starry-eyed imagining herself participating in such important, vigorous discussions about the future of the plant. She prepared her opening statement—I'm so honored to have been considered for this promotion. Working here, at this plant, has been the great joy of my life thus far.

Should she wait until their talking died down before she knocked?

No. It would make more of an impression if she was confident. They could finish this debate after her interview, she was sure. She rapped her knuckles against the door and put on a smile, the silver fillings in her molars shining. She was ready.

"Repost"

Carol Smither at 11:01am on 01/04/17

We appreciate all the kind words you've been sending us during this hard time. To those of you able to make it out to the funeral, thank you for coming. It was nice to see some of you. John and I decided to post this video in the hopes that it teaches other kids a lesson, or acts as a wakeup call to some of you parents—we never thought Chance would do something like this, and if he did, then your kids probably are, too. Losing Chance has been the most unimaginable pain, and if sharing this video stops even one more parent from going through what we are going through, then it will all be worth it. Hoping you all have a safe, blessed New Year.

Comments

Michael DeAngelo at 11:02am on 01/04/17

Carol & John, so sorry to hear about Chance. Thinking of you.

Carmine Lumley at 11:04am on 01/04/17

Sending hugs and prayers xo. Let me know when I can make you guys dinner.

Victoria Beverley at 11:07am on 01/04/17

Praying for you and John. Sorry we couldn't make it to funeral—had to go to see our Josh play basketball in Terryton.

CrazyDudesBible at 11:48am on 01/04/17

Check out this sick vid of a kid downing 12 shots of tequila and swallowing 12 lit matches to ring in the New Year. Dude fucking breathes fire like a dragon!! Absolute fucking legend! Tag your friends who are too pussy to try this!!

Comments

Demarco Phillips at 11:49am on 01/04/17

Alex Healey Jordan Merkel Joe Gomez look at this fucker dude is crazy as hell lmfao we gotta try this next weekend this is so lit lmao

Jennifer Allen at 11:49am on 01/04/17

As an ER nurse I have to say this isn't "sick" this dangerous please anyone if you see this don't try it at home

Jordan Merkel at 11:50am on 01/04/17

Fuck off twat

Josh Beverley at 11:51am on 01/04/17

This was my friend Chance rest easy dude you were a party LEGEND

Carol Smither at 11:58am on 01/04/17

To the people who run this page: please take this video down. This was our son, Chance, who died shortly after this video was filmed.

Alex Healey 12:00pm on 01/04/17

Shut the fuck up whore at least he died a legend

"Bonfire"

"No, not those kind," Sheridan said as Kailey dropped sticks onto the kindling pile inside the metal firepit.

"What's wrong with them?" said Kailey. They'd all been under the same tree, so convenient to grab fifteen or twenty at once, and they weren't wet, like the last bundle she'd gathered. She kicked at her backpack, foot thudding against the canister inside—she'd packed the mini fire extinguisher her mom had bought her last year for Hanukkah, just in case. She hoped Sheridan hadn't noticed.

"They're pine," said Sheridan. "All the sap pops and sparks go everywhere. You can see how that might be bad."

Kailey's mom hadn't allowed her to join the Fire Scouts like most of the kids—too expensive, she said. She had a serious knowledge deficit about how fire worked, amazed, for instance, to learn that the book of matches her mother kept in the medicine cabinet were illegal. She didn't understand how flimsy strips of black paper could pose a danger. "How can you tell if it's pine?" she asked.

"You just—it's *pine*, y'know?" Sheridan sighed. "It's like, do you see all these little ridges on the bark? And how tiny the branches are? If I had my guidebook, I could show you the really zoomed-in picture."

"Ohhh," Kailey nodded, but she couldn't really see what Sheridan was talking about. She hadn't wanted to make a fire—it was something that other kids did, or at least talked about, but she didn't want to participate. It's not that she was a goody-goody: she'd squirted a drop or two of hash oil onto her tongue when Ric had passed one of the

little bottles around the table at lunch. She spent the rest of the day treading her legs under her desk like she was pedaling a bike, amazed by how her body moved.

But starting a fire seemed dangerous beyond the point of sense, like crashing a car into a wall on purpose. The world was so dry that anything could catch fire now. Whole neighborhoods carved out of the valley in a single windy, fiery night. Houses into charcoal skeletons. She trusted Sheridan, though: the wind was quiet, the air still. She figured she'd witness her first fire before she graduated, and here she was. She came back to Sheridan with a dozen sticks.

"Better," said Sheridan. "Hand them to me." She took one of the bigger ones and cracked it against her thigh, then snapped it in half and in half again. It reminded Kailey of the birthday party where Sheridan had broken one of the porcelain horses her father had bought her twenty minutes after she opened it. Kailey had almost sympathy-cried when she saw all its legs broken off, but Sheridan had just smiled: "It was fun to break it. It looks pretty broken, Kailey."

Kailey helped Sheridan arrange the stick pieces in criss-crossing Xs. "How do we…you know." She made an explosion motion with her hands. "Did you bring a lighter?" She didn't think Sheridan owned a lighter, because she'd probably talk nonstop about it, but her friend did sometimes surprise her with the illegal things she managed to procure: Sheridan pulling a can of spray deodorant, banned for its potential explosivity, from her gym bag, or a single sparkler at last summer's Independence Day party that she held over a bowl of water as it fizzled and sparked. She was, apparently, an expert in acquiring contraband.

"No lighter. I have a better way. They taught us at the last Fire Scouts meeting. Sit over there." She pointed to a spot across the pile from herself.

"I thought they were supposed to teach you about fire safety, not how to build fires." "It's all about knowledge," Sheridan said. "To understand it, not be scared of it."

Kailey crossed her legs. "Don't tell me we're gonna do that thing where we spin a stick back and forth. Does that even work?"

Sheridan shook her head. "What do you think I am, a cavewoman? No. You just lean in like this." She braced herself on her hands and stuck her head close to the sticks. "We're gonna tell the fire secrets." The twigs glowed red. "See? That was a secret—they told us not to tell people who aren't in the Fire Scouts about this."

"Is this for real? You're not fucking with me?"

Sheridan shook her head. "Try it. It has to be a secret I don't already know, so don't talk about the really expensive sweatpants you accidentally peed in and threw out last week."

Kailey blushed. "Okay. Um…I stole chewing gum from the store one time." The pile crackled and a lazy tendril of smoke drifted in the air.

"Good." Sheridan nodded. "My turn again. I *did* go to Zack's birthday party last weekend." A whoosh. A tiny flame ignited.

"You said your mom wouldn't let you go, either!"

The Admiraal family were all firefighters, away constantly to douse fires across the county, so Zack ran their deep-in-the-woods estate like a Playboy mansion. Parties there almost always ended in disaster. The last one—the one Sheridan had gone to, apparently—had ended with six cases of alcohol poisoning and a bullet lodged in Nadif

Mahroub's left shoulder. "Aren't you glad I didn't let you go?" her mother had said. "That could have been you!"

"I lied," said Sheridan.

"Why would you lie about that?" Kailey said.

"Well, I wanted to go, but I didn't want you to be mad about not being able to come. It was just to make you feel better."

"But you still went. You could have come over my house and had a party, just the two of us." That's what they always did when the other kids had parties. Kailey drew her knees up to herself like she had caught a chill. It wasn't cold. It was never cold.

"What fun would that have been?"

And Kailey knew she was right. It wouldn't have been fun, or at least not as fun as Zack's party, probably. "Was it really as crazy as everyone was saying?" The flame sizzled out.

"If you don't keep up a stream of secrets," Sheridan said, pointing to the slightly-charred stick-pile, "the whole thing goes out. Now we have to start over. And it's your turn. You can't double-feed a fire. Makes it go nuts."

Kailey tried to think of something exciting. Sheridan already knew, for instance, that her grandma had stopped talking to Kailey's mom last week because she was embarrassed her new son-in-law was ugly. Kailey hated her stepdad, too, and even she thought that was harsh.

"Try to come up with something good," Sheridan said. "I'm about to spill some juicy shit. Let's try to keep it a two-way street, yeah?" She reached into her backpack, pulled out a big stack of papers, and threw them in the bonfire. Sheridan was really smart

but never did her homework, which always annoyed Kailey, who tried so hard and still had lower grades.

"I think your hair looks stupid like that." Kailey said. It was a new hairstyle, and Kailey had said it was gorgeous when Sheridan asked. But she hated it. The flame sprouted outward, enveloping the whole pile of sticks and worksheets.

Sheridan shook her head back and forth, glittery pink beads clacking as her braids swung. "Ooh, that was a good one. Extra mean."

"You're just pissing me off! Going to a party and lying about it. What the hell, Sheridan?" It was the party, but it was everything else, too, including Sheridan thinking her secrets were better.

Sheridan leaned toward the fire. "I know who shot Nadif. Her eyes glazed over a little, pupils widening in the darkness.

"Oh," Kailey croaked. That's why Sheridan had been so insistent they come to the woods after school to make a fire. Why she wanted to build a bonfire with secrets. She'd been so weird all week, smashing her locker closed repeatedly, throwing her calculator at a wall during trig. Even more violent than usual.

"I saw them load the body in the ambulance," she said.

Kailey shivered, hearing Sheridan call him a body like he'd died. He almost had: that's what she heard, that his lips had gone almost black like he'd had frostbite—when was the last time anyone got frostbite?—instead of a bullet in his shoulder. There'd been whispers in the hallway all week, but she didn't want to be the outsider desperate for details. She had her theories—Zack Admiraal himself, namely, since he had a reputation for shooting pistols like a cowboy when he got drunk, at least once a weekend.

"I'm sorry," she said. She didn't know if she should give Sheridan a hug or not. When her mom died, Sheridan punched Kailey in the stomach for trying to embrace at the funeral.

"Just feed the fire," she said. Her gaze grew less distant.

Kailey leaned closer to the fire, letting its heat wash over her. She didn't understand how people used to do bonfires for fun, crowded in each other's backyards after football games. Already her forehead felt like melted plastic, her eyes dry from the smoke, and this wasn't even a full-size one. Her mom talked about giant shipping pallets soaked in gasoline, the fire's fingers stretching to the stars—how did people sit near the fire without getting their eyebrows scorched? "I took a sip of beer from my stepdad's can the other night when he wasn't looking," she said.

"Beer is gross. Vodka is gross, too," Sheridan said. She laughed, and, seeing the soft concern on Kailey's face, said, "What? I'm not allowed to laugh just because I saw some fucked-up shit?" After Kailey had steeled her expression, blanked it out, Sheridan continued. "I kissed Joanna at the party." The bonfire lapped up like it wanted to entwine its tongues with hers—she was laughing as she said it, and she had this way of laughing where her tongue slipped through the edges of her teeth.

"Was this before…?" Kailey asked. She didn't know how far she was supposed to push.

"Yes, stupid. Joanna has braids too, and I wrapped my fingers so tight in her hair she said I made her scalp prickle. Super hot."

Kailey blushed. She reached into her backpack and found an old history worksheet she never finished and threw it in the fire. It curled and burned fast, black ink

consumed word by word. “I found a pair of handcuffs in my mom’s closet,” she told the flames. It was the closest thing to a sexy secret she had.

Sheridan walked to a big branch nearby and lifted it, smashing it against the rim of the firepit. The metal rang like a gong and flakes of rust crumbled into the flames. She lifted the tree limb above her head again and swung down. Another clang and a crack as the wood split. She panted, happily exhausted. “Fuck yeah,” she said, heaving. She dropped the pieces in. “We need to make this fire bigger.”

“Why?” Kailey said. “Isn’t it safer at this size?” She reached into her backpack to find another sheet of paper—maybe that would be enough to appease Sheridan—but all her hands found was the cold smoothness of the extinguisher.

“We’re out here, we’re doing it. We may as well have fun with it. But you’re gonna have to start giving out bigger secrets. I mean, really. A pair of handcuffs. Whose parents don’t have a pair of handcuffs in their closet?”

She lifted another big piece of wood, grunting with the weight. She bent her knees and wrapped her arms around it in a bear hug, then *oof*ed with the effort of throwing it on top of their fire. “I made a fake account online to spy on girls I think are cute without them knowing!” She shouted it, spreading her arms wide. The fire surged toward the confines of the metal barrel they’d built it in.

“How is that a big secret?” Kailey asked. “Everyone does that!”

“It’s technically illegal.” Sheridan winked. “Nothing juicier than breaking laws, babes.”

Kailey did not like this new nickname, “babes,” that Sheridan had begun to employ not just for her but for everyone she knew. She’d even heard her say it to her dad

when he called her a few days ago. Probably she had picked it up from someone she'd met on the Internet, but like almost all slang from that place, Kailey cringed when she heard it out loud.

"Did you, um, want to talk about Nadif some more? Or…?"

"What's there to talk about? Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy, right? Nadif, the dickwad drug dealer. Pfft."

"Uh…."

"Too harsh? You know I'm right."

Kailey bit back a sigh. It was true Nadif was awful—he'd already been arrested three times this year, twice for getting into a fight and once for getting caught dealing drugs, but she knew the real reason Sheridan didn't like him was because he'd refused to sell to her two years ago, insisting she was a nark.

Sheridan cleared her throat and nodded toward the bonfire.

Kailey cast her net of memory far, hoping to snag something, anything: a time she snuck into an R-rated movie, or didn't leave Pluto Park at dusk like the signs said, or didn't call the smoking hotline to report a homeless man on the side of the street with a cigarette. But if there lurked skeletons in her closet, she had buried them so thoroughly with shame that they were hidden even to her. "Sometimes I spit on my stepdad's toothbrush," she said lamely, but the flame judged it sufficient and the log let out a loud snap, a fissure splitting across its rings.

"I didn't realize you hated him so much," Sheridan said.

"How? I talk about him all the time." Kailey had literally just told Sheridan a story as they were gathering kindling about her stepdad throwing out all the cake mixes in the house because he was starting a new diet.

"I guess I just don't pay attention." Sheridan opened her backpack again and pulled out some trash from lunch, the plastic wrapper and cardboard sleeve from a snack cake. "You're pretty boring sometimes." She tossed the plastic and cardboard into the fire. The edges of the white cardboard curled and blackened as the fire spread across its surface, but the plastic shrunk and shriveled into a little ball.

"So are you," Kailey started to say, but swallowed the thought halfway when she saw Sheridan already rolling her eyes.

"Am I? Would a boring person want to do something cool like start a fire? Would a boring person sneak off to drop acid at the party like I did?"

"Where did you sneak to?" Kailey asked. She couldn't help asking, and when she saw how wide Sheridan grinned, she knew she'd been too interested, too desperate. Sheridan was relishing her power.

"The old…what do you call it. With the pumps."

"Gas station," Kailey said. Her mom told her they'd been all over the place once, reservoirs of gasoline on every street corner. But all the fires meant towns cratered by explosions, so they took them all out. "They used to build them on opposite street corners and compete over prices, down to the penny," her mother had said. "Smaller towns with no fire departments lost whole downtowns if they had two or three stations blow."

"Yeah," Sheridan said. "Those. It was kinda creepy there. Big holes in the cement. Like a pit to bury bodies."

"Was Nadif there?" Kailey had to ask. Who else would have brought acid to the party, doling out the little strips of paper, demanding fifteen dollars from each person who took one?

"Your turn, remember?"

The embers danced, white heat shimmering across the face of the coals. Kailey felt dried out, no moisture left in her skin. No secrets. Nothing interesting about her. "I don't have anything left," Kailey said. "You know pretty much everything about me. We're best friends."

It was amazing, Kailey realized—one night they weren't together, and suddenly there was a chasm. Sheridan had an evidently limitless reservoir of secrets to share; everything she'd done at Zack Admiraal's party, every step and breath she'd taken, was a surprise, a mysterious piece of information that fed the fire, not to mention whatever she knew about Nadif getting shot. Kailey needed to develop a more interesting solo life, clearly, or maybe just stop telling Sheridan everything. She clicked her fingernails against her front teeth. "I used to tell my mom my braces payment was five dollars higher every month and took the extra." The embers flared white—her corneas seared.

"Didn't you have your braces for, like, four years? That was to be close to, like…" Sheridan chewed her lip as she added.

"Two hundred and fifty dollars," Kailey said.

"Damn. What did you use the money for?"

Kailey watched the fire. "I thought we weren't supposed to double-feed."

Sheridan waved her hand impatiently. “Nadif was there, yes. Now, what did you spend that money on?” She tilted her head and bared her teeth. Lit from below, they looked too long.

Kailey tried to affect the same careless attitude. “So you saw Nadif get shot?”

Sheridan pretended to lock her lips, throwing the key into the flames. Kailey had no idea how hot fire had to be to melt the chintzy metal of a diary key, but she suspected this one might have done the trick.

“Okay.” She stalled, dragging an “um” across five seconds. She didn’t want to tell the actual truth about the stolen money. It was stupid. “I used it to buy a lighter from that kid in the grade ahead of us.”

“You bought a lighter and never told me? What the fuck!” Sheridan said.

“It…broke. I dropped it when I got home and stepped on it. The fluid inside got all over the carpet in my room.”

She wasn’t a convincing liar, but Sheridan bought it. She slammed her fists into her thighs and groaned. “What a wasted opportunity. The *fun* we could have had with that.”

But then the fire started sizzling, sparks fizzing out in all directions. Kailey felt some brush against her cheek, burrow into her chin, little pinpricks of heat melding with her skin. The wind wasn’t blowing. Kailey didn’t understand.

Sheridan glared at her, mouth curled into a snarl. “You’re fucking lying.”

“No, I’m not,” Kailey said. She crossed her arms.

The fire continued to hiss and spit. One of the sparks landed on the ground and Sheridan jumped up, stamping on the spot. “The fire only sparks like that when someone

tells a lie. The first time we did one of these at Fire Scouts, I told everyone I was a virgin. I almost burned down the whole fucking forest." She leapt at another spot where the ground sizzled. "You have to tell the truth or it will keep going like this." A pop sent a spark five feet off; Sheridan tripped trying to get to it in time. She smothered it against the sole of her shoe.

"Fine. Hanukkah presents for you and my mom." She saw one last offshoot land near her. She licked her hand and laid the wet palm on the dried-out, spiky grass. She'd seen it in a movie once.

Sheridan looked ready to slap her. "That's it? That's all you used it for? I'm out here revealing actual shit and you come to the party with this weak-ass shit?"

The fire stopped spitting and burned merrily—it was definitely the biggest in-person fire Kailey had ever seen. One of the neighbors' houses on her street had blazed once, but they'd evacuated before she'd had a chance to see the spectacular flames engulf the blue-painted siding board. Kailey's mom forgot to close the windows; her bedspread reeked of smoke for a month.

"We're poor, Sheridan. I was eleven when I started doing it. I didn't have any money. How else was I supposed to buy gifts, especially when you show up with, like, really nice stuff?" Kailey's cheeks burned with heat and embarrassment. When they were nine, Sheridan and her father had shown up on their door with all sixteen Lego sets they'd released to promote Kailey's favorite movie series about space pirates. All Kailey had to give Sheridan was a little stress doll that squeaked when squeezed—her mother's idea.

"All right, all right. I'm sorry." She held a hand out over the fire, and at first Kailey thought she meant it was a peace offering, but she kept lowering her hand closer to the flames, until her palm hovered just above. She sucked her breath in and dropped it into the fire, letting out her air in a slow hiss as the fire coursed across her skin.

"What in the fuck are you doing?" Kailey whispered, but she knew: it was like when they were twelve and Sheridan made Kailey stand at the top of the steps, dropping a brick on Sheridan's foot over and over until it broke, bones finally giving way to red rock. Or like when they found a baby bird on the sidewalk and Sheridan picked it and twisted until its neck snapped.

"Just wanted to know what it felt like," Sheridan said, pulling her hand out and wincing as she blew on the burn. "To answer your question, yes. I saw Nadif get shot."

"And you didn't tell the police?" Kailey had heard Nadif couldn't remember much, that his blood had tested positive for not only acid but a slew of other hallucinogens, too. And Sheridan had the key! What was she waiting for?

Sheridan, rifling through her backpack, pursed her lips. She had on a glitter lipgloss, which glinted dizzily in the fire's light. She stood again. "We're burning through this wood faster than I thought. Go find some more." She removed a few broken-down tree limbs from the backpack and tossed them into their inferno.

"Sheridan, who was it?" asked Kailey. She reached into her backpack and fidgeted with the paper instructional tag on the extinguisher.

"Don't forget to tell the fire a secret," Sheridan said, walking away.

When she was gone, Kailey told the fire about the time she peed in her stepdad's coffee. She found a few more sticks and returned to the fire. She tossed them in—a few

hung over the lip of the fire pit, cantilevered by some force of gravity until their cell walls had destabilized into smoke and ash. They tipped onto the ground, and Kailey dove to pick them up and throw them back in the fire.

"Good save," Sheridan said. She had already dropped some sticks in, too.

"Why is it burning so high?" Kailey swore it had grown almost exponentially.

"Oh, I fed it a *really* juicy one." Sheridan grinned.

"Just now? Without me?" It was desperation again—she was afraid she'd missed some crucial detail about Nadif.

"Not every secret needs to be shared with you, Kailey. I need to have some mystery. Otherwise I'd be like you!" She laughed.

Kailey's lip twitched, almost in a dog snarl. "I have secrets."

"No, you said you don't, remember?"

"Plug your ears. This one is just for me and the fire." Kailey knew it was stupid, a little juvenile, but she didn't want Sheridan to be right. When Sheridan put her fingers in her ears and started humming, she leaned into the fire. "Today isn't the first day I've wished Sheridan wasn't my best friend." It was like three secrets in one, and the fire shot up like they were kerosene. Kailey, startled, fell back on her ass. Sheridan seemed unmoved.

"I figured you had to be holding out on *something*. We could have been done a lot faster if you'd started out of the gate with whatever it is you just told the fire."

"What do you mean, done?" When the other kids lit fires, it was a game—her mom told her that the equivalent when she was a kid, in both danger and glamor, was the choking game, where middle schoolers wrapped their hands each other's throats and

didn't stop squeezing until their bodies had wilted, brains tingling with the ebb and flow of oxygen into their systems.

"Did you think we just made this fire for nothing?" Sheridan pulled a sweatshirt from her backpack, stretching the arms out like Jesus on the cross. It said Victory High School across the chest in blue block letters, the outline of a horned bull screenprinted in yellow beneath it. Kailey owned one just like it—even though it didn't get chilly anymore, people still wore them at night.

But Sheridan's had splatters across it, dark red splotches spiraling outward in a spray. She considered it, her smile almost proud in its wickedness, before balling it up and throwing it onto the fire. Kailey wasn't sure how the fire would react—the fire preparedness teacher taught them laying on top of tiny blazes would snuff them out, suffocate them, steal their air away. A hoodie would do the same, wouldn't it, even without a body inside to give it heft. The bonfire started to smoke, big clouds.

"Is that blood on there?" Kailey asked.

Sheridan smiled. The smoke billowed harder, faster. The air smelled seared, melted.

"But it's your blood, right?"

Another smile. The smoke was a vortex, twisting upward. "Haven't you ever heard the expression 'if I told you, I'd have to kill you?'" Then flame shot upward, an obelisk of fire.

"Please tell me it's because you murdered a chicken or something." Sheridan's family had started keeping chickens—a lot of people had, because it was cheaper to grow meat than to buy it prepackaged—but Sheridan had been a vegetarian for the last eight or

nine months. Kailey reached for her backpack, pressed it against her chest until she could feel the metal cylinder of the extinguisher canister on her sternum.

"Kailey, don't act brand new. It's your turn." Sheridan's left brow was arched so steeply it almost looked drawn on, her lips so plump even as she smirked that they looked pumped full of God knew what. Even her ears looked odd, one Dumbo-sized and the other small, like a seashell someone had fixed to the side of her head. It was just the fire, of course, but Sheridan looked ghastly, a bunch of mismatched body parts glued together, and with each hiccup of the flames, her visage shifted, kaleidoscopic, into another horrific configuration.

"Um. Okay. I'm a little scared right now."

"Because of the fire?"

"I'm not sure what's going on. With you or the fire. I mean, I thought we were just coming out here to do stupid high school stuff. And now you're burning a sweatshirt covered in blood. Why is there blood all over it?"

Kailey looked down into the fire, squinting and shielding her eyes as if it would do anything. It wasn't made of cotton, so it wasn't burning, but shrinking, melting. The cuffs on the sleeves were going first, holes fusing shut.

"Duh. I shot Nadif."

Kailey had to close her eyes, but her mind telescoped forward—if the police realized it was Sheridan, couldn't she herself go to jail for not telling, too? She groaned. The fire roared so loud that it blotted out her noises of discomfort. She could see it through her eyelids, burning so bright that it shined through the blood in her veins and hit her irises, a red glow.

Sheridan poked at the sweater with a stick and moved it closer to the center. Some of the melted synthetic fiber clung to the branch. “Your turn.” She grinned.

“Cut it out,” Kailey said. “I don’t care if the fire goes out. There must be enough secret trapped in that sweatshirt to keep it burning for a year.”

“You don’t understand,” Sheridan said. “I have to get rid of the sweater. Even if he suddenly remembers—he was out of his mind on acid. This was the only evidence. And it’s almost gone. It’s the perfect crime. Or it will be, if you just do your part and keep the fire going.”

Kailey stood and pulled the extinguisher from the backpack. “No. You brought me into some fucking weird shit and I deserve answers. Spill, or I’ll put the fire out myself.” She tensed her legs.

Sheridan sighed. “Some friend you’ve turned out to be.”

“Where did you even get a gun?” Kailey couldn’t imagine Sheridan carrying one around—she didn’t even use a purse, so there was nowhere for her to store it. In the waistband of her pants, maybe, but she’d taken to wearing tight khaki slacks lately. There was no way she could have smuggled one into the party.

“They’re just laying around out there. I opened the cupboard over one of the bathrooms and this little pistol was just sitting next to the mouthwash.”

“And you just took it?”

She shrugged. “Free gun? Wouldn’t you?”

The fire grew smaller, negative space around the flames glowing white with afterburn.

“Oh, great,” Sheridan said. “I double-fed.”

“And that makes it shrink? Good. Keep talking,” said Kailey.

“Shrink isn’t the right word. It’s like it’s getting more condensed. Hotter. More intense.”

“Isn’t that what you want?” Kailey asked. A spurt of fire arced up and back down into the firepit. “Shit.”

“It gets more unstable. I’m just trying to destroy the sweater. Not the whole damn town.”

Another jet of flame burped out.

There was a hairline fracture in Sheridan’s voice. Her cool was quickly vanishing. Kailey had power, for the first time possibly ever in their friendship. “Did you get rid of the gun? It’ll have your fingerprints on it, right?”

Her friend snorted. “You don’t think I know how to wipe a gun clean? I put it back where I found it, fingerprint-free.”

Kailey was actually shaking, her legs quaking with little tremors as she stood. She didn’t understand how Sheridan was so calm. She looked nearly blissful. “Why? Why did you do it?” She was competing for volume with the bonfire.

“Wouldn’t you shoot at someone if they tackled you to the ground and started slugging you in the ribs, screaming about a grizzly bear attacking him? While everyone else had wandered off, screaming about the trees melting and the oxygen glowing? I couldn’t exactly rely on them for help. What choice did I have?”

The fire grew smaller still. There was a blue core to it now; Kailey hadn’t known fire could be blue. The sweatshirt was almost unrecognizable. She shuddered, imagining the fabric melting on her body, a second layer of skin that would bubble and burn.

Sparks showered out of the bonfire's fray. She didn't know if it meant Sheridan had told a lie or if this was just part of the repeated feeding, the fire unknitting itself from the inside out. "So you shot him in self-defense?" She pictured it, Sheridan aiming the gun as Nadif lifted his fist to land another blow, loading his clavicle with lead, blood spattering across her shirt—and her face, probably, she thought, but she must have wiped that off with the sleeve—then dropping the gun and putting her hand on Nadif's shoulder, apologizing profusely as a profusion of his insides leaked outward, flinching as her fingertips made contact with the entry wound.

"Yes." The fire collapsed inward, like a dying star halfway to a supernova. Sparks hissed upward like fireworks—Kailey's mom told her about how her friend had been wounded at a firework show once, that they sat too close and one of the dud fireworks shot toward them and exploded against a nearby tree. "Seriously, Kailey, you need to say something. You're playing with fire."

"Can't you just tell him it was an accident? You were both high. You were probably hallucinating, too. Thought he was like, a wolf or something." Even if it wasn't true, it was plausible. The police would believe it.

The fire had grown so small that Kailey's body actually started to cool, heat coming off her in waves in the absence of the big fire.

"I wasn't high. I went with them. But I didn't take a tab." The bonfire was tiny now, almost smaller than a closed fist, but its tongues flickered so fast they looked to be vibrating, the outside edges shimmering. "You've got about three seconds, Kailey, before this whole thing goes off. Quit fucking around."

Kailey pulled the pin from the extinguisher. She squeezed on the handle lightly, testing it—this is how it must have felt for Sheridan to put her finger on the gun's trigger, to wonder about the explosion and kickback. She understood, then, a little of how it must have played out. With her other hand, she grabbed the hose and aimed it at the bottom of the bonfire's flames. She'd never actually used an extinguisher before, but they practiced once a month at school, so the mechanics were familiar, muscle memory.

She squeezed and braced herself as the foam sprayed outward. It was thicker, whiter, goopier than she expected, squirting out messily. She waited for it to extinguish the fire, talking over it. She locked eyes with Sheridan. "Just apologize. The cops will get it! We're just dumb kids. It was an accident. You—it was self-defense."

She looked back down at the fire: it hadn't gone out, not at all. The foam had slid under the flames, which burned across its surface. The smoke was bitter, tangy, sharp. She coughed breathing it in. Her eyes stung. "I don't understand. It's an all-types extinguisher." She looked back at Sheridan.

"This isn't a fire that you can snuff so easily," Sheridan said. "And I can't apologize."

"You almost killed a guy, Sheridan!"

She grimaced, the pain flashing across her features. "I know."

Kailey was about to tell her it was an accident again, try to playfully remind her how easy it was to call the police, only three short digits. She would do it herself, if she had to: she didn't think she could live knowing what her friend had done, keeping it a secret, dying with the knowledge. She'd heard Nadif might have to have a shoulder

replacement surgery to repair the damage of the point-blank bullet. She opened her mouth, but Sheridan started talking first.

"I just wish I'd finished the job. He's a fucking prick. I was aiming to kill."

Kailey dropped the extinguisher, her hands clammy, loose, unable to be controlled. Her heartbeat pounded so loud it sounded like the ocean had replaced her brain. Her mouth was almost too dry to speak. "Because he tackled you? I mean, jeeze, yeah, but…is that enough to say he deserved it? That you wanted him dead?"

Sheridan waved her hand. "He never tackled me, okay? I lied. I hid in the trees and waited until he walked by. Then I pulled the trigger. He was just the one who happened to walk past me first."

"Why?" Barely a whisper. She was frozen, unable to break Sheridan's gaze. She might be sick.

"I just wanted to know what it was like." She broke off, a little chuckle. Kailey didn't know if it was forced or genuine. "Y'know. To pull a trigger. To be a killer."

The fire erupted like a geyser as Kailey's insides burned. Through the flames, she could make out only her friend's eyes, glowing white, like the devil peering up at her from hell. The rest she couldn't see—she didn't think she'd recognize her anyway.

"Strawberries"

Tamira signed her daughter up for the greens program and her heart felt lighter. Finally, she would taste carrots and pineapple and tomatoes, which were so expensive to grow that most stores couldn't afford to stock them. She'd know the real things, at last, instead of potato chips flavored like "veggie medley" or candy that delivered the flavor and vitamins but none of the texture, none of the skin-peeling and seed-spitting delight she remembered from her childhood.

"It's our commitment," the brochure said, "to offer free samples of fruit and vegetables to the children of America so they can be exposed to these once-everyday delights of nature. Please wash thoroughly, as we are a farm-to-plate organization but *not* an organic one." The organic trend died down when crop after crop got hit by super-aphids.

The first shipment was one of her favorites: strawberries, bright, sunset-glow red with green leaves still on the top.

"Make sure to wash…thruly?" said Jada. She had just learned to read the year before and loved to do it out loud.

"Thoroughly," Tamira said. "That's what I'm doing!" She turned them end-over-end in the palm of her hand as the tap water cascaded over the tiny seed pits. "Here."

Jada took one and bit in. "Mmm! It tastes like a sucker!"

Tamira sighed. "Goofball, you were supposed to wait for me so we could taste it together!" She shook her head and bit in. "Oh, wow," she said, chewing the fruit to a pulp

and swallowing. “I forgot what it tasted like. What it felt like. Mmm.” She nibbled another chunk. “It’s sweeter than I remember. I wonder if it’s a GMO.”

“GMO, ELO, CPO,” chattered Jada. “Another one!” She held out her hand.

She rinsed it in the sink. This one had a tiny dark hole in it, perhaps where a fly or a slug had eaten away a bit—the bugs had to eat, too, she knew that. She tore at the strawberry’s flesh with her fingernail until the bad spot was gone, then rinsed it some more.

Jada squeezed it between her fingers. “It’s so wet!” she squealed as the juice ran down her fingers.

“I just wish there were more,” Tamira said. The plastic container was only big enough to hold four. “I could have cooked with them. Made jam, or jelly.” Jada never even got to have the visceral pleasure of a peanut-butter-and-jelly, since jelly was more like food-dyed corn starch smear than anything and peanut butter was laced with rat hair. They marketed the clean stuff as “texture-free” and it cost four times as much.

She looked at the last strawberry. She could already taste it. But she didn’t want to rob her daughter of the experience. “So you really like this, huh?”

Jada nodded, spreading her lips open in a grin. Seeds studded her gums and teeth.

Tamira sighed. “Okay, it’s all yours, kiddo.” She ran the strawberry under the sink, remembering that the most important part of motherhood was sacrifice. She left it under the water a long time, imagining the invisible film of pesticides breaking apart under the spigot’s deluge. But she never once imagined the new film that ensnared the fruit in its place, the thin armor of lead particles that coated the strawberry and all their cups and plates and even her skin.

"Here you go. All clean." She handed the fruit to her daughter and licked her fingers clean—perhaps she was just imagining juicy residue, or her tongue's desire had been ignited, but even her skin tasted sweet.

“Eyes”

I was afraid the neighborhood would be unrecognizable after the property developers bought the lot next to my sister’s house. I’d hoped a nice, young married couple would buy it and build their dream home on it. I’d imagined they’d roll around the empty, unpainted rooms and kiss and lock their bodies together like my sister and I had done with our twin husbands when we built the twin houses that stood side-by-side.

But it went to a property developer instead.

“Maybe they’ll build a retirement home, or an artists’ colony,” I said to my sister one morning as I helped her put her pearls on.

She scoffed and preened at her reflection. “Probably just another pizza place.”

“You think so? I like pizza.”

After two months, the building had been assembled: a sphere made entirely of glass.

“An eyeball shop,” Lillian glowered.

“It won’t be so bad.”

She spun from the window and glared at me. “Don’t get any ideas. You promised you wouldn’t.”

“I know, I know,” I said, bracing myself on the arms of my wheelchair. “Not until I need my eyes replaced again.” I sighed and looked away, keeping my eyelids shut, hoping my sister wouldn’t look at me too closely.

#

Getting removable, replaceable eyes was like corrective laser surgery, but with the added bonus that we could all finally have the same pale blue eyes as our high school crushes, trading in our boring dark brown number six for tropical blue number three. Finally, everyone could have Elizabeth Taylor's violet irises, or even truly purple eyes, purple like sandbox toys.

But you had to relive your worst memory: "a stimulant of some kind, to engage the optic nerve, is a necessity, and the doctors found it in the darkest, most disastrous memory, in the visual information stored by the brain," is the way Zachary explained it to us at dinner.

When the surgery was first announced, appointments at local hospitals and ophthalmologist offices extended out months in advance. Zachary got us appointments ahead of the rush, his first patients, but I was amazed by how popular the surgery was. Apparently people didn't mind suffering through the darkest part of their lives if it meant they could finally change the color of their eyes.

For about six months, it was even common practice to sentence murder convicts to life in prison with monthly mandatory eyeball changes, until a team of researchers concluded that constant, repeated exposure to the darkest corner of one's mind could lead to destabilization of behavioral functions, especially in people with "pre-existing, uninhibited engagement of dangerous proclivities" like the very criminals subjected to the procedures. After the report was released, the use of eye replacement as punishment was banned nationwide, cited as a cruel form of torture.

#

I stared at the storefront from the bay window; it had just opened the day before. My thoughts, of course, were not on the eyeball shop itself—no, it didn't bother me in the slightest to see a building like the one where my late husband had worked—but rather on the months in which we had our houses erected, the long summer where Lillian and Clyde and Zachary and I yelled at builders who hammered nails into boards the wrong way, or argued about paint colors, since we wanted the houses to be identical inside *and* out, but Zachary and Lillian couldn't agree on design schemes, or the night when the shell of the house was complete, roofless and open to the sky, and we camped in what would eventually be the bedroom.

Lillian entered the living room and saw me. She walked up behind me and rested her hands on my shoulders. I twitched, nervous. "You can't sit out here and stare moon-eyed at that store for the rest of your life. It's not good for you."

"Lillian, I'm fine," I said. "It doesn't bother me. Really. I'm just looking."

"If you are fine, then why have you started hurting yourself, Michael?"

"What are you talking about?" I began the complicated maneuver of turning my wheelchair around to face my sister, a lot of rolling myself backward and forward a little bit, then backward and forward, but before I had turned even halfway around, I felt Lillian's hand fly into my cheek. A red-hot handprint lingered where she had struck me.

"You see? You keep slapping yourself. I'm so *worried* about you."

I said nothing, afraid to incur another wrathful palm.

"I'm going over there to have a talk with those people," Lillian said. "A talk about how they're mentally disturbing my widower brother. Stay *here*."

"Lillian, just let them be!" She glared at me, straightened her pearl necklace, and left the room. I sighed and wheeled after her, my wheelchair creaking as it rolled along. By the time I got to the front door, she was already halfway to the shop. It was so frustrating—they could make replaceable eyes, but not fast, safe wheelchairs. Priorities. I opened the door and slid forward. "Lillian, wait!" I called after her, pulling the door closed behind me. By the time I had wheeled past our house, she had entered the shop; once I got there, her argument was already underway.

"Why? Because now I'll have to deal with congested traffic, all day every day! You don't even have a parking lot! All of your customers are going to clog the sides of the street. The noise! How am I supposed to live in peace with all of *this* going on?" she asked, her arms pinwheeling as she spoke.

"Ma'am, I—" A younger man, dressed in khaki pants and a green button-down shirt, with a metal nametag that said "Stephen."

"Let me talk to your manager!"

"I *am* the manager. I own the store. I was actually going to come by tomorrow afternoon and talk to you about the parking situation." Stephen paused, noticing me for the first time. "I wanted to offer to buy your house."

"*My* house? And do what? Open a second store!?"

"No. Why would I do that? To pave it over. For a lot. Since I don't have one. Like you said."

Lillian's face began to stretch—her eyebrows arching upward, her lips flattening into a long, mean line, her eyes swelling in size—and she spluttered indignantly. "You—want—to—pave—over—*my*—house?"

Stephen said nothing.

"Lillian," I said. "Calm down."

She jumped, unaware of my presence, unaware that I had followed her, a crippled half-shadow on wheels. She smiled when she turned to see me, a menacing display of sharp, almost fluorescent teeth; there was something about Lillian's smile that reminded me that teeth were bones—pointy ones.

"I'm sorry, who is this?" asked Stephen, brow wrinkled.

"This," said my sister, decreed it, almost, "is my brother. And do you know, exactly, what the history of this property is?"

Stephen shook his head.

"Where we are, where you've built this stupid shop, is where my twin and his husband built their home, which burned down, claiming both of our husbands and putting my brother in a wheelchair. And now we live next door, in *my* house."

"I—I'm sorry. I didn't know." Stephen's mouth tightened and shrank.

"He has had to *watch* for *months* as you and your builders have trampled over all of those memories we made there. Why do you think this property has been empty for so many years?" Stephen stuttered for a few seconds. "Respect from the community for our trauma!" Lillian began to whisper conspiratorially. "Between us, the event that claimed both of our husbands has left my brother a little…unhinged. Just this morning…he was *harming* himself."

I tried to protest, but all that came out was an angry squawk, which alarmed Stephen.

Lillian opened her purse—a huge designer bag—and pulled out a hammer. I tried to choke back a laugh, which escaped from me as a throaty, seal-like bark: of course Lillian carried around a hammer in her oversize bag. I should have seen it coming.

"I even found him with this hammer last night—I think he was planning to come here tonight and smash every new, shiny surface of this glass store." My sister swung the hammer up and down to emphasize her words and, on the last word, it flew from her hand, where it crashed into and destroyed the bottom shelf of a display. "Oh my goodness. Oops. I am so sorry! It just slipped *right* from my hands and—"

"No, no, it's okay. Don't worry about it." Stephen kept shifting his gaze from Lillian to the shattered glass and back. "I'm sorry, ma'am, really I am. I didn't know about the on-site tragedy—" Here, Lillian snorted and guffawed. "—but I want to make it up to you, even if it's just a little. Let's forget about the hammer and, uh…Oh! I notice that your eyes are due for a replacement."

When the eyes had first become available, their recommended life cycle was five years; the earliest models had been built with indicators in them, a circle around the iris that slowly lightened to gray, to indicate when it was time to replace them, though in the last two or three years, the feature had been phased out as people got them change more and more frequently. Lillian's eyes, however, were an old enough model that the indicator still existed, and the ring around the edge of her cow-like brown eyes was a pale, cloudy gray.

"Perhaps I can give you a free replacement—no charge."

Lillian sniffed a few times. "Perhaps. But you'd have to do both of us. We're both about due, aren't we, Michael?"

I winced. The manager looked at me, and I tried diverting my eyes, but it was too late.

"What? His are totally fine. Definitely more recent than yours."

"You must be mistaken. Why, we last had them done about five or six years ago, when he was recovering in the hospital from…well, from the accident." Lillian's voice fizzled to a whisper. She reached for my hand, which was gripping the arm of my wheelchair. I nodded slowly, my eyes wide and pleading at Stephen.

He paused before replying. "Oh. Um…I'm sorry. I must be mistaken, then. Perhaps I need *my* eyes replaced!" He laughed and Lillian joined in.

"Great! Now that that's sorted, when can we schedule an appointment?" she asked.

"How about in an hour? Once I get this glass all cleaned up? You'll be my first official customers!"

Lillian smiled. "We'll just go back home, then, since we *are* neighbors and all." She let go of my hand and turned toward the exit. "See you soon." She strode out purposefully, and I nodded at Stephen before wheeling after her.

#

My sister and I married identical twin husbands, Zachary and Clyde—tall, a gap between their front teeth, and small feet. They were both doctors, Zachary as an ophthalmologist and Clyde in the burn unit at the regional hospital. Lillian wanted nothing more than for us to marry a set of twins after we spent a summer watching the reality dating show *Twinterested*, which featured only sets of twins as participants.

I remember sitting on the couch, basking in the air-conditioning as the muggy summer descended with a humidity that made the air thick like pudding, fighting Lillian for the remote control every Thursday night.

"Please, not this show *again*. Reality dating shows are *awful*," I said.

"But it's good shit to unwind to," she whined. "C'mon, Michael. This show is different."

"No, it isn't."

"Yes it is! It's twins, just like us!"

I sighed, remembering the previous week's episode, where Luke and Samuel had sabotaged two of the other sets of twins during a whitewater rafting competition that almost led to their competitors drowning.

"Those twins aren't like us," I said. "Not at all."

After the episode was over, she turned to me, eyes gleaming. "If these boring ass people can get on television, just imagine what our lives could be like," she said. "We're way more interesting!

She begged me to attend a twins-only festival the following summer. *Twinterested* only lasted one season, but not before spinning off into a much more successful show called *Twincest*, about some of the successful couples from the show who had gotten married and lived as swingers with one another. "We will not be like them," Lillian said, clucking as she changed the channel. "That's despicable. Where's the decency?"

"So no husband-swapping?" I asked. Honestly, though I'd hated *Twinterested*, there were parts of *Twincest* that turned me on.

She slapped me playfully. "Don't be gross."

We met Zachary and Clyde at a huge speed-dating event—it took place in a barn, with card tables and folding chairs set up over a floor of smelly, damp hay. Each set of twins was given a card with table numbers on it, and every four minutes we had to move to a new table. Taped to the surface of each was a topic of discussion: "Favorite movie?" or "Dream vacation destination?" or, as it said on the table where we met our husbands, "Babies?," a question which prompted stutters from Clyde and giggles from Zachary and me. I remember staring, mouth agog, as the two of them sat down in perfect duplicate, pulled out their phones in the same way when our four minutes was up, and asked for our numbers in an almost-rehearsed synchrony.

We shared the same wedding anniversary, October 14th; Lillian and Clyde got married right away, not even three months after the festival, and Zachary and I three years later, once our kind of marriage was legalized. My husband even took the time to plan a ceremony, but when I saw the invitations, "Mr. Zachary Nelson & Mr. Michael Pierce cordially invite you" printed in a rollercoaster-looping script, I called it off, burned them, and convinced him to elope.

#

"Hold my hand, Lillian," said Clyde. We were all in Zachary's office for our first replacement surgery.

"Why?" she said.

"I'm nervous. What if it doesn't work and I can never see you again? I want to at least be able to *feel* you."

Lillian laughed and gamely laced her fingers with his. Zachary and I looked at each other: he rolled his eyes.

When it was over, Clyde and Lillian were both crying—that was pretty typical for a first-time procedure, that the mind wasn't prepared to experience in full force something that it had compartmentalized, reduced, or erased completely—but it had worked. They blinked the tears away and stood from their chairs together.

"Thank you, Zachary. We'll see you both for dinner, yes?" asked Clyde as they exited the room. I envied the way they walked together, like a constant, imaginary waltz was playing for them. Zachary and I bumped into each other, clasping and unclasping hands—I coveted their grace, but loved, needed, thrived upon the affirmation of my body coming into contact with his again and again.

"Are you ready, Michael?" he asked me. I nodded, my eyes still lingering on the doorway, his hand lingering on my leg.

I stood and walked to one of the operating chairs. "Yes." He lifted his hand and reached for the anesthetic. As he twisted the cap off, I murmured, "Zachary, I'm scared."

"It's okay. Whatever you see, whatever your brain shows you…it's over. It already happened, and I am here waiting for you."

I was silent for a few seconds. "Kiss me before you do it. I at least want to be able to *feel* you." We both giggled—lately, we had begun to imitate our twins, parroting their dialogue, which often bordered on cheesy.

Zachary leaned forward to kiss me, our stubble rubbing and interlocking like two bramble bushes growing together. "See you soon, okay?"

The bottle of anesthetic came into view; I watched Zachary's gloved hand squeeze, and in splashed the drops. I was surprised by how cool they felt; I had expected them to burn.

The memory—the technical term is "experience"—bloomed in front of me like a cloud rolling across the sun.

#

It was the day after Lillian and Clyde's wedding. I was helping my sister pack her suitcase, one of those squat, hard plastic shells in the brightest lime green imaginable.

"I hope you enjoy your honeymoon, Lillian," I said, folding a pair of black slacks. "I can't believe you guys are going to Oslo for a month." The longest Lillian and I had been apart was six days, when my parents made us go to separate camps one summer, but we both got kicked out on the fifth day, pining for our twin and wanting to go home. "I'll miss you."

"Michael, listen," Lillian said. "We aren't coming back."

"What?"

"I want to stay there."

"There? But what about our twin houses, and our jobs at the art museum?" We had recently been hired as assistant curators at a nearby, small-scale museum, where we were permanently charged with curating a collection of paintings by and about twins.

"I changed my mind."

"About what?"

"This!" she said, waving her hands. "This whole stupid twin life."

"But you're the one who wanted this! The *Twinterested* show? You said you wanted us to be just like Mary Beth and Luanne! You wanted this for us…for yourself!" Even as the tears filled my eyes, I continued to fold and pack Lillian's clothes.

"Well, that was before I felt like we were a goddamned political statement! There was an op-ed piece about us, for Christ's sake!"

This was true: Lillian had put out wedding notices in some of the local papers, but the story had been picked up by a few larger outlets, calling for attention to marriage inequality, citing the tragedy of our circumstance—twin couples who found love but couldn't marry together—as proof of injustice. The *New Yorker* story, "Reflections of/on Inequality," had come out a week before Lillian and Clyde's ceremony, and it brought droves of journalists to the courthouse, eager to interview Zachary and me on how it felt to be slighted by the legal system, photographers ready to capture the sorrow in our eyes as we watched our twins married from the sidelines.

None of the press paid attention to Lillian.

"So you and Clyde are just going to move to Sweden and never come back? Has he found a new job? How long have you been planning this?" I placed a stack of dresses I'd folded into the suitcase and compressed them.

"I haven't told him yet."

"So what are you going to do, Lillian? How are you going to trap him there?" I placed the last of the clothes—a pewter blazer—into the suitcase as Lillian rose from the bed, trying to squeeze everything down so it would fit. "And what's going to stop Zachary and me from coming after you? We could get *married* in Sweden, you know."

She brought the suitcase lid down on my wrists and squeezed. "

#

The sharp pain jarred me out of the memory—the surgery was over, I could see again, and my eyes were watering. I had felt my wrists crunch under the pressure of the

suitcase lid with exactly the same excruciating intensity as when it had happened three years prior.

"The entire sensory experience will come back," Zachary had warned us before operating. "When I had mine done, I could taste the blueberry pie my mother served Clyde and me the day she told us about Dad." I had nodded silently; Zachary hadn't been able to eat anything with blueberries since that day.

But Lillian never managed to stay in Sweden, never even told Clyde she didn't want to come back. Clyde's surgery failed, his vision rapidly darkening, a relatively common risk of the surgery in its early days. The procedure, not yet legal in Europe, necessitated their immediate return and elicited a prolonged period of paranoia from Clyde, who refused to leave the country again until the surgery was available everywhere.

#

When we got home from the eyeball shop next door, Lillian excused herself to the bathroom. I sat in the foyer, rubbing the palms of my hands along the arms of my wheelchair roughly, my breathing heavy and my pulse quick.

"Michael, can you come help me?" Her voice, drifting down the hallway.

I wheeled myself toward the bathroom, from which poured a sharp, sickly citrus scent, a candle that Lillian insisted on burning despite my protests. She was trying to take off her pearls when I got there; she crouched down to get the clasp within reach of my hands. I undid it and watched the necklace fall from her throat to her waiting hands.

She turned to face me. "Thank you." Then, leaning toward me, she looked directly in the eyes. I watched her pupils dart back and forth, small and hardened and

searching. I felt a thousand fires come alive across my body, each follicle electric, and I felt a dull throbbing in my lower back. I breathed once, twice, three times before she spoke.

"That manager was right. Your eyes are newer than mine."

#

The game that Zachary and I played, the one where we quoted our twins, took on a more serious turn in the second year of our marriage. Lillian and Clyde had gone to a weekend medical conference in Orlando, so while Zachary was in the shower, I snuck over to their house and borrowed some of Lillian's finery, a sundress and a floppy hat and a spare pearl necklace—she'd packed her three best for the conference, but there were still at least six to choose from.

I put the clothes on and crawled into bed, waiting for Zachary to finish cleaning himself. He emerged and saw me, trying to cover himself with his hands—he never took a towel out of the bathroom, always exited fully nude—and laughed when he realized it wasn't Lillian.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Just pranking you," I said, rising from the bed. "D'you like my new look?" I spun for him, the dress lifting with the movement.

"Heh." It was a nervous laugh. A guilty laugh.

"Um…" I sputtered.

Zachary walked toward me. "I do," he whispered, his breath swirling into my ear. A pause, a few more exhalations that funneled into my insides and stoked the coal fire in my stomach. "Is that okay?" I nodded slowly as he pressed his lips against my neck.

And so the game evolved, the game where we stole our twins' souls and acted out their intimate moments. We ate meals in costume, went on planes in disguise, sometimes spent entire days living as our twins.

But it wasn't enough.

We snuck into their house, used their bed, cooked scrambled eggs in their pans.

But it wasn't enough.

#

"You promised me," Lillian hissed. "You promised you wouldn't revisit that horrible incident, not until you had to. You promised you would do that for me, after all these years of taking care of you like a baby, even after you destroyed *everything* we had."

"I had to see his face, Lillian. All of the pictures, the back-up hard drives where we kept the pictures, it all burned. I never want to stop seeing his face. I had no choice."

"You ungrateful shit. After everything I did for you!"

"You did *this* to me," I said, slapping my hands against the wheels of my chair.

"But I let you *live*."

"So you could keep me on a leash. The better to torture you, my dear," I snarled, and before I could say anything else, Lillian had wrapped one hand around my mouth to silence me. I tried to speak again, but the worlds were garbled, muffled against the palm of her hand. I felt her fingernails, sharp like scalpels, rake down my forehead—skin rent open, rivulets of rusty blood running down the side of my face—then hover above my left eye. "Lillian, no," I mumbled, but it didn't stop the agony, the ripping and the tearing of my eye being pulled from its socket.

#

It was only about a year and a half after the surgery was invented that all the kinks were worked out and an industry took off. Quickly, being able to change the color of your eyes was as much a fashion choice as the color of your hair. Gossip websites were constantly aflurry, trying to chronicle every starlet's change from brown to green to blue. The fashion world got involved, and suddenly the market was saturated with high-end designer colors: Smoky Chocolate Thunder from the House of São Guilherme, or l'Aurore from the duJardin line, the color of which shifted and shimmered like the aurora borealis.

Lillian, enamored of this ability to change her eyes, bounced from green to orange to black to red, patterns of plaid and stripes, or even an outrageous set with glow-in-the-dark stars for pupils. She had her eyes changed for major holidays, and even had a mismatched set that matched her wedding colors for her fifth anniversary. I stayed well away from her on changing days; whatever bad memory she underwent, it made her venomous, viperous, and vitriolic. The first few times she had them changed, I stopped over to compliment her new color, and it invariably ended in disaster: a plate thrown at my head, a punch in the stomach, and even an incident where she tried to light my hair on fire. I didn't understand why she went through the suffering so often.

Because the eyes were synthetic, they could be altered and affected in ways real eyes could not: some pairs came preloaded with a film that could be projected in front of you, a novelty which faded quickly because of the limit of one movie per pair. Enhanced night vision was an early modification, but scrapped quickly due to malfunctions in pupil adjustment that caused the eyes to short out.

The most popular (and most short-lived) adjustment was eye drops that produced hallucinations, a soft, glittery purple fluid called Sugarplum. The substance sold out in two days, and so vivid were the visions people experienced that it was outlawed within a week.

"Dammit," said Lillian at dinner the week the ban was announced. "I wanted to try that."

"Don't worry," said Zachary. "I managed to steal a little sample from work." From his pocket, he produced a urine sample cup with some of the shimmery liquid. "Enough for all of us."

Lillian hooted with excitement, but I was suddenly very worried—I wasn't thrilled about the prospect of all of us trying it together. What if Lillian did something crazy? But before I could protest or invent an excuse, Zachary had administered the drops to everyone but me.

"You joining us, Michael?" he asked, his voice soft and inviting. Silently, I tilted my head back and let the liquid enter.

What I remember is disjointed: desert oases and obelisks of fire, a piano with keys made of human teeth, kissing Zachary, and, toward the end, hands around my throat that shifted from a wizened hag's to crab claws to metal vises. It wore off on all of us at the same time—exactly an hour later—and we all snapped back to reality as Lillian tried to strangle me to death.

"Oh my god!" said Lillian, loosening her grip. "I thought you were a man coming at me with a knife!" Gently, she rubbed at my neck. "That Sugarplum is some crazy shit!"

Everyone laughed, but I had seen the glaze in her eyes shift to hot, thirsty anger before she let me go.

#

"Please, please help! Before it's too late!" Lillian shouted as she wheeled me into the shop.

"Oh my god! What happened?" Stephen, panicked and horrified by my bloody face.

"He—he goes into these *fits* sometimes when he remembers the loss of our husbands. I triggered it when I mentioned them, like a total idiot. I've never seen him do something this bad before. Please help!"

Stephen wheeled me into the back of the shop, where the surgeries took place. I felt the cool drops on my eye and in my empty socket, and breathed a sigh of relief as my worst memory blossomed in front of me.

#

"I'm going to fool Clyde," I told Zachary one day.

"What?"

"I'm going to dress up as Lillian," I said, "and seduce him."

"Michael…that won't work. He'll realize pretty fast that you aren't his wife—as soon as he tries to cop a feel." He pressed his tongue against the gap in his front teeth as he giggled, his hand sliding up my thighs and squeezing.

"I'll stop before then."

Zachary didn't say no.

So I hatched a plan: every Sunday, we took turns hosting dinner. On a night when it was our turn, I'd wait for Clyde to excuse himself to the bathroom and then follow him—when he emerged, I'd have quick-changed into one of my Lillian outfits.

So far had my dedication to deception gone that I had duplicates of all her clothing, and would make excuses to visit her early in the day to find out what her outfit looked like. That day, it was dark jeans and a yellow tank top—unusually lowbrow for Lillian—but it fit under my own T-shirt and slacks without any noticeable lumps or bulges. As for the lumps natural to Lillian's body, I could stuff something down my shirt as I put on the wig, which I had hidden beneath my pillow.

Halfway through the meal, a roast beef with a thick, mushroomy gravy, Clyde loudly clattered his silverware against his plate. "I'll be right back," he said.

"Me, too," said Zachary. They rose from the table at exactly the same time; their effortless unison entranced me, and I wished for once that I could sync with Lillian, or even Zachary, the way Zachary and Clyde did. "Clyde, you take the bathroom in our bedroom. It's nicer. We have scented candles in there." He got my eye as he spoke.

"Are you saying I smell?" Clyde stuck his tongue out the same way that Zachary did when he laughed. I felt a sharp tingling all over my legs.

They both walked away. Lillian and I continued to eat for a few seconds, then I rose quickly, feigning shock. "I think I left my towel on the floor this morning. I'm so embarrassed. Let me stop Clyde." I ran toward the bedroom; thankfully, the bathroom door was already closed with Clyde inside.

I peeled my Michael clothes off and exchanged them with the wig and tightly-packed wads of tissue paper beneath my pillow. I cleared my throat and tapped on the

door. “Clyde?” I said, raising my voice to imitate Lillian’s. “Michael sent me to make sure there were no towels on the floor!”

The toilet flushed, a churning, whooshing sound that echoed against the closed door. The sink ran briefly, then the click of the lighter we kept near the candle. The door opened, blowing a gust of Citrus Breeze in my face.

“What?” said Clyde, emerging.

My breath caught in my throat: he didn’t recognize me. “Nuh—nothing,” I said. I wasn’t sure what to do, afraid to betray myself with the hokey batting of an eyelash, or a sudden deepening of my voice. I knew I had to get him to go back into the bathroom so I could escape—Clyde would ask Lillian why she had disappeared, but they always argued about Clyde misremembering things, so I wasn’t worried.

I froze as he reached for my wig, to unmask me, surely, to reveal the real twin, but he only gently patted a flyway strand of blonde hair down. I breathed out, slowly, but suddenly his mouth was on mine and his hands were on my shoulders and I felt myself being steered toward the wall and then pressed against it.

So this is how it happens, I thought. *This is how they do it. Our own episode of* Twincest *after all*. I tried to remember the grip of his hands and the openness of his lips so I could tell Zachary, and I knew I should stop but I couldn’t and soon we were moving again, headed for the bed. Clyde kicked the nightstand and a book I had placed there—*Renaissance Re-Nascence*, an unwieldy coffee table book full of glossy reproductions of Renaissance paintings about twins—fell to the ground with a thud. His eyes widened, but I giggled and put a finger to my lips. *Shhhh*.

He started to unbuckle his belt even as we heard footsteps approach. I hoped it was Zachary, coming from the guest bathroom to see the seduction for himself.

"What the fuck?" I was frozen again—it was Lillian. "Clyde, what the fuck?" A pause, and then, "Michael? What the *fuck*!? He—this—it's supposed to be *mine*!"fsui

Clyde's hands fell from his belt as he looked at me, looked *into* me, then at the real Lillian, then at me again. "I, uh, I…." As he tried to pull his words together, Lillian pulled a knife from the back pocket of her jeans—did Lillian always carry a weapon?—and lunged at her husband, sliding the knife across his throat and plunging it into his temple. She pulled it out as he fell to the ground, then turned toward me. From behind her, more footsteps, heavier, faster: Zachary, at last.

"Lillian, no!" he shouted, but before he could cross the threshold, she made two huge strides across the room and slashed his throat, too. He slid down the door frame, the fingers on his right hand feebly trying to find purchase as the fingers on his left tried to cover the wound, to keep the blood in.

I rolled across the bed, away from Lillian, and ran toward him, but my sister was faster. She grabbed my wrist and put the blade to my neck. "We're going to the bathroom," she said, "to get the candle." Still gripping the bones of my wrist—not as small as hers, a flaw in the game I could never overcome—she marched me away from my gasping, bleeding husband.

When we got the bathroom, Lillian picked up the candle and inhaled deeply. "Ah, that's nice. 'A summery blend of orange blossoms and lemon with undertones of mint and cherry.' I like that. I'll have to pick that up next time I'm out." She yanked the wig

off of my head. “This wig is cheap.” She lowered the mass of blonde curls into the flame until it smoked and caught fire.

“What are you going to do with that?” I asked.

“I can’t leave a house with three dead bodies in it. I’m going to burn you all away. A tragic accident, I guess.” She contemplated the rapidly-burning hair in her hand; satisfied, she tossed it and the candle to the corner of the bedroom and watched for a moment as the carpet began to burn, too. Lillian pushed me back toward Zachary, his eyes more hazy and unfocused with each passing second. “I want you to watch him die,” she said. “This is your fault.”

She eased the knife away from my neck, and my muscles tensed with the anticipation of moving, of darting away from her, but she sensed it—of course she sensed it, standing next to her dressed-up doppelgänger—and the blade’s tip found itself almost buried in my lower back.

Zachary, by now, was beyond the point of speech, pale, still bleeding, and wheezing erratically for breath. I wanted so much to stab him again, or snap his neck, anything to end it: my husband had watched his father vegetate on life support for three years before his mother agreed to let him go, and was such a staunch believer in DNRs and timely acceptance of death that he had even worked it into our wedding vows—“I promise to let you die when it is time, to not prolong what is coming”—before we scrapped the ceremony and eloped.

But I wasn’t like Zachary, brave and ready for death, so I stood unmoving, afraid to feel the edge of Lillian’s knife puncture my flesh, to feel my nerves catch fire, so I

watched Zachary turn into a puddle as the smell of burnt hair and orange blossoms swirled around us in a thickening smoke.

My husband choked, rasped, and died, extinguished like a candle wick drowning in its own wax. I remember looking into his eyes—hazelnut coffee #2, freshly replaced the month before—and then the sharp, explosive burn of the knife as Lillian plunged it into my spine and twisted.

"The Price We Pay for Wholeness"

She braked the car so hard he tilted forward against his will. Against the seatbelt, too, thank God, as he might have smashed his head against the windshield without it. She moved in reverse and straightened her park job. She turned to face him.

"I don't really want to have this argument now," he said. He pointed out the window. "We're at the grocery store."

The building was a smooth concrete exterior, beige with a gaping maw where the electric sliding door used to be. There was no glass barrier separating the store from the rest of the world. Not since they invented the infrared insect-zapping lasers that stopped bugs from coming in. Humans could pass through it unharmed (probably). Sort of rendered the door a moot point. The company said it didn't fit with their united-with-nature vibes. They only sold organic, grass-fed, cruelty-free foods.

The shopping cart steered them. It had synced with their fridge. Knew they would run out of milk in two days. Saw their yogurt was fifteen minutes from expiring. The cart's panel flashed to remind them they hadn't bought bread in two weeks. Their bread (whole wheat, thin-slice, machine-aerated) had blue bacteria on it.

He hated coming to the grocery store. Where they had fully half of their verbal sparring matches. Voices hissing as they strolled past the vacuum-packed cereal bags and compostable milk jars. He thought when they invented the WiFi refrigerators and cabinets, it meant they didn't have to go there anymore. But hackers (pranksters, really) had figured out how to hijack the data that passed from kitchens to grocery stores.

Racked up four hundred dollars of carrots or sixty-eight bottles of wine. Most people accompanied their carts to stop any malfeasance.

"Stop," she said, thrusting her arm in front of his chest and making him *oof*. "I forgot I wanted to buy some cashews." They had passed the nuts six aisles ago. He was already fourteen minutes deep into his grocery store tirade. The one where he explained how embarrassing it was to fight like this in public. They were passing the pet food section. Right on schedule. But the switch brought him up short, and as they turned, he had to change tactics.

"If you hate everything about me," he said, "why don't you just break up with me?" The words squeaked through his teeth. Spittle dotted his lips.

"We're working through it," she said. "There's an end in sight, but you keep deflecting. Not my fault." The cart halted her in front of the cashews and she picked up some of the cans. Turned labels to read them. One of the containers (a stupid square shape) announced in bright green letters it was made from bioplastic. Whatever that was. She considered one last one. Shook the can close to her ear. Put it in her cart.

"Are you serious?" he said. "Why would you pick those ones?"

"Why wouldn't I? They're even lightly sea-salted, just like you like." She pointed to the label through the cart's bars.

"But they're twice as expensive! It's not even like they're the good brand. Why are they so expensive?" He squinted at the two rows. Tried to figure out what the difference was.

"These ones are whole cashews," she said impatiently.

“And they cost seventeen bucks? Just because they’re not broken?” The can next to them only cost eight. Halves and pieces, the label said. He couldn’t believe this. Yes, sometimes he paid an extra forty dollars for vodka. Chunky, cloudy potato vodka imported from somewhere in Eastern Europe. But there was a prestige to it. What possible reason could anyone use to defend the price of these whole cashews?

“I heard the broken ones are actually a little poisonous still. That the reason they’re broken is because they exploded in the heating process and aren’t fully sanitized. The whole ones are safest. Isn’t it worth paying more,” she said. Gave the cart a gentle push to send it back to the aisle they’d left abruptly. “For the pure, whole thing?

“Another classic bullshit aphorism,” he said. “Do you even know how to communicate? I kind of fucking hate you, you know that?” He trailed after her. Whispered about how everyone was watching them and was she happy. She followed their shopping cart, retreading all the aisles they’d already seen. Rattled the jar of whole cashews as they walked.

"Bring Back the Cold"

1. What We Knew

The woman stood outside the legislature building with a sign that said "Bring Back the Cold" in blue marker. She wore a heavy brown coat and a knit hat, made of pink yarns that spiraled outward into darker and darker shades, almost white at the crown of her head and a bloody, embarrassed pink at the edges. At the middle of her forehead was a snowflake, white and embroidered right into the fabric. The hat clung to her scalp tightly, only a few strands of black hair peeking out. It was March, which was the new July, and seeing her so bundled made some of our armpits dampen with pinpricks of sweat.

Some of us didn't *want* the cold back: our houses, once remote and desolate, had become beachfront resorts that people flocked to so they could escape the heat, and suddenly our backwoods lot was coastal paradise. Some of us forgot the cold had ever existed, had suspected it was just a trick of the mind in our old age. Some of us had never known the cold, had been born into a world without it, green scum perpetually coating the surface of every pond, tap water tainted with the tang of algae.

Real information was hard to come by these days, of course—experts were liars and liars were experts—but it didn't stop us from seeking out the news channels, the ones we hadn't bothered to turn on in months or years. Surely they'd have dug up something about her, some explanation about why she stood there for three days with this sign, the edges of the white posterboard curling in the heat. Nobody had bothered to protest for six

months, a year—we couldn't even remember how long it had been—because it meant nothing.

2. The Handwriting Analyst

Six hours into her protest, they brought in a handwriting expert. The graphologist remarked how impressive and stern her writing was, how confident and sharp her lines were. "I mean, you just don't see penmanship like that anymore," he said. He was bald save for a ring of white whisps that lined the sides of his head. "You can almost feel the anger in those letters." He adjusted his green polka-dotted tie. "See how the Bs are more blocky than bulbous?"

A picture of the protestor, one of the three they'd made available on the newscasts—an unflattering one, where she had pulled her head toward her chest and quadrupled her chin—appeared on the screen. Someone, somewhere, a digital tech intern they'd plucked from the hallways of a middle school, no doubt, zoomed in on the sign. The Bs were retraced in a sloppy, bright red, almost like the eights on a digital alarm clock, and a brief glitch made a crosshatch of seven or eight interlocking lines, like a clumsily-drawn snowflake, appear in the bottom corner.

"That's always a hint. Blocky Bs mean anger and betrayal. Nice, flowy Bs mean someone who's in love. Or at least happy. Can you imagine anyone loving this old bag lady?"

"Why does being a bag lady mean she can't be loved?" asked the newscaster, Tanya Lasagna, or something like that. Her eyes, almost black on our oversaturated high-definition screens—we were too lazy to change the default picture settings—narrowed.

"When's the last time *you* loved an old lady?" the handwriting analyst said. "I divorce my wives before they get too old." He laughed.

Tanya Lasagna cleared her throat for almost fifteen consecutive seconds. We were impressed.

"Okay, okay. As I was saying. Let's take a look at those Os—typically, people draw them counterclockwise, starting from the top, but as you can see, her strokes start at the bottom and go clockwise up and around. Very unusual."

"What does it mean?"

"Well, we see this kind of letter-forming from someone who has learned late in life—outside the constraints of a formal education in penmanship, not that schools take much time to teach that anymore, really gonna put me out of a job here soon—or especially with second-language learners who are working with the Latin alphabet for the first time ever." The graphologist, whose name, Alexei Kelch, flashed on the screen as he finished speaking, stared into the camera significantly.

"So are you implying that, based on this woman's handwriting, we can infer that this woman…that she might be a Chinese national?"

But it didn't matter if he was implying it—the newscaster had done his dirty work for him, her question enough confirmation for half of us to turn off our televisions in fear or disgust.

3. The Climate Change Pundit

The man in the suit was soaked under the lights—it was the second day of the woman's protest, but this was perhaps *his* first time under a television set's rack of hot,

white bulbs. But even as he mopped up the beads of perspiration that dotted his hairline, he spoke with confidence. “Clearly she’s just some instigator paid by the Chinese to further the preposterous notion of global warming,” he said.

“I thought we had left that long behind us,” said the talk show host, who looked more pallid and clammy than sweaty. Some of us had always thought she looked like a revivified corpse, skin oddly bloated with water weight or perhaps embalming fluid, especially after her second stroke—why wouldn’t she just retire?

“And yet here we are, still having to entertain the absolutely nonsensical notion that the world is warm,” said the pundit. “But it’s always been this warm! I can remember my eighth birthday—now I’m a Sagittarius, so I was born in December—and it was eighty-eight degrees out there—eighty-eight on my eighth birthday, that’s how I remember. I mean, do we really think—”

“You’re such a fucking liar!” someone in the audience shouted. “This is all bullshit!” The censors couldn’t keep up, the bleeps coming milliseconds too late, turning his tirade into a storm of senseless soundbites. Security dragged the person off and the host apologized.

“Wouldn’t be your show if someone weren’t screaming about baby daddies,” the pundit said and grinned. A droplet of sweat rolled into his eye and he blinked spastically.

“I think you’re confusing me with a different show,” she said, patting at her wig. “I do human interest pieces.”

“Whoops. Hard to keep all of you guys straight, honestly. Anything that airs between two and five is daytime trash, y’know?” He shrugged. Some of us were offended—the daytime shows were what kept us company as we decorated and

undecorated our homes, pulling down pumpkins and snowflake garlands as the holidays passed one to the next. It was easier to miss them now since there were no seasons to remind us what time of year it was.

The host rearranged the talking points in her lap. "As you were saying—"

"Right, yes. Okay. Let's be honest. We've seen years of science prove that climate change is just a hoax. The planet warms up on its own, naturally. It's been happening for centuries, it's a normal pattern. Do you think the dinosaurs complained about global warming when it got too hot for them? I mean, sure, they died, but we're not dinosaurs. We can adapt. We have adapted!" He wiped at his brow again, this time with his tie; the silver fabric glinted in the light, except for the dark wet spot his sweat had left behind.

4. The Mythical Creatures Spokesperson

One of the fantastical rights groups sent a spokeswoman to a network. "We have reason to believe that this woman is actually a snow sprite. According to our research—" She pulled out a map of the United States, covered in stars. "—each of these represents a place where we suspect snow sprites have been found."

"That's a lot of stars on there," said the anchor, a young guy with his hair up in a ponytail—he was new to the station, but our longtime favorite had recently died of liver cancer. "Why are there so many?"

"Well, we're fairly certain the sprites live on mountaintops—where else will you find enough snow for them these days?—but even the tallest peaks are melting. Every

time a mountain goes bald—that's what we call it when the snow is completely gone—we think the sprite appears down on the ground."

"What peak would she have fallen from? There are no mountains near the capitol building."

"Well, it's almost certain she would have travelled there after falling."

"So it's possible she fell from, say, the Himalayas?"

The woman furrowed her brow. "Possibly, I suppose."

"So she *could* be a Chinese spy."

"Uh…"

"Just a thought I had," said the anchor, pulling a pen from his breast pocket to scribble something on the paper in front of him.

"Well, as I was saying. Documents hackers have acquired from government servers—"

"We both know discussing hacked documents is illegal," the anchor interrupted, twirling the pen between his fingers.

The spokeswoman paused. She chewed her bottom lip, which had been pierced in one corner with a diamond stud. "According to hearsay—" She stopped and looked at the anchor, who gave her the smallest nod we'd ever seen. "According to hearsay, sprites can only last on the ground for a week, maybe two."

"So this woman—sprite, maybe—doesn't have much time left." The anchor nodded as he spoke, then scribbled some more. "Live journalism, folks. This story is unfolding before your very eyes."

"We need—someone in the capital needs to offer up their home. Their refrigerator. Their meat locker," the spokeswoman said. "We have no idea how long this snow sprite—"

"If that's indeed what she is, and not a Chinese spy," the anchorman said over top of her.

"—has left to live—she is *not* a spy, don't be an idiot—"

"I mean, this would be a very convenient smokescreen, a grand old distraction, classic tactic—"

The spokeswoman slammed her fists on the desk. "For Christ's sake."

"After all, aren't you the same advocate that showed up in Florida to protest the rights of the gatorpeople, and the woman they interviewed about the Bat Boy of Birmingham a few years back?"

She spluttered.

"Of course, you went by a different name both times, and your hair was different, and it looks like you maybe had some…renovations done, which, who hasn't." The anchorman laughed and ran his fingers down the bridge of his sculpted nose as the screen behind him projected images of a woman, strikingly similar to the woman sitting with him, being interviewed by other news stations. "You're clearly just as much a paid distraction as *she* is. So now that I have you here, do tell—what's the *real* story?"

The spokeswoman looked into the camera. There was a pause, the kind that made some of us cling to the soft, ratty fabric of our armchairs, and then she spoke.

"Whatever your name is, if you see this, we're fighting for you."

We turned off our TVs in disgust. What a lunatic.

5. The Neighbor on the Internet

Nobody wanted to hear from the woman who claimed to be her neighbor. She tried to contact all the local stations and even a few national ones, but they all dismissed her. She reactivated an old blog where she used to post crockpot recipes for things like Jell-O roast beef and snow pea winter stew, and she made a post—a testimony, really—about her neighbor.

"I know have been familiar with this woman for sixteen years, but I can assure you she doesnot a Chinese spy, a snow sprite, and paid protestor! She's a nice lady. We see each other at the grocery store. She buys a many of bailan melons at the supermarket!"

The post went on for eight or nine paragraphs, but many of us were so bothered by the weirdness of her writing, by the tiny glitches and twitches in her sentences, that we gave up and scrolled down to the comments. They were very active—it was the internet, after all—and we were far more captivated with what we found there.

"Everything in this post sounds like it was run through a translation engine."

"Bailan melons is what the *Chinese* call honeydew!"

"The geotag for this post says it originates from the Chinese embassy in Vancouver…"

And the diligent replies to each of them from the woman who wrote the post:

"I was never very good with English, apologies. The melons we had were from the Chinese grocery in our neighborhood. I fled to the Canadian embassy when they were trying to round us all up, wouldn't you?"

There was a stream of hatred there, too, so strong that we had to close our eyes. We thought about commenting back, on attacking some of the attackers, but we didn't feel like getting caught up in a flame war, annoyed by the idea of an inundation of notification emails that we couldn't unsubscribe from, no matter how many times we told them to leave us alone.

6. News Crews on the Scene

The news crews—we'd taken to calling them new-screws under our breath—rushed to set up live streams of the protest, splaying their cameras in a semicircle around the woman and her sign. They were careful to make sure none of the cameras could be seen, even peripherally.

Their broadcasts ran continuously, but no one was watching, really: there wasn't much to see, just the woman standing there with her sign. She wasn't responsive to questions, even when the crews heckled and badgered her: "What's your name, sweetcheeks?" and "Why don't you just go home?" One of the camerawomen even shoved the protestor—she stumbled but kept her balance, never lowering her arms, never making eye contact. Some of us thought it was in poor taste, but most of us were just annoyed she didn't react.

At the end of the third day, there was a ground-shaking boom. All the cameras swiveled in the direction of the noise and the seven or eight people who were still watching the streams could hear the crews speculating in whispers about whether it was a bomb, or a fracking earthquake, or something else entirely. Their cameras could pick up a plume of smoke and a jet of fire on the horizon, but the images were blurry, their lenses

aperatured and adjusted to focus on the protestor bathed in the blinding brilliance of their lights.

But even as they pivoted their cameras, there was a yelp from where the protestor was. The crews, we came to understand, didn't know what to pay attention to. Some of the feeds stayed trained on the fire, but others tried to swing back to the woman and her sign, except that she was gone. There were two figures running into the distance, but it was dark and we couldn't tell by silhouette alone if the woman was one of them—we couldn't even tell if the two figures were holding hands or if one of them was dragging the other.

The only thing left in the semicircle of lights was her sign, floating downward in the breeze like a single giant snowflake.

7. What We Decided

Only some of the cameras turned back—the others stayed focused on the fire, apparently *just* a warehouse exploding from a gas leak, and they got fired for missing the story. The footage of the runners got analyzed on every talk show, every news program, every "independent" online network. Someone pointed out that one of the retreating figures seems to pull off a hat and discard it, but no one could find the hat the next day to verify if it's knit and pink. Another pointed out that you can hear the sound of fast footsteps on the pavement in the moments before the explosion—probably just some runners out for a nighttime sprint, his cohost suggested.

The Chinese government released a few statements, as did our own, but they were unconnected, unrelated: one about trade embargoes, another about cruelty toward

immigrants and dual citizens, plus one offering condolences to the owners of the exploded warehouse. Someone on one of the news channels—it's hard to remember which one, now, since we were trying to watch them all simultaneously—made a connection that the warehouse was full of air-conditioning units, awfully coincidental considering the message on the protestor's sign, but no one took the bait and the theory died.

None of us reached the same conclusion; some of us staunchly knew she was sent by China to derail new coal legislation, while others of us just believed she was a frustrated, fed-up woman. A few of us told our children the easiest truth for them to swallow, that she was a magical creature sent from a mountain to teach us something we'll ultimately ignore. We spent a week, maybe two, trying to crack the case, trying to follow links to websites with juicy theories that are dead or disappeared when we look for them again. She became an afterthought, and soon we forgot her. We turned the air conditioner up a degree and watch the oak tree across the street, dried out, hollow, burst into flame under the scorching sun, ashes caught in the breeze like a blizzard.

“Hacking Practice”

The First National Patel Bank had one of the most advanced cybersecurity teams around, a feature they marketed on their billboards. “We can keep your identity safe,” the ads said, with bars of gold peeking and glinting from behind a half-closed safe door, the big metal kind with a many-spoked wheel on it.

They didn’t tell their customers that they’d faced an attack every single day since they opened their doors three weeks ago—they didn’t want to scare them off. “Maybe it’s our fault for being so boastful,” the president of the bank said in a meeting. “We issued a challenge, and now we have to face off.”

“It’s just amazing,” said the head of the cybersecurity division, who was the president’s sister. “All the attacks originate from the same place. Why is this one IP address coming after us?”

“How many times have they breached our walls?” the president asked. He liked the solidity of the word “wall,” had almost chosen the other ad mockup which touted the company’s extensive firewalls, where the image was of a brick wall on fire, but if you looked close, the fire was made of little red analog ones and zeroes.

The cybersecurity head grimaced and drained her little paper cone of water. “Out of the twenty-one attacks we’ve faced, they successfully cracked our defenses nineteen times,” she reported.

Her brother checked over his shoulder to make sure the door was closed. “How much money have we lost? Have all accounts been compromised?”

She threw a packet of papers on her brother's lap, columns of numbers in tiny print. "That's the thing. Not a single dollar. They breach the accounts and take nothing."

The president shook his head. "Why? And what was different the two times they couldn't make it past our defenses?" The mechanisms in his chair whined as he tilted back.

"It's the security system we have in place on our top accounts, the million-plusses," his sister said. "It's so complex I'm not sure even *I* could crack it. Six layers of two-thousand-forty-eight-bit encryption." She didn't add that, once that was cracked, potential hackers would have to face a series of Sphynxx 8.8 riddles that *and* play a virtual round of pinball on a simulation that titled every eighteen seconds. She'd created all the games and puzzles that protected the accounts herself, but didn't think her brother would take kindly to knowing that she was being paid to basically do the work of an indie game designer. She knew they were good, though—she even sold a few of the systems to some of the major banks and quietly pocketed their payment. She didn't need anyone to know she was farming out her services to other banks.

"And it's holding up? Should we employ it on all the accounts?" The president scrolled through his phone until he found the number he needed, the cousin who did their marketing. He could have her retool the billboards to showcase their eight-hundred-ninety-nine-bit whatever it was his sister was talking about.

The cybersecurity head grimaced. "I…I don't know. I'm not sure how long it's going to hold up, to be honest. The second time they tried it, they got pretty close to cracking through."

"How close is pretty close?" He swiveled in his chair.

Whoever this hacker was had rammed through all six walls of encryption like barbarians with a felled tree crashing through a mead-hall's doors, but got tripped up first on the riddles—she'd written some of her own riddles for the Sphynxx software, ones she came up with driving to and from work that she even searched to make sure hadn't been thought of before—then for two days on the pinball game. The secret was to launch the pinball exactly three seconds before the tilt, where the angle of the simulation's board would cause it to bounce off a bumper and into the bonus hole. She opened her mouth, prepared to launch into the explanation, but her brother cut her off.

"Just make sure no one finds out that their accounts have been accessed, yeah?" the president said. He played with the little Zen garden, the only thing he kept on his desk.

On the twenty-second day of the hacks, the hacker, whose IP address traced to Camden, New Jersey, cracked through the six-layer encryption on the First National Patel Bank's biggest account, which contained eight million dollars, but did not steal even a penny. The cybersecurity head found a message in her inbox, though.

"Thanks for the trial run," it said. "I've been scoping out all these different banks to see what kinds of obstacles are out there and if I could work my way through them. You have some pretty cool ones, maybe the best of any bank I've seen—that fucking pinball shit? Genuis."

The cybersecurity head was elated: she knew her brother believed in her and her methods, but he didn't *understand* them. Even if she'd been defeated, at least it was by someone who appreciated her art, her ingenuity in crafting cyberdefenses. She was

conflicted about showing her brother: she wanted to prove she *did* deserve a raise, but at the same time, she'd failed, and he might fire her.

The next day, all the major banks' security walls fell, their accounts all drained to zero.

"Thanksgiving"

A car door slammed. I tensed.

I'd done a head count only three minutes ago, knew everyone was accounted for—that meant that it could only be a van full of men. They'd have handcuffs, a pair for every one of us. Ninety-one. I'd counted.

I was hanging my coat in the closet. In this building, a banquet hall nestled in the middle of a park, the closet was its own room. The door had a lock. I wondered if throwing the deadbolt and staying inside, trying to find a way out—was there a secret trap door in the floor?—counted as betrayal. *Told you so, goodbye and good luck.* That's how it would look, and everyone would remember me that way as they got shuffled to jail cells or deported back to countries they'd never visited, places we were from only ancestrally.

Everyone already thought I was weak for skipping the last two Thanksgivings, for blinking away a mist of tears if someone mentioned my dead parents. Their estimation of me was not correct. I opened the door and stepped out. But there were no men in bulletproof vests, no family members pressed up against walls being patted down or shackled. Nobody even noticed my triumphant exit from the closet.

"Oh, there you are," said Josie, a cousin—second or first twice removed, I wasn't sure how that worked—older than my dad and not someone I usually talked to. She reached out and pinched my cheek. "Your parents would be so proud of how well you're doing. I'm so glad you're here."

I grinned my way through it, though I didn't think anyone was happy to see me. Their eyes tracked me warily, their hugs vacant and brief. I had just been trying to warn them.

Through the building's glass front, I saw Morgan, a first cousin, my favorite one, and her boyfriend, who was holding his daughter's hand, guiding her through the parking lot. I couldn't believe Morgan would date a guy with a baby, but her mom told me she had changed since her year abroad working in refugee crisis management. "Syria really changed her. She's more serious, more compassionate," she'd said over the phone when I'd called the day before.

It wasn't possible to enter a family function without confronting a deluge of people trying to embrace you, people whose names you could barely remember spitting up facts about you that you'd forgotten, a swarm that lasted at least ten minutes. I paced in front of the closet door and waited for Morgan to get through—at minute seven, she broke away without so much as a backward glance while her boyfriend and his daughter got swallowed up.

"Dude, what the fuck is this shit you're telling people about the feds coming to arrest us?" she said once she'd reached me, ducking and darting through outstretched arms on her way.

I looked at the floor. The carpet here was gray, with shiny black spots where gum had been trod into the fibers. Morgan tapped her foot. "Hold on," I said. "You just left your new boyfriend and his kid to get eaten by the mob."

She squinted. "Don't joke about that." She'd been paranoid for years that we were secretly a mob family, that the various restaurants and warehouses were fronts for the real

source of our family's wealth. "Organized crime is really serious—and the mob is nothing compared to the sort of shit going on where I just was." I hadn't pegged Morgan for the sort to constantly reference her humanitarian trip, but she'd brought it up less than a minute into our talking.

"I don't *really* think that anymore," she said. "That's dumb kid stuff." I didn't think dumb kid stuff included calling me at two o'clock in the morning, hyperventilating about a black car she swore was circling her block, probably a rival mob family planning a hit on her and her mother. There was no way she was over it: she'd been on that warpath since she was seventeen.

I didn't want to push it. "Okay. You still just ditched your boyfriend and his daughter."

"They'll be fine. Or they won't be," she said, "and that's how I know to break it off."

I ushered her into the closet, clicking the door shut behind us. The coat closet had been a haven for us in the past—in middle school, we'd hid there to compare trading cards, tilting them to see their holographic pictures glint. "I won't ask you about your trip," I said. "I'm sure you'll spend the rest of the day answering questions about it. Was it fun?"

"Well, fun maybe isn't the word. But it was rewarding." Morgan nodded. "Yeah. Eye-opening. I'm glad I went. You sort of realize what's important when you're out there. You get serious. So no more mob stuff. No more goofing around. I got myself a stable relationship, a good job. I'm for real." She slid out of her coat, one of those puffy

metallic aqua ones that looked like they could keep you warm even in outer space, and grabbed a hanger.

"Cool," I said. "Just saying, I never didn't allow you to have a conspiracy theory. I guess that doesn't go both ways." I laughed, but we both felt the needling, the bitterness in my words.

"There's a difference," she said. "You keep telling everyone about your crazy bullshit. I only ever told *you* about my idea."

"Not like it matters. Nobody listened. We're all still here." I rapped my knuckles gently along the walls, pine paneling on top of drywall, listening for hollow echoes, just in case there was a hidden crawl space. "Knock on wood."

"My mom called me three times this week asking if I thought we should cancel our RSVP. If your plan was to incite a panic, then you did it. They might not have heeded you, but they are definitely paying attention." She slid the hanger onto the rack, but her coat tipped to one side and fell to the ground. She grabbed it upside down and a pack of cigarettes fell out.

"You're smoking again?" She'd started and quit more times than I could count. "Don't tell me you smoke around the kid." I moved from one wall to the next.

"Of course not," she said.

I gave up on the walls, scanning where the corners met the floor for irregularities, weak points. "Your mom said you weren't even coming."

"I swear she's losing it," Morgan said. "Last week I had a job interview for a graphic design position and I find out today everyone thinks I got hired as a CEO of marketing." She stuck the cigarettes back in her coat pocket and zipped it shut, but held

onto the lighter, flicking little flames into existence, snuffing them out. “Remember when we tried to smoke weed in here a few years ago? That was a stupid idea.”

We’d both choked on the skunky smoke and spent the rest of Thanksgiving paranoid people would smell it, wrapped up and trapped in the fabric of their coats. “It wasn’t even a good high.”

“Is that why you shut us in here?” she asked. “I could use a toke or two.”

“Won’t that soil your new, holy image? Your mother made it sound like Syria turned you into Mother Teresa.”

“Are you kidding? Mother Teresa probably got high every day to deal with everyone’s bullshit. I got high at least once a week out there. Primo stuff.” Morgan flicked the lighter and held her other hand over the flame, playing chicken as she dipped her palm closer and closer. She let the fire go out and reached for a black mink coat. “Whose is this?”

I walked closer to inspect it. “Aunt Velma’s,” I said, running it between my fingers. It was softer than air.

“See, everything about this coat screams ‘mobster’s wife.’” She sunk a hand into the right pocket and pulled out four mothballs. The smell spiraled into my nose. We choked. Morgan dropped them back into the pocket and we waved our hands until the scent dissipated. She took it off the hanger and slid it on. The collar was high and thick. The fur tickled the bottom of her chin. It swallowed her neck.

“Do you really think a mobster’s wife would be worried about moths when she could just buy a new one?” I asked. Aunt Velma had been a widow for a couple years,

but if the Teslas she bought for all her grandchildren when they graduated from high school was any indication, she wasn't strapped for cash.

"I'm just kidding." She let the coat fall off one shoulder. The effect would have been more dramatic if she weren't wearing a hot pink top and faux-fur-lined boots.

"Is that code for 'insufficient evidence?'" I said. I snatched the coat off her and put it back on the hanger.

"That used car salesman winked at his manager when I told him our last name! How doesn't that make you think 'mob, mob, mob!'" Her eyes flashed like a siren. I could hear it in her voice, how close she was to cliff-diving back into her mob idea. Your manias never leave, even if you pretend to be too sophisticated for them.

"He was probably using some secret car salesman code to tell his boss how hot you are or something. It's no big deal."

"That's still kind of a big deal. There's enough pervy-ass nonsense in this world without a winking code for sleazeball salesman. Why does only your fear get to be real?"

I looked around again, which was silly, because I knew there was no one nearby. I'd stolen Morgan away into a closet, for Christ's sake. But I still turned off the light and grabbed a coat—not Velma's, but a crinkly polyester one left over from the eighties, probably Uncle Vic's—and threw it over our heads. It rustled, like wind roaring past my ears on a downhill bike ride.

Morgan flailed. "The fuck?"

"Just in case," I said, and she laughed until she heard I wasn't.

"Oh, you've got it bad."

I nodded, but I wasn't sure what she thought I had bad—paranoia or proof. I assumed the first but pretended she meant the second.

She sighed. "Okay, lay it out for me. Mom was only giving me pieces. You know how bad she is at telling stories."

I made sure to fluff the jacket as I spoke so it broke up our talking. Just in case any bugs found their way in on someone's collar or button. "They're going to round us up."

"Jesus, do you really think that?" She sank to the ground to sit with her legs crossed and the coat slid off her head.

I squatted to her level, holding the coat overhead like a canopy. "I don't get why I'm the only one who's worried. I mean, the last three holidays, they've rounded people up. Today's a holiday. It just seems like they'd try to run another purge."

"Why are you so convinced they'll come for us? We didn't do anything wrong."

"None of the people who they've taken did anything wrong."

"That we know of."

"The only thing they did was check the new box on the census forms, the one that allows them to identify as nonwhite." The forms last year had had a different option, one for Middle Eastern and North African, that hadn't existed before. "Everyone in our family picked that option, too."

"Well," Morgan said, "we are."

I rolled my eyes, but it was dark so she didn't see. "Obviously! But it's weird that it's suddenly a choice. Why separate us?"

"They did the same thing to Latinos like, twenty years ago," she said. "Spun them out into their own thing. To like, better understand their needs as a community or whatever."

"So they said. But that was when people started panicking about illegal immigration. Because suddenly the immigrants were a category, a separate thing. A more easily hateable thing." I was basically parroting a sociology professor I'd had once. I switched from a squat to sitting, legs sore.

"What does that have to do with us? We aren't immigrants." Morgan flicked the lighter on and off, her face illuminated from below like a campfire.

"Now they can generate a list, of you and me and everyone else, and the list has our addresses and our phone numbers—"

"And everyone else's," Morgan said. "They've always had all that information about us. I mean, for God's sake, *Amazon* has that information about all of us." She raised the lighter higher and the flame kissed the coat. Smoke curled in our faces. "Shit!" she said, and I dropped the coat, stamping on it.

"Right, but now they can, like, filter it. Like a customizable search function, and we're all right there. Every self-identified Middle Eastern North African person. They can see where we live, figure out which phones to tap, which neighborhoods to watch or poison or raid." The crinkling of the coat against my foot broke up my words. I didn't know if Morgan could hear me.

The air whooshed as she stood. Her knees cracked. "Hopefully whoever owns that coat doesn't notice," she said.

"Where are you going?" I stood, too. I pulled the coat off my head.

She hugged me, the plastic of her lighter pressing into my ribs. “I’m glad you told me, because you clearly need to get it out of your system. I know how these people can be, and I’m sure they weren’t doing a good job listening.” She fell silent, still hugging me, then said, “I know you don’t like being asked this, but is everything all right?”

I wriggled out of her arms and poked at my tear ducts to see if they were dry.

“It’s okay if you’re not. You’ve had a hard two years. You’ve been strong.”

“That’s not what this is about,” I said, but the words were so wet in my throat. My cheeks burned. I was glad it was dark.

“Okay. Just checking.” Morgan patted my arm. “I don’t really think we have anything to be afraid of.”

“And why not?” I tried to get my voice under control, eliminate all the shakiness. I put the coat back on the hanger.

“I don’t think our family is the kind of people they’re looking for.” Her pocket lit up, phone screen glowing right through the material of her pants.

“You brought your phone in here? Jesus Christ,” I said. I switched the lights back on. “They’ve probably been listening to every word.”

Morgan looked fixedly at the ground, sticking the lighter back in her coat’s pocket. “I’m going back out there. Are you coming?”

I had to, I knew. I’d lost my cool, embarrassed that Morgan and likely everyone had tried to draw a connection between my parents and *this*, as if I were acting out. I hadn’t convinced her, but I still had time to convince her.

“Yes, sure.” We walked back to the party. “Where’s your boyfriend?”

She scanned the crowd. “Oh, Jesus, Mom’s introducing him to all the uncles.”

"They'll be busy for at least fifteen minutes," I said. The uncles were a real good-time gang. I'd never met a group of people who could spend three hours reminiscing on a single football game. They loved to talk over one another, their words like coppery beetles writhing over each other in one of those bug bags.

"Let's scout the dessert table, then," she said, and we hugged the perimeter, passing tables where everyone had set their purses but no one had bothered to sit yet. We passed the kids' craft table. Someone had brought coloring books and a bunch of boxless, broken crayons, mostly in shades of yellow.

Morgan stopped and grabbed a lime green crayon. "This is Emmy's favorite color." She didn't have a pocket, so she handed it to me. "You mind?"

I put it in the pocket of my cardigan. "Who's Emmy?"

"My boyfriend's daughter. Duh."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry. Thought her name was Ellie."

She shook her head. "My mom again. I keep correcting her but it doesn't seem to stick."

We narrowly avoided a crowd of people who called us over. We waved and told them we'd be back right away. "You really think I'm freaking out for nothing?" I asked.

"Totally." Morgan laughed. "It's like. Okay, this is going to sound bad, but I don't mean it like that, because obviously it's bad that these people are being snatched *at all*, but we aren't like them."

"How do you mean?" I said. We reached the dessert table. I tried to feign disinterest in what she was saying, so I pointed to a plate of cookies. "Don't eat those.

Those are the ones Maria made." Maria always brought chocolate chip cookies, not even from scratch, but her house was so full of cat hair that her baked goods were furry.

Morgan gagged. "Noted." She picked up a cookie from the next plate. "These ones are okay, right?" She bit into it before I answered and rolled her eyes in delight. "Mmm. Double chocolate macadamia." She finished the cookie. "Anyway, I don't think we're in any danger. I mean, look at our last name. Stevenson. It's not like we're posting on Facebook about going to the bin Laden family Thanksgiving. For Christ's sake, we're Maronite Catholic!"

The word "Maronite" was enough to clog my nose with the memory of the incense burning through the thurible in the small, overstuffed church where a thousand mouths sung in Aramaic. "That's a meaningless distinction," I said. All the distinctions were meaningless.

"We're children of children of children," Morgan said. "They'd never come for us. I'd be more worried about them tracing our college tuition back to mob money and seizing our degrees, firing us from our jobs."

"Shut the fuck up about this stupid mob bullshit," I said, cracking a pizzella—we weren't Italian, who brought them?—between my fingers. "I'm talking about something real!"

Morgan picked up another cookie. "Okay, asshole," she said.

"Fuck. I'm sorry, I didn't mean that." But she was already walking away. I grabbed her wrist, but her skin, lotioned and buttery, slid through my grasp. I didn't chase after her. She headed back toward the coatroom. I walked in the opposite direction, toward the food.

It was all laid out, though we probably wouldn't get to it for another forty minutes. There were two serving trays with turkey and stuffing, of course, but tucked next to them, incongruous next to the giant vats of green beans and mashed potatoes, were the kibbeh and the bowl of hummus, the grape leaves and the slices of pita bread. These were the foods people wanted most—I once witnessed a near-trampling as people rushed for the plate of raw kibbeh drenched in vegetable oil—and every other year they were first on the buffet table. This year, they were almost disguised.

I kept walking, drifting through the crowd, spectral. The lights kept catching people's necklaces, gold crosses hanging just so on their cleavage or the chest hair sprouting from the V-neck of their sweaters. Jeremy, one of the guys closer to my age, stopped me, hand resting heavy on my shoulder.

"How's the furniture store?" he asked, and I asked him how working as a sports physician was. He flinched as I reached for his necklace—I hadn't realized how intimate the gesture was until my fingers brushed against his skin. His cross was the kind that also had a crucified Jesus on it, and the figurine was exquisitely rendered; I could even make out individual thorns and rivulets of blood.

"Where'd you get this? It's nice." I let it drop and held my hands behind my back.

"Oh, this?" he asked, running it through his fingers. "I've had this since, gosh, First Communion? Uncle Joe got it for me." Vaguely, I remembered a much younger Jeremy being told not to suck on his necklace, spitting the cross out of his mouth with a trail of drool hanging off Jesus' feet.

"And you're suddenly wearing it again?" I asked. I wondered if he still stuck it in his mouth when he was deep in thought.

"It just seemed like a good time to get back to my faith." He let go of the necklace, but the chain was twisted, so he had to work it back to normal. "Losing Aunt Mel and Uncle Frank—it was hard on all of us. We all loved them."

My limbs went rigid when he said my parents' names.

"I had to get back to my roots to get through it. And with my mom being diagnosed with MS." He choked and put his hand on my shoulder again, leaning on me to get through the sentence. "I know how you feel."

"Uh huh." I unmoored myself from the discussion. A lot of people in the family had, at various times, tried to sympathize with me by burdening me with stories of their own woe. I was only equipped with one response, and it always involved walking away, so that's what I did. I turned back to look at Jeremy—someone had already stepped in to hug him. He'd be fine.

I spotted Morgan with her boyfriend, the daughter nowhere to be seen, maybe out on the jungle gym with some of the other kids, and we made eye contact but she broke it too fast. She was still mad. I kept walking, and another aunt—a great-aunt—stopped me. "Vivica!" I said. If I didn't feign enthusiasm she'd yell at me.

"Aunt Vivica," she corrected.

I nodded. I had left the "aunt" off intentionally. She didn't need reminding that she had the advantage in our power dynamic. "How are you?"

"You know," she whispered as she drew me in for a hug. Her sweater left little pills of wool on mine. "I've always admired how sensible you are."

"Oh?" I said. Vivica did not usually compliment me.

"Yes! I think there's a lot of sense to what you've been saying. Almost didn't come myself, you know. I had similar fears. Watching the news three times a day can do that to you, make you nervous about everything. But I thought, well, if they're going to round us all up, at least I'll be with my family one last time!"

It was not a sentiment I shared, wanting to see them all one last time. I fixated on the centerpieces, cardboard turkeys with tail feathers made of ruffled red paper. Someone had even sprinkled iridescent leaf confetti on the table, little leaves in reds and oranges and golds dotting the plastic tablecloths.

"I just wish you'd stand up straight so people would take you seriously." Vivica straightened the turkey nearest her, angling its beak toward her.

My shoulders went stiff so fast they popped and cracked. "Thanks for the advice," I said. "I, uh…I need to go talk to Morgan. I think she's over there—"

"But you already have talked to her. I saw you two leave the coatroom. I haven't had a chance to ask her about her trip yet. Did she bring pictures?" I started to walk away, but she grabbed my hand. "Stay and entertain a bored old lady! None of my children bothered to show up." She groaned. "In-laws."

"I was wondering where Vivienne and Vivo were," I said. I wasn't, really. I hated talking to them because they were so like Vivica. At least I could pretend Vivica was horrible because she was old—though I had plenty of people to testify she'd been rude all her life—but her children, only ten years older than me, were just as bad.

"Yup. All alone! That's why I volunteered." She dipped a hand into a bowl of peanuts on the table. They were unsalted and tasted like dirt because we had a lot of people in the family with heart problems.

"Volunteered for what?" I reached for the bowl of cashews.

"To keep you company."

"I'm perfectly capable of keeping my own company." I split one of the whole cashews into halves with my fingers before I ate it.

"Afraid not." She had this smirk, a combination of the mean teacher from middle school and the friend whose parents had explained sex before yours had. "You're an old-fashioned fearmonger." On her left index finger, she spun a pocket rosary ring, thumb worrying into a pearlescent bead. I didn't know it was possible to disparage someone while praying a decade, but Vivica could apparently do both.

At the front of the hall, Uncle Victor whistled. "It's time to begin! Can we have the children come to the front of the room?"

The younger children ran, eager to be in the spotlight, but I saw a few stragglers, the nine- and ten-year-olds dragging their feet, insisting that they weren't kids anymore. They lined up and Uncle Victor pointed them toward, hanging off a flagpole in the corner, an oversize American flag. It was the kind that would have hung from the roof of a tall building to pick up the whipping winds or the cross breeze of an airplane passing overhead.

"The children are going to lead us in a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance this afternoon," Uncle Victor said, "and then Aunt Vivica will lead us in prayer before we begin the meal. Everyone, please stand."

The family oriented themselves toward the flag, their hands on their hearts. We had never done something like this—the flag had always been there, since I'm pretty sure this hall was used for the local fireman's ball, but we'd never paid it heed, certainly never

offered up our undying, indivisible devotion to it and all it represented. Some people were even filming it, too, big phones wobbling unsteadily in their left hands.

When it was over, all the bodies turned toward me—toward Aunt Vivica, really—like flowers following the sun. She bowed her head and, knowing that any one of the people there would cannibalize me if I didn't follow suit, I bowed mine, too, fingers reflexively weaving themselves together.

"Dear Lord Jesus in Heaven," she said, clearing her throat. "We thank you for this blessed holy day of family and love. God, we thank you for this incredible food, and we pray that you bless every crumb so that it nourishes and heals our bodies, providing the sustenance we need to continue to be followers of your divine light. We hope that the Catholic Church remains a home of guidance and wisdom for everyone in this family, even those who have chosen to leave it, for we know that your arms remain ever open in the kingdom of Heaven."

I let out an involuntary groan that I tried to mask as one of admiration—perhaps the people around me would believe the Holy Spirit had entered me. The prayer dragged on for another twenty seconds.

"Amen," she said finally, and we all murmured it back in response.

Uncle Victor clapped his hands. "We have some delicious, family-prepared food for everyone. Why don't we have Aunt Vivica's table go up first, and I'll be around to dismiss the rest of the tables one-by-one."

I stood. "Well, I better go find my seat," I said. Each long table was supposed to represent a branch of the family, and Aunt Vivica was not part of mine. I didn't know where I'd be, since the configurations were preplanned, locking family clusters together

like Tetris pieces to ensure there were no empty seats. I didn't have a cluster anymore; I was the coveted single square they could slot anywhere to cement a gap.

"Don't be silly," Aunt Vivica said. "You're right across from me."

"But my family—" I had hoped I'd still end up by Morgan. There was still time to convince her.

"We're all family!" she said. "Besides, who do you think put out the nametags? You know I'm a control freak." She tapped the little paper tent across from her and turned it to face us. There was my name, in overly-ornate green calligraphy.

I followed her up in line, but she insisted that her sister's kids and their babies cut in front of us—they'd put their tables together since no one from Vivica's family had come. A few steps behind Vivica, who tottered rather than walked since her hip replacement, I saw everyone load up on the turkey, white slices of meat that would inevitably be too dry and chewy. Cousin Sally slapped her son's hand when she reached for a slice of the pita bread and forcibly tipped two grape leaves off the spoon he'd grabbed. They plunked back into the pot. When her children made their way to the drink coolers, searching for metallic juice pouches, I saw her discreetly scoop some raw kibbeh onto her plate, dragging a piece of turkey over top to hide it.

By the time I was done eating—my plate only had a corn and mashed potato blend, since I hated most of the food they served at Thanksgiving, Lebanese or otherwise—Morgan had just gotten in line. "I think I want some dessert," I said. "Do you want anything, Aunt Vivica?"

I had timed it so I was at the table at the same time Morgan's family was. Her boyfriend held Emmy up so she could see the spread. He was in the midst of explaining

what baklava was when I sidled up. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the green crayon. “I heard this was your favorite color?” I proffered it to Emmy, who squealed and snatched it from me.

“Please don’t be mad at me,” I said.

Morgan balanced her plate and her boyfriend’s, one in each hand. “For pretending the crayon was your idea, or for being a massive dick?” she said. Her boyfriend glared at her and mouthed *language*. She set the plates down and began to build a cookie plate, stacking sugar cookies into a tower. When she lifted that plate, the flimsy coated paper buckled and the tower toppled. “Goddammit,” she said, voice dropping to a whisper when she remembered there was a child near.

“Both, I guess. I’m just really stressed out and nervous. I didn’t mean to snap.” I held out a gingersnap as a peace offering.

She took the cookie and set it back on the tray—I hoped none of the germaphobes saw that, or they’d have her head. “Here’s the thing. You didn’t tell me you were telling people the police followed you here, or that you ‘caught’ your internet being surveilled. Or that someone you know who works for the feds called you and you today was going to be a major crackdown.”

“Nobody was paying attention to me. I had to stretch the truth a little!”

“I really don’t think any of that qualifies as ‘a little.’”

“But the ideas are true, aren’t they?” I said. “Isn’t that what they did to the Pakistanis and Egyptians on July Fourth and Halloween? Doesn’t it make sense we’d be next?”

"Yeah, but they took a bunch of Brazilian families on Labor Day. That doesn't work with your theory, does it?"

I spluttered. A Noite do Roubo had confused me and the other back-alley forum dwellers for the entire month of September. "A distraction—a bone to throw us off the scent—"

"Maybe in your brain. You can't run around freaking people out so they think like you." She waved her boyfriend and Emmy off. "Go. I'll be at the table soon. Here, take your plate. Emmy, why don't you carry the cookies? Don't drop them, okay?"

Emmy nodded. "Thank you for the crayon!" she said, grinning. She was missing three teeth at the front of her mouth. The boyfriend escorted her away, looking over his shoulder at us doubtfully.

"What makes us so innocent?" I said. "Are you really so confident you could prove your loyalty if they came for you?" This was always the caveat, at least if the news could be trusted: the people that had been rounded up were asked to prove their loyalty, but, in the words of one report, "there had yet to be a single detainee capable of doing so." I had no idea what the tests were, what sort of performance I would be expected to put on, but I was confident it would be insufficient to save me.

"What's there to prove?" Morgan said. "I mean, we don't even speak Arabic. Nobody here knows a word." She looked, just out of the corner of her eye, a call for backup, maybe, or seeking an escape route.

"For real? You just went to Syria for a year!"

"On a humanitarian trip!" Her plate tilted and a roll fell off.

"And how easy would it be for the government to decide it was actually a trip to get radicalized by some insurgents?"

She had bent to retrieve the bread. When she came back up, she threw it at my face. "You're such an asshole. Do you even know what I was doing out there? Can you even imagine the shit I saw? The shit that's daily life for those people? And you have the nerve to accuse me of being a terrorist. You're out of your mind."

I ground the roll under my foot. "You're missing the point. I know that's not why you went out there. But it doesn't matter if we both know it. It's not about if we speak a language or worship facing Mecca or if our skin is a certain shade or if our family is fifteen generations established. Dicing yourselves up, seeking out all these minute differences—you're just playing into the problem!" I was shouting, I realized, and the room had already fallen silent who knows how many seconds ago. I wondered what word it had been that caught their ears and triggered the quiet, or if it had been a gradual hush like a tree losing its leaves in fall.

"Why'd you even come?"

"Because I felt guilty," I said, and that was true. I had come out of a sense of obligation, some niggling feeling in my earlobes and around my uvula and between my toes.

"And you swear that's the only reason? Not because you wanted to be right? It was more important to see yourself vindicated, even if that meant getting locked up, so you could have one last smirk at our stupidity. Ugh. I need a fucking cigarette."

"You're smoking again?" Morgan's mother had sidled up, somehow escaping my notice until she spoke. She shook her head. "We'll talk about that later. Why don't you both come sit down? Eric said he'd switch seats so we can all sit together—"

"No, Mom," Morgan said. "I'm done playing Behind Enemy Lines. We're not going to get through—you can't penetrate a brick wall of stupidity and assholery."

"You don't have to save me," I said. "I'm trying to save all of you."

Morgan's mom smiled, her head inclined. "Oh, sweetie. When he was sick, I promised your dad—"

I kicked at the leg of the table that held the cookies. They cascaded to the floor, pies flipping their spiced brown insides onto the carpet. My face burned. "Fuck all of you. I'm done. Just—fuck!" Every person in this room was a lost cause, I could see that now, could see how this would be explained away as a drunken rant, something with drugs, how my appearance at Christmas would be uneasy, maybe unwelcome. If there *was* a Christmas.

I walked to the coatroom—I was out of here. People turned back to their conversations, or maybe start new ones about what they'd just seen. I closed the door so I couldn't feel their eyes on me. In my hurry, all the coats looked the same, scratchy pea coats with oversize buttons. I found mine, the only navy one in a sea of black wool, and slid it on. The material squeezed against my shoulders as I stretched it across my back.

I had tried to keep it together, tried to make it through the day without acting up. I had failed. If I were the sort of person who cared, I would have been worried the way I behaved disappointed my parents, the way they'd been disappointed when I ran off with Morgan onto the trails that surrounded the banquet wall and threw snowballs at other

family members from the trees. But I had shown up, which I thought they would have wanted. I was done trying to oblige their memory, at least for the day.

The car doors slammed as I was doing the last button, trying to be delicate since the threads that held it on were frayed, one sharp tug from breaking. I tried to talk myself out of the tension in my muscles, an automatic clenching, but it had grown silent on the other side of the door, the susurrus thinning into nothingness. I heard a tinkling sound—a champagne flute breaking, a wineglass being dropped in surprise? I wasn't sure.

I grabbed the doorknob, but I remembered the tide of eyes that'd ushered me to the closet, the turned-down gazes and defiant stares that chased after me. I flipped the lock instead. I sunk my hand into my pockets and pulled out a tiny American flag pin, a leftover from kindergarten, the words "Lest We Forget" in looping golden script on the red stripes, and fastened it to the epaulette of my coat. From my other pocket, I extracted a full rosary, an antique made of cut, sparkling diamonds. I wrapped it around my hands, threading the crucifix through my fingers. I started to climb for the air vent in the closet's back corner. I could still escape.