

## ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: BEHIND A CRYSTAL VEIL, A NOVEL-IN-PROGRESS  
AND STORIES

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This novel-in-progress and collection of stories aims to explore the role of collective memory and storytelling within families. Each narrative is interested in investigating what parts of heritage are intuitively known by younger generations, as well as what pieces of family history are lost over the years. The concept of the title, *Behind a Crystal Veil*, stems from the idea that when looking back on the past, there are some memories that can be seen anew by younger generations through storytelling, yet other aspects of heritage that will always be obscured and veiled by the passage of time.

BEHIND A CRYSTAL VEIL  
A NOVEL-IN-PROGRESS AND STORIES

by

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## Snakes in Suburbia

It started one afternoon when Latif didn't return home from his afternoon walk. He was eighty-three years old, and he'd been living in America for nearly sixty years, but the last he remembered about that walk was turning onto Evergreen and the dry summer heat suddenly reminding him of home, of Baghdad. In a moment, he was an old man walking alone in his suburban neighborhood, and he was a young boy walking with his father on Baghdad's cobbled streets. Latif's wife, Habiba, had said he'd nearly stopped her heart when she found him hours later, resting beneath a stranger's car a few blocks over, his skeletal arms and legs spread out along the black asphalt, his face beneath the passenger door, hidden in shadow. Latif had told her he'd just been shading himself from the sun, as he'd done on so many a hot afternoon in Baghdad, when he and his brothers would nap in the shadows cast by buildings and market awnings. But in truth, he was just as frightened as she upon waking to find himself staring at the twisted coils of a car's underbelly without remembering how he had come to be there.

Ever since, the days seemed to merge together like a panoramic photograph, where eating lunch on Saturday ended with eating breakfast on Monday, and turning the corner at the elementary school was followed by a walk along the Tigris as a teenage boy, taking Habiba's hand into his own. Days came, days went, and sometimes days reappeared, like silver coins winking at Latif from a distance.

On one day, on this day, the neighbor's teenage son was refilling Latif's car fluids in front of their house. Habiba had asked him. It was a hot summer afternoon, and the heat was swimming above the blacktop like currents of smoke. Latif watched from a lawn chair near the garage as the boy removed a thin metal rod from beneath the hood of

Latif's small Toyota and wiped it clean with one smooth stroke. He hustled past Latif into the dim light of the garage and emerged struggling with the lid of a large canister. A splash of oil hit the pavement beside Latif's white tennis shoes as the boy stumbled by.

"Sorry, sir," the boy said, but Latif was not listening. The inky puddle forming near the white toe of Latif's shoe held his attention, a potion seeping into the cracks of the pavement, morphing, taking shape. It gleamed in the sunlight like a wet, black fish. Hints of color streaked the obsidian. Latif felt his hand drawn toward it, as if he could dip his fingers into the skin and right through the pavement into some other world. Instead, his hand struck the warm, rough surface of the blacktop, and the sleek ebony oil slid over his skin.

"Mr., don't touch that!" the boy shouted, and Latif drew back his hand quickly, startled. The pavement scraped his skin, stinging slightly, but his fingers slid away easily, greased with the oil. The sensation was familiar. He held his hand up to his face, the oil marking the lines of his palm black, staining his finger nails. He felt again that slick abrasion.

"The snake," Latif said. He was still studying the black lines of his palm.

The boy shook his head firmly. "No snake," he said. "Just a little spill." The boy walked up the white front steps of Latif's house and knocked on the front door, and Latif knew the boy was fetching Habiba to tend to him again.

Afterwards, Habiba took Latif inside to wash the oil from his skin. The oil stained a black spider web into the wrinkled creases of his hand. Latif stood with Habiba over the sink, and her hands worked roughly over his as black soapy suds bubbled up from his fingers. He felt her smooth, warm hands glide up and down from his wrist to his

fingertips, her nails scrubbing forcefully. He felt the frustration in her movements. “That snake,” he said again, attempting to explain.

In the first month of their marriage, when they were still living in Baghdad, a snake had entered their bed in the middle of the night. There, in the desert, it was common to find snakes hiding in dark places, curled inside mailboxes, under sofas, or in the corners of sheds. That night, Latif awoke to the strange sensation of something climbing down his leg and sliding over the arch of his ankle. It moved over his skin like greased sandpaper, a certain slick roughness like nothing he had ever felt. He threw off the blanket and caught the shadow of a black triangular head shimmying across the sheets and slipping over the side of the bed. He and Habiba conducted a thorough search, but they could find no trace of the snake, not how it had entered nor how it had left. Latif could not escape a certain feeling of intrusion, the way the snake had come and exited so quietly, like a thief in the night. He lay awake, thinking of that smooth scraping against his ankle, that slight pinch, almost unnoticeable, as if the snake had taken with it a small piece of his skin. In fact, the snake had left no physical mark; it had slipped away so easily, more like it had faded and joined with the darkness than been something that had come and gone.

Habiba turned off the faucet, wrapped his hands in a small green dishtowel, and looked him carefully in the eye. “There are no snakes here,” she said, holding his hands firmly beneath the towel. “Understand? No snakes.” Her eyes were pinched at the corners, heavy and tired.

Latif was certain that was not what he meant when he said it, but he couldn’t remember what he had wanted to say, and Habiba seemed to be pleading with him. He

could sense her sadness, a constant presence these days, the weight of it heavy and yet not quite visible. Latif nodded, trying to hold the words in his head as he spoke them.

“No snakes,” he said.

Still, for the rest of the afternoon, he would recall that sensation of his hand grazing the oil against the pavement and find himself standing in the driveway without knowing why he had come. Sometimes, he forgot completely and returned inside after a moment, but other times he lingered with only the distinct feeling that he had come in search of something.

Habiba joined him outside, sitting beside him at the end of the wood stoop. Latif was studying his hands, lacing his fingers together and moving his thumbs in a slow circle. He looked up to find Habiba studying his face. Her charcoal eyes were damp at the corners, peering into his, searching.

“What is it, Latif?” Habiba asked. “What are you looking for?”

He wanted to explain that he felt it, too, the absence forming within him, but words, like most things now, were difficult for him to find. Instead, he reached for her hands, moved his thumb over the familiar creases, her skin like dry wax paper. All those years ago, the night the snake had come, he’d lain awake tracing the lines of her hand, feeling their permanence.

## Halom

Excerpt of a Novel-in-Progress

It's a cold December afternoon in 1990, and my mother is preparing a Christmas celebration for my son, the first one he'll celebrate at her house. For the past five Christmases, we've taken Charlie to Caroline's parents' to celebrate the holiday with the side of the family that is actually Christian. Her family is not very religious, so in some ways, Christmas with them is similar to the make-shift Christmases my parents designed when I was growing up in order to blend in with the neighbors—it's all about the family, the food, and the presents. But this year, Caroline's parents have flown to California to spend the holiday with her sister and the brand-new baby, and Omi is thrilled to finally get Charlie to herself for the holiday. It will be the first Christmas she's prepared for a boy who isn't one-hundred-percent Jewish.

Charlie lies belly down against the carpet, absorbed by two new plastic wrestling figurines that Caroline's parents bought him, and I can hear my mother working in the kitchen, lids lifting and clicking shut, the wooden mixing spoon scraping metal as it moves from pot to pot. The rest of us—Caroline, my sister, my father, and I—have been commanded by my mother to sit and wait. She'll never accept help in her own kitchen, not even from another woman.

We're gathered around the coffee table in the living room, its shelled design hidden as always by bowls of nuts, candies, and dried fruit. The table is an import from the Phillipines, its surface design made from an usual shell thin as paper that my father used to select for his business to design ceiling fans, lamp shades, ornaments, and any other houseware you can imagine. Most items in the house—from the furniture to the

silverware to the bathroom sink— have arrived from somewhere else. I've never been able to escape the feeling that the house feels distinctly foreign.

My father sits stiffly beside me, his hands placed evenly on his knees, his eyes fixed blankly on the drawn blinds. It's an expression he's worn frequently since the onset of his Alzheimer's a few months ago—a certain absence to his gaze, as if he were constantly looking inward rather than at what's in front of him. Coarse black stubble shades his gaunt cheeks, and his graying hair is haphazardly combed, probably by my mother in a quick effort to make him look presentable. Caroline is talking and laughing with my sister, Amira, but I've lost the thread of their conversation—I'm distracted by my father's mute presence, and I struggle, as I've had to recently, to encourage him to talk. "Did you watch the stocks on TV today, Abi?" I ask loudly, hoping Amira or Caroline will help me by joining the conversation.

He nods without looking at me. Until recently he used to spend his afternoons following the stocks on the CNN clicker, studying the ones I own long after he didn't own any himself, so that he could offer me trading advice on my few investments at the end of each day. It's clear he's not going to offer anything further, and I'm trying to think of my next question when he responds suddenly, "Yes, I think so. I think I did. The stocks, eh?"

Amira lets out a high, loud laugh at something Caroline's said, and I clench my teeth instinctively. I know Amira's not laughing at him, but still, it feels strange that she's laughing at all, when something about the house feels so distinctly empty without my father's usual presence in the room. Caroline catches my eye and furrows her brow, sending me a worried glance that I know is telling me to relax, to take it easy.

Omi emerges from the kitchen with a fresh plate of *sambusaks* and places it steaming on the table beside the bowls of snacks. She brushes a black wisp of hair from her eyes and looks at us commandingly. “Eat,” she says firmly. It’s impossible to remain hungry in this house, with food stacked on every tabletop, but we all begin to pile our plates with the cheese-, onion-, and chickpea-filled pastries. We wouldn’t dare deny food she’s offered us—Omi’s always been a tyrant in the kitchen, and with the constant worry over my father recently, feeding her children is the one of the only things that seems to make her happy.

Charlie scurries over to the table and places his tiny hands on the rim, his eyes scanning the spread for something he can eat. His nose crinkles at the heavy smell of fried onion; at six, he hasn’t quite taken to my mother’s Iraqi food yet. At Caroline’s parents’, he’d be grabbing at everything they’d have to offer—the spaghetti, the baked chicken, the pigs in a blanket with mustard dipping sauce. He pokes at a *sambusak*, then grabs a handful of M&Ms instead and stuffs them into his mouth, flopping back onto the carpet and picking up his figurines again. I watch as my mother’s face lights up and then sinks into disappointment.

“Charlie,” I say, sinking to my knees on the carpet beside him. “It’s time to put that away and eat with us now.” I place my hand on his back, smoothing his wrinkled blue Disney T-shirt.

“But I don’t like any of this food,” he says, raising his face to stare at me obstinately. He has his mother’s blue eyes, her straight, light brown hair, and just a hint of my dark skin tone.

I struggle to make my voice and my expression stern, to discipline him and teach him how to be kind and respectful, as my father did with me. “That’s enough, Charlie,” I say. “Omi worked hard on this food, and you’ll eat what she gives you.” He pouts and places his toys on the floor but doesn’t protest further. “Say thank you to Omi,” I tell him, pulling him into my lap.

“Thank you, Omi,” he says meekly.

My mother smiles and blows him a kiss. “*Awafi, abdalek,*” she says. When he doesn’t respond, she adds, “You enjoy, my love.”

Caroline bites into one of the warm pastries, pulling the melted cheese from its center with her teeth. She makes a show of telling Omi, as always, how delicious they are, how this time must be the best she has ever made them, and Omi beams proudly. Then Caroline looks purposefully at Charlie. “Mmm,” she says. “I sure wouldn’t want to miss out on these. These are better than icecream, even. If I had to choose between a *sambusak* and icecream, I’d choose a *sambusak*, hands down.” She winks at me. Amira joins in, licking her lips and marveling over the taste. My father sits staring absently at his hands through it all.

Charlie looks skeptically at the pastries. I’d tell him he has to try one if he’s going to have dessert, but it would only upset Omi. She wants him to take an interest on his own. Omi sits near us on the couch and leans in close to Charlie. “Maybe you try one, love?” she asks, tickling his chin. She smells of a mix of old perfume and fried onion, and the gold bangles she wears around her wrist chime softly, making her presence almost musical.

Charlie shakes his head. “No,” he says. Then, looking up at me, “No, thank you, Omi.”

She throws up her hands and pushes herself up from the couch. “Aye!” she exclaims in defeat. “I bring him chicken patty.”

I exchange a glance with Caroline as my mother retreats into the kitchen and emerges again with a plate full of chicken fingers. Charlie wiggles out of my lap and claps his hands in delight, and Omi pinches his chin affectionately as she places the plate in front of him. “Okay, okay, you eat now,” she says. “A growing boy knows what he likes. I feed you what you like.”

“Sorry, Omi,” Caroline whispers as my mother settles between her and Amira on the couch.

Omi waves her hand dismissively. “He is the little king. I love to make him happy.” Before Charlie was born, I was the little king in the family, as all first-born Iraqi boys are—second only to the big king, my father. I glance over at my father, noting his listless expression, and wonder where I fit in this imagined line of royalty now.

As a gust of wind clatters against the window, Amira shivers and cuddles close to my mother. “Here comes the bitter winter,” Amira says, her long, dark hair falling in waves across my mother’s shoulder. My mother pulls her close as if my sister were still a child, and they embrace with an ease more like that of sisters than of a grown mother and daughter. Each is wrapped in a long wool sweater overly warm for the temperature. My own collar is unbuttoned, and I’m sweating slightly from the dry heat my mother is pumping through the pipes.

“Baghdad didn’t make my bones for these winters,” Omi says, as she does every year, though she’s lived here on Long Island in the same house along the canal for forty years. There were times when I used to remind her and Amira that they’d each lived more seasons here than they had in Baghdad, but I keep quiet now. They’d only remind me that my bones have been accustomed to this climate since I was a baby.

Omi’s been avoiding looking at my father, but when she sees him sitting beside me without a plate in hand, she exhales loudly in exasperation and stands from the couch, waving me out of her way. She sits down heavily next to him and begins piling *sambusaks* on an empty plate. “You will eat, Malik,” Omi mumbles, more to herself than to him. “You will eat because I make this food for you, because you love this food your whole life.” She takes a napkin from the table and tucks it into the collar of his shirt like a bib, then places the full plate on her lap and cuts a piece of *sambusak* with her fork. She narrows her eyes in determination and raises the food to his mouth shakily, as if the utensil were her weapon in a battle. My father’s been difficult with his meals recently. Though his mental capacity has been declining for months, Omi’s still not comfortable commanding him to do things for his own good; she’s taken orders from him for over fifty years.

Abi suddenly looks up from his own hands to my mother’s face, his eyes widening with a warm sense of recognition. He looks as if he were glimpsing Omi from a distance after being away a long time. His lips curl into a thin smile. Omi is intently focused on the forkful of food she holds quivering before his mouth. Abi leans in and kisses her above the ear, and Omi’s mouth opens slightly in surprise. She raises her eyes to Abi’s, her mouth twisting as if to stop herself from crying. It’s rare now that Abi

focuses his attention on her, let alone shows this kind of affection. I am reminded of how they used to greet each other in my childhood after Abi would return from a long business trip—how both of them, after seeming a bit lost during these temporary absences, would become themselves again in the instant they were reunited, their sense of loneliness vanishing in the presence of the other.

“You eat now, Malik?” Omi says softly, a question this time. He does not take the fork from her but opens his mouth obediently as she raises the food to his lips. He chews forcefully on the cheese and soft dough, then forces it down with a loud swallow.

“*Awafi*,” he says, to himself.

“*Awafi*,” Omi echoes.

Charlie tugs at my pant leg and cups his hand over my ear. “Why is Abi eating like a baby?” he whispers. He crinkles his nose in an inquisitive expression. I know he is probably thinking of his six-month-old cousin who he’s seen spoonfed this way, and I wonder how to explain to him that we become more like infants as we age, that we leave this world the same way we enter it. I cup my hand over his ear so that my answer won’t upset anyone. “Abi is sick,” I say. “When we’re sick, we become weak, and we need people to help us.”

Charlie considers this a moment, then nods knowingly. “Like when I’m sick, Mom takes care of me,” he says, not in a whisper this time. Omi and Caroline glance at us. The moments when we must verbally acknowledge Abi’s illness always feel like we are breaking some kind of implicit agreement to pretend this isn’t really happening to him.

“Yes,” I say. “Your family takes care of you when you’re sick.”

“Your family takes care of you always!” Amira chimes in brightly. She leans her body low over her knees to make eye contact with Charlie. “Do you know what else your family does for you?” she asks him. Her eyes have their distinctive mischievous glimmer.

He shrugs his shoulders and spreads his hands wide. “I don’t know.”

“They buy you presents,” she exclaims, clapping her hands. “On Christmas!”

Charlie can’t control his body from bouncing. “Is it time to open presents? Is it time to open presents?”

“I don’t think so, boo,” Caroline says, throwing a glance at Omi, who’s still feeding my father. Abi is struggling to chew the food at the pace that Omi shovels it into his mouth, and bits of food slip from his mouth onto his lap, forming small oily circles on his slacks. “We won’t open presents until we’re done eating the appetizers,” Caroline says. I’m grateful to her in this moment for politely reminding my sister of my father. She’s a better mediator than I am, managing to hint at what’s right without letting signs of her frustration sneak into her voice or her face.

Amira waves her hand. “We don’t have to wait,” she says. “Poor boy, suffering through all our grown-up talk. Shouldn’t he get to open his presents now?”

Amira’s always loved Christmas, embracing it as if it were her own holiday and not more evidence of my parents’ persistent fear of being outcasts. When we were children, she’d dress herself proudly in red dresses, tie her hair up in green bows, and draw pictures of Santa Claus and his reindeer on red and green construction paper to hang about the house. Omi and Abi would carefully place the Christmas tree in the window and keep the menorah on the kitchen table, out of view. Abi would string red and green lights from the roof, and Omi would hang a decorative pine wreath on the front door. It

was not until I was eight that I learned from the other children in my Hebrew school class (from a boy named Eric Grossman, specifically, who told on me when he found out our home was visited by Santa) that Christmas was not a holiday Jews typically celebrated. And it was not until I was thirteen that I fully understood why we celebrated the holiday. Abi explained to me the evening before my Bar Mitzvah how he and Omi had fled Baghdad in fear of their lives, how he had seen Jews dragged from their homes and slaughtered in the streets by the Muslims, how he had seen a hatred for the Jews descend from Germany and grip the people of his country with force. It was one of the few times he tried to instill a loyalty to my heritage. Ever since, I could not escape the feeling of irony in finding joy in celebrating Christmas.

“Let Abi finish eating, Amira,” I say sharply. “Charlie can wait, so Omi and Abi can watch him open their presents.”

Amira’s expression becomes serious, and she shrugs her shoulders as if to dismiss her previous enthusiasm. “You’re his father,” she says, the slightest hint of resentment sneaking into her voice. Since her divorce almost fifteen years ago, Amira’s never found someone to settle down with, and she receives constant pressure from Omi about getting married and having children, even now that she’s forty-six and likely too old to become a mother. Omi can’t stand the thought of a woman making a life on her own.

Charlie sits back down on the carpet and dunks a chicken finger in ketchup when he hears my words. Silence descends upon the room, and my father’s hurried chewing becomes the only sound we can hear. We’re all staring at the yellow chickpea mash churning at the front of his lips, falling in bits down his chest and staining his lap like chunks of pollen. He looks exhausted, as if eating were consuming all of his energy, and I

notice his frustration growing as Omi continuously brings the fork to his lips before he's swallowed, her own frustration making her feed him faster and faster. Suddenly, Abi raises his hand and knocks the fork from her fingers with a swipe of his wrist, sending food falling onto the carpet. "No more!" he shouts through a mouthful of *sambusak*. Then he grabs at the plate on her lap and throws it onto the floor, sending my mother's hard work to be crushed into the carpet.

Omi springs from the couch, throwing up her hands in exasperation. "What you want me to do!" she shouts at him, her voice breaking. "What do you want!"

It takes me a moment to compose myself, but I stand and place my hands gently on her shoulders. "Let him be for a minute, Omi," I say quietly. "Give him a minute." I know that my father has descended into one of his recent ugly moods, but that it will pass soon if he's left alone, that it will be quickly forgotten as most of his thoughts these days are.

My mother nods in defeat, her eyes focused on the floor, and I walk her to the green velvet chair on the other side of the room, sitting her down. Amira plops herself down on the armrest and wraps her arms around Omi, kissing the top of her head. Caroline's picking up the spilled food, and Charlie's holding onto her ankle, his eyes revealing confusion and fright as he studies his grandfather. I wonder if Charlie can still remember Abi as he was before this year, how Abi used to chase him about the house pretending to be a monster, how Abi would invent long adventure stories to tell him at naptime, how Abi would take Charlie to the field and teach him to play baseball, as he did with me. I wonder if when Charlie's grown, he'll remember his grandfather at all.

I sit down beside my father. “Abi’s done eating, apparently,” I say. “So let’s open presents.”

Charlie’s hesitant now, so Caroline plucks a small present the size of an envelope from under the tree and places it in his lap. “Go ahead,” she says.

“Ah,” Omi says, brightening a little when she sees the present Caroline’s selected. It’s the only one wrapped in blue snowman paper. “That’s your special gift, Charlie! Special from Abi.”

Charlie pulls slowly at the corners of the paper and tugs at the Scotch tape, revealing a brown leather pouch with a single snap button. He holds it in front of his face. “What is it?” he asks, squinting at it.

“The present is inside,” Omi says. “Open up.”

Charlie snaps open the button and pulls out a golden pendant about the size of a half-dollar coin. Caroline and I both join him on the carpet so that we can better see the pendant and quickly get to talking it up to him. The pendant is bordered by a silver, ribbon-like trim, and the center is engraved with a picture of the Parthenon, its broad columns clearly visible even in the thin etching.

“Abi selected this for you a long time before you born, *abdalek*,” Omi says, her English faltering a little more than usual as she struggles to explain what my father’s complicated intentions must have been. “He find this in Greece, and he say, when I have grandson, this is for him. This is a symbol of greatness, he say.”

I take the pendant from Charlie’s hand and bring it to Abi, placing his finger on the cold metal to draw his attention to it. Abi glances down and studies the pendant carefully, taking it in his hand and raising it to his face to make out the engraving. I

wonder if Omi decided to give this to Charlie now so Abi could be here to see him receive it, if she's worried he'll be gone by next Christmas. He probably hadn't intended for Charlie to receive it until he was older and would appreciate it more. "The Parthenon," Abi says, but he seems to show no memory of the pendant itself.

"You bought this for Charlie years ago," I say. "You remember? You wanted him to have it."

Abi lowers his chin in a single authoritative nod. "Good," he says. I know in years past, he would have told Charlie about the Greeks, about the great goddess Athena, about the importance of art and civilized culture, about how the Parthenon is an enduring symbol of democracy. I know because he spoke to me about all these things when I was a teenager, when he was feeling reminiscent of the law degree he'd hoped to pursue. I struggle to find a way to translate the importance of this to my six-year old son, who will likely just view the pendant as treasure.

"This was a great building built by people long ago called the Greeks," I tell Charlie, tapping on the gold pendant. "Abi admires the Greeks because they were fair, good people. They tried to do what was right, and this was one of their famous buildings." I know I'm simplifying, idealizing, but I hope it makes sense to him. I hope I'm explaining my father's reasoning as he would have wanted to himself. I look back at Abi, but his eyes are on the window again.

"You should always do what's right," Charlie says, echoing a line I probably fed him after some kind of sharing dispute in kindergarten.

"That's right," I say. "Abi believes, more than anyone, in doing what's right. And he believes in history, about knowing about people who lived and died a long time, and

learning from them. That's why he gave you this." I can't help but feel like I'm delivering my father's eulogy to his own ears. Abi keeps his hands resting still on his knees, his eyes distant, and I know he's not really listening.

I hand Caroline the pendant and she presses it into Charlie's palm. "This is very special, Charlie. You'll have to keep it safe. You can't bring this to school. We'll talk about a safe place you can put it," she says.

Charlie slips the pendant into his pocket. "I'll bet it's lucky," he says. "Abi always gives me his lucky things." Then he's reaching for the wrestling figurines from Caroline's parents, his attention already elsewhere, on things that make more sense to him.

I'm about to tell Charlie to go give his grandfather a hug when Abi suddenly begins speaking, his voice rising and his words slipping in and out of English and Arabic.

"What is it, Malik?" Omi asks, but he doesn't even look at her. "What is it?" she asks again, more desperately.

He begins to speak louder, and my mother closes her eyes and places her hand over her forehead. Amira and Caroline look at me imploringly as if I should know what to do, as if I have all the answers. I can't follow the thread of Abi's words, but he begins gesturing with his hands as if in conversation with someone. I catch some names I have not heard him speak of in years, and I hear him mention a river and sweet melons in the market. "Abi," I say, but he does not respond. He is now speaking of the Sabbath. "Abi," I say again. He laughs and exclaims a phrase in Arabic, then brings his hand to his mouth and giggles like a boy. I dip to my knees in front of him and place my hands gently on his

legs. “Abi,” I say again. He finally turns his eyes toward me and falls silent, as if only just noticing me in the room. “Hello,” he says with a smile.

It takes me a moment to find my words. “Who are you talking to?”

He looks me straight in the eye and tells me, “I am talking to my father.”

I feel my throat close and tighten as I search for a response. My instinct is to remind him that his father has been dead for decades, but I can’t speak the words. He takes my face in his hands and kisses my forehead, then looks at me with tears in his eyes. I haven’t seen him with such an expression of joy in years, and I am struck by how childish he looks, how young and naive. I wonder if in this moment he knows who I am; I wonder if he is seeing his son or his father in my face.

He looks past me and lets his hands fall to his lap, then begins speaking in Arabic again. I look up and see Caroline holding Charlie’s hand and trying to coax my mother from the room. She leads them out the back door to the porch over the canal, and Amira and I are left alone together as our father holds a conversation with the ghost of our grandfather in a language I’ve never been allowed to learn. Amira sits frozen still, her hands over her mouth, tears streaking her face. I can’t bear to ask her what my father is saying.

It is following this day that my father slowly seems to enter a world all his own. He speaks incessantly, and Omi, Amira, and I sit transfixed, searching for any trace of coherence in his words. At the dinner table, in the living room, in the bedroom, he conducts business transactions with nonexistent clients, speaks to relatives who have long been dead, and occasionally, reaches out for one of us to deliver some piece of information urgently important and impossible to discern. Grabbing my arm, he searches

my eyes imploringly, tells me, “The water buckets are beneath the tank. Gather the checks.” I assure him that I will, and the desperation in his eyes and the strength of his grip pains me, as I want nothing more than to carry out his last commands. “Mr. Munatto will send the trimmings,” he says, and releases me. I nod; but who is Mr. Munatto? What is he trimming?

I make guesses to my mother, to Amira, and to Caroline. Our evenings and weekends are spent this way, observing, tending, and guessing, as if my father were the household pet to whose strange habits we attempt to assign purposeful thought. “Omi,” I say, “was Mr. Munatto a client? An exporter? Could Abi have some unfinished business with him?” My mother is arched over a pile of dishes, her body swaying with the motion of her scrubbing, her long purple robe swinging circles around her ankles. In another time, my father would be sitting beside me, and he would comment on her elegance: “Even dishwashing, she manages to make graceful.” My mother pauses at my question and presses one hand against the base of her stiff spine, gold bangles cuffing her thinning wrist. The running faucet fills the silence of the room. “Maybe, *abdalek*,” she says softly, without facing me. “I can’t remember all their names anymore.” She takes a deep, heavy breath and resumes scrubbing, her robe casting dancing shadows over the kitchen tile.

I wonder to Amira if Abi hid checks somewhere we don’t know about, if he is worrying about their loss; he had always been careful and private with his savings. Amira is not as gentle with me as my mother; she has learned to stop guessing before the rest of us. She raises her eyes from the women’s magazine she is flipping through and then places it face-down on the coffee table, throwing her long, dark hair over her shoulder. She leans over her knees and looks me carefully in the eye. “You can’t torture yourself

over this, Joey,” she says. “You know that.” She holds my gaze as if to telepathically transmit this feeling of acceptance and then picks up her magazine again. The cover headline advertises a ground-breaking anti-aging treatment. I catch her sneaking glances at me over the rim of the magazine. She knows my heated silence well. After a moment, she comes behind my chair and places her hands on my shoulder, pressing her cheek to mine, her skin smooth as an infant’s and faintly cold. “Oh, *akhi*,” she says. “*Ayuni, akhi*.” I respond in English, though I know my simple words do not exactly match the Arabic: “I love you too, sister.”

In the privacy of our own home, I suggest to Caroline that the tanks might refer to some kind of fund, or that maybe the water buckets refer to a memory from my father’s childhood, to gathering water from the well in his family’s basement. I am rubbing my forehead and looking out our bedroom window at the quiet, lamp-lit street. My wife wraps her arms around my waist from behind me, slides her smooth, slender hands into mine. I feel the warmth of her body align against my back. “I’m not sure, Joe,” she says. She turns me to face her, her blue eyes soft at the corners. “But you would know better than me.” Each, in her own way, tells me, as the doctors have, *it’s the Alzheimer’s, it’s the disease*. They tell me my father no longer knows what he’s saying.

But there are moments when I wonder. One afternoon, we are discussing selling the Lexus, as my mother only needs the old, green Lincoln to run her errands, when my father interrupts us: “Two cars.” I am shocked, and grateful, and clinging to the last shred of hope that somewhere within, he listens and comprehends our words. I try to reason with him as if he was still the man I once knew. “Abi,” I tell him, “you don’t need them

both anymore. You and Omi aren't traveling much anymore." I do not say that he can barely travel about the house, that he needs help to rise from the bed, that his knees shake and wobble with each step he takes. He looks at me furiously, slams his fists into the couch, and shouts, "Two cars!" It's unreasonable, but it's a trace of the willful man I knew; it's a command I can understand. I obey and the discussion is dropped. Still, for weeks afterwards, he questions me about the cars, asks me to prove that they are in the garage, shouts in panic when he cannot find the keys in his pocket. On one afternoon, he takes the keys from the hook on the wall and hides them in the bathroom drawer, his face crumpled with worry.

And then one evening, I hear my father singing Arabic songs in his sleep. I can hear his voice from the other end of the house, rising in volume, uttering high cries and syllables I have never before heard from his mouth. I stumble through the dim hallway and join my mother at his bedside, studying his joyful expression. The evening light filtering through the shades falls across his face, lighting his wide, toothless smile, his fingers, extending toward the ceiling, catching at the streaks of light. Each and every word reverberating in my father's throat sounds like an anthem. It is only now, studying his face, hearing his voice rise up and seize this language, that I understand with what pride my father cherishes his homeland. He so rarely spoke of Baghdad. He had always raised me to be an American.

My mother stands and moves to the window. In the dim lighting of the room, caped in her blue nightgown, she looks small and somehow misplaced, more like an

apparition than like my mother. Her back to me, she says with a choked voice, “In his mind, you see, he goes back to the Arabic.”

I realize then that she is weeping, and I move to her, place my hand on her wrist to comfort her.

“I used to know the song,” she tells me, her face streaked with the filtered light. “I no longer remember it. I don’t know what it means.”

I take her hand and wait for her to stop crying. Before long, Amira joins us in the room, and together we are able to coax my mother to rest in the guest room while we look after my father. Amira and I each sit in a chair on either side of our father’s bed, avoiding each other’s eyes. We can still hear Omi crying quietly as she walks down the hall. I do not know if her sadness in this moment is over my father’s condition, the restless nights he spends that prevent her from sleep—or something more—the loss of her homeland, where he has returned, leaving her alone at the end of her days in this strange place.

My father used to like to tell his American friends that he and my mother arrived from Baghdad on a magic carpet. When we entertained guests at our home, he’d say that a brown-skinned genie with a charitable heart sent them sailing through the stars with all of their belongings, with a promise of wealth and good fortune, and, the greatest wish of all—with a son waiting to be born. In truth, they arrived by plane in New York with nothing.

Amira tells the story like this: The year was 1951. Our father, wearing a firmly pressed white satin suit, led his quiet, beautiful wife and his small, frightened daughter

from the plane to the immigration desk. Proudly, he displayed their passports. When the officer finished asking his many questions and stamped and finalized the paperwork, my father motioned at the rounded curve of his wife's belly and said, "Sir, a name."

The officer did not understand. He wore thin-rimmed glasses, which he tipped toward the front of his nose. "What did you say?"

My mother placed her hand delicately against the slow slope of her stomach, her long, thin fingers fluttering against the soft purple fabric of her dress. My father said, "We have a child on the way. A son, we are sure. We want him to have the most American name."

Then the officer named me Joe—the most common American name. And my father was pleased.

I first learned this story from Amira when I was eleven years old. She was six when she arrived in America, and that official, she says, was the first man with white skin she had ever seen. She remembers his spectacles, his hard, blue eyes, the slow drawl of his speech. She remembers her fear of him—the way he questioned, as if they were guilty of secrets.

With my father's voice ringing out in song now, I study Amira's dark, round eyes, and I try to see all the things she saw then, and all the things she saw before, in Baghdad. And suddenly, watching her, I am eleven years old again. I am studying her face in the mirror as she tells me the story of our family's arrival in this country, the story of my name. It's a spring evening, and she is preparing for a date with an American boy, the first of many attempted dates that will wreak havoc in our household, that will ignite my father's temper and challenge his pride, that will draw tears and desperate pleas from my

mother, that will send my sister away from us and spark words that will never be fully forgiven. But I am eleven years old and I know none of this; I am watching my older sister and learning from her. Amira looks closely at her own reflection, dusting a dark charcoal powder over her eyelids. She draws her lips a deep red, tracing carefully, puckering. Then she turns her chair around to face me. I look away from her, down at my hands.

“What’s wrong, *akhi*?” Her voice is smooth and rich, a sing-song chorus of syllables.

“I don’t like the story,” I say simply. I am tracing the threads of her bed quilt. I hoped the story of how I received my name would be more like my father’s, who was given the name of a royal ancestor whose riches remained for centuries, or like Amira’s, who bears the name of our great-grandmother and her sharp tongue. Instead, I was named by an immigration official.

“That’s the story,” she tells me, “like it or not.” She crosses her long legs, reaches for her heels.

“It makes the name boring,” I say. “Joe. Any old Joe Schmo.”

She laughs, high and loud, showing her white teeth. When I do not laugh with her, she nudges me gently with her foot. “Cheer up,” she says brightly. “You’re the new frontier.”

I raise my eyes as she stands and places her hands on her curved hips. She is wearing a knee-length red dress, tight around her chest and loose like a table skirt around her legs. She has on white stud earrings, clunky red heels, and our mother’s pearl necklace, snuck from the bureau drawer. Her eyelashes are long and thick. She gazes at

the ceiling, purses her lips, and puffs her dark curls with her palm. “Now,” she says, “don’t I look gorgeous?”

I feel my cheeks flush. I glance down. I do not want to admit that my sister is beautiful. “Uh-huh,” I say.

Amira’s hands return to her hips. “I hope my date’s more enthused than you are,” she says. “Let’s see if we can find something that will please Abi.” She thumbs through the garments in her closet and removes a white, long-sleeved blouse. She slides her arms into it and buttons it up to her neck, then slips out of her heels and pulls on plain close-toed shoes. She tosses the heels into her purse. She returns to the mirror and runs her hands down her front to straighten her blouse. I observe her quietly. Our eyes meet in the mirror, and we look at each other without really looking at each other, each of us staring at the other’s reflection.

Amira turns after a moment and kneels in front of me. “Would you like me to give you an Arabic name?”

I nod silently. She reaches her fingers to my forehead and traces the lines of my face. I wait for the name to come to her, as if by magic, as if the energy of my Arabic name might pulse from my forehead into her fingertips. She tells me that in Baghdad, our relatives waited days after a child was born before deciding on a name. They observed the child’s mannerisms, his strength of appetite, the sound of his cry. They judged his interests by his eyes—anything that gave an indication of which ancestor he most embodied. The girls were named six days after their birth at the *Sitti* festival, but the family took more time with the boys’ names. It was on the eighth day, at the *brit millah*, that the boys were finally named in the presence of all their family members.

Amira looks at me carefully and lets her fingers fall from my face. “It takes time, you see, to find a name.”

“But I’ve been alive much longer than eight days!” I protest.

“Impatient boy,” she scolds, wagging her finger at me. “This is a big decision. Give me time. I’ll think on it.”

I smile. “Thank you, *ukhti*.”

She takes me by the hand. “Come with me in front of Abi,” she says. “Distract him.”

I follow her into the hallway. She stops me before we enter the living room, nodding at the thin curl of smoke and the back of our father’s head rising above the couch. She gives me a small push forward, and I shuffle into the living room as she quickly rounds the corner and heads for the stairs.

I sit down beside my father, who is enjoying his after-dinner cigarette, and without saying a word, I bring two fingers to my lips and slowly pull them away, exhaling. I often pretend to smoke this way. My father turns his dark hawk-like eyes toward me, and a faint smile shapes his lips. In unison, we bring our fingers to our mouths and exhale. I watch a line of smoke slip from between my father’s teeth and rise toward the ceiling.

“Bye, Abi,” Amira calls from the stairwell. “I’m off to Martha’s.”

I flinch as my father rises from the couch. “Wait,” he says firmly. “Come here.”

I follow him to the doorway of the living room and watch Amira slowly ascend the stairs, her eyes focused on the floor, her hand grazing the railing. Her shoes sound

quietly at each step, sticking and peeling away. She reaches the top and stands before our father, folding her hands at her waist.

“Is that any way to say goodbye to your father?” he asks. His voice is thick and laced with only the faintest accent.

She stands on the tips of her toes and kisses his cheek. “Sorry, Abi,” she says. “I was late.”

He places his index finger gently under her chin. “Come,” he says. “Let me look at you.”

I watch as Amira lifts her eyes to our father’s worn and tired face. He always looks darker at this time of day, his cheeks and chin shadowed by coarse black stubs. Tight creases stretch from the corners of his eyes, making his skin taut and his stare rigid.

“I don’t like the way you’ve painted your face,” he says, his finger falling from her chin. “It draws attention.”

“Yes,” she says, her eyes focused on his. “I want people to notice me.”

Our father draws a deep breath of air into his lungs, slowly, his chest rising. “Wash it off,” he says.

Amira lifts her chin. “No.”

He is silent then. His lips form a tight line, and his eyes remain still, as if he is observing her from a distance. “Do not disobey me, *binti*,” he says softly.

A car horn calls from outside, an invitation. Amira sucks in a quick breath but keeps her eyes focused on our father’s face. He stiffens, his fingers curling and tightening at his side.

“Malik,” says my mother, standing further down the hall in the doorway of the kitchen. Her voice is soft, almost distant. The dim light shapes her as a silhouette. She speaks more with her eyes, rounded and wide, beckoning him. Her hand grips the white paneling of the doorway.

I watch the tension ease out of my father’s hands. My mother steps out of the doorway, into the light. She wears a long violet gown that reaches to her ankles, and a gold bracelet glitters on each wrist. Her dark hair is cropped in a short bob that frames her cheekbones. In this small way, she resembles the mothers of my friends.

“Joey,” my father says to me, turning his gaze back to Amira. “You may go outside and inform Amira’s friend that she will not be joining him.”

I look to my sister uncertainly, trying to offer some apology, but she has not taken her eyes from our father’s face. She straightens her neck and stands taller. Then she turns away from him abruptly and paces down the hallway, dodging our mother, who reaches out to her.

“Go, Joey,” my father commands, more loudly now, speaking at Amira’s back. “You can also tell him she has already eaten—as she eats every night—from her mother’s kitchen. She won’t be needing his services.”

I descend the staircase, my hand loosely holding the railing. I do not dare to look back at my father, to question his decision. When I reach the doorway, I straighten. I understand that as a man, I am supposed to guard my sister.

Amira’s date is waiting in a powder-blue Oldsmobile. A faint rock beat drifts through the open windows. As I step out the front door, her date turns toward me

casually, almost carelessly. He is more absorbed in the music, his finger tapping in rhythm against the steering wheel.

I approach the car, trying to stiffen my stance, to appear taller and stronger. I am very aware in this moment of my small, skinny frame. My Yankees t-shirt hangs loosely off my shoulders, and my short dungarees reveal my twiggy legs. I cannot help but feel a little excited as I near the Oldsmobile—it's my first time seeing one so up close. When I reach the car, I place my hands on the door.

Amira's date turns the knob of the radio to lower the music and leans toward the passenger side, bringing his hand over his eyes to shade them from the sun. He has shaggy brown hair that falls over his ears and past his brow. He is wearing a long-sleeved, brightly-patterned shirt, unbuttoned at the neck. The shirt is tucked into tight-fitting dungarees. "Hey," he says, with a wide smile, before I can speak, "Joey, right? What's going on?"

I am quiet for a moment, unsure of what to say. I want to tell him yes, I am Joey, Amira's brother, and what's going on is that Amira won't be joining him tonight, or ever, on any night again. But I like the guy—his clothes, his car, his casual smile. The music on the radio. I often see guys like this around the neighborhood, driving with the windows down and the music loud, as if keeping with some other tempo.

"Abi—my dad—says Amira can't come out tonight," I say. I try to mimic the guy's style of speaking, to sound nonchalant, almost cavalier.

He frowns and roughs his hair. "No?" he says. He looks forward then, at the empty street. "That's too bad."

“Sorry to bust your night,” I say clumsily. It’s a term I’ve heard on the television, and I stumble a little over the word.

“That’s okay,” he says. Then he turns toward me with another wide smile. “Hey, it was nice meeting you, though.” He extends his hand.

I shake it firmly, perhaps a little too enthusiastically. I have only ever shook hands with men in my father’s presence, and they are always businessmen or my parents’ friends from the neighborhood.

“See you around,” he says. “Tell Amira to give me a call.”

I wave as he drives off.

When I return to the house, my father has returned to his cigarette, and my mother is in the bedroom with the door closed. I don’t know where Amira is until I hear the water running in the hallway bathroom. I follow the sound and stand outside the bathroom for a moment, listening to the interruptions, the splashes breaking the steady flow. The light from the bathroom leaks into the dark hallway where Amira has left the door slightly open.

I push gently against the door, peeking cautiously into the bathroom. Again, I find my sister’s eyes reflected in the mirror. The light powder over her lids now settles in inky bruises beneath her eyes. Her mascara drips down her cheeks in black watercolor lines. I watch as she raises a tissue to her lips and peels away the lipstick. She rinses the tissue and brings it to her cheeks, trying to erase the dark lines.

“Your friend,” I say, “he said to call him.”

She pauses, pressing the damp tissue against her skin, and looks blankly at me in the mirror. “Great,” she says.

We are quiet, then, for a long time. The faucet runs in steady rhythm, filling the silence of the room. Amira gazes vacantly at the mirror, looking both at herself and at me, our overlapping reflections. Small drops of water drip from the end of the tissue down her chin and onto the collar of her white blouse, leaving murky red-black stains.

“You see?” Amira says. “You should be happy you’re American.”

I open my mouth to answer but can think of nothing to say. I do not yet understand the many divisions that separate us, but I am old enough to know that our father treats me differently, that Amira’s relationship with him is more difficult. I can hear the tone of command in my father’s voice when he speaks to Amira, the tone he also uses with my mother, but not with me. I know that on weekends he expects Amira to stay at home, to cook and help my mother, though I am allowed to go out in the neighborhood with my friends. I know these things but have never considered the reasons behind them.

Amira takes the tissue from her face and tosses it in the trash, then grips the edge of the sink and leans forward over it, closing her eyes. “Go now. I want to be alone.”

I turn away from her and close the door behind me. When I reach the living room, I sit at my father’s feet. He is still wearing his pressed gray suit and glossy black shoes. His black hair is combed stiff, and the ceiling light glints off its shine. I play with a stray thread of the carpet.

“Did you send the boy away?” my father asks. I nod, and my father grunts in approval. I try to make out his expression, but I can’t clearly see him in the dim lighting. Smoke rises in an even haze before his face. It snakes toward the ceiling. It fills the room.

“Tell me,” he says, “where are Mantle and Maris today?”

“There’s no game today, Abi,” I say.

“But who is winning?”

“Maris, for now,” I say. “He pulled ahead by two homers, just this week.” I tug at the thread of the carpet. “Mickey will catch him, though. I know it.”

My father inhales deeply on his cigarette. “Tomorrow, we will go to the field and play ball, you and I,” he says.

“Okay, Abi.”

“Now, come sit beside me.”

I join him, keeping my back lifted off the couch so I can place both feet firmly on the floor beside my father’s. This night, as on countless other nights, we talk about baseball, about trading cards, about Mickey Mantle and his bat, while the light drains from the room, while my father finishes his cigarette, while I pull the smoke deep into my lungs, and hold.

My father cries out sharply in the middle of his song, a sudden sound of pain. He grips the sheets in two fists, and his face strains. I reach my hand out to him, searching for a cause of his distress, but just as suddenly as he cried out, he is sleeping again, quietly now. I look to Amira and we both wait for more, but our father remains silent. The room suddenly feels suffocating. I push up from my seat and exit through the screen door to the porch. I rest my arms on the railing and look out over the canal where I spent much of my childhood, fishing off the dock with Abi. The late evening sun, a dripping orange in the sky, casts a shimmer over the water.

Amira joins me on the porch and rests her hand on my arm. “*Habibi*,” she says quietly, “What’s wrong?”

I feel a trace of anger that she even has to ask the question. Like a stubborn child, I say nothing.

“*Akhi*,” she says. “Joey.”

“What is it, Amira?” I ask. I do not look at her.

“I want to know what’s wrong,” she says. She touches her fingers to my cheek, attempting to turn my face toward her. “I want to help.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I say. When she withdraws her hand, I add, “Isn’t he your father, too?”

She stares at me with an expression similar to the one with which she always challenged my father in her youth. “*Zaltny*,” she says. “Don’t say such things.” I don’t know the meaning of the Arabic phrase she uses, but her eyes, narrowing, communicate a warning.

I trail my fingers along the splintering railing of the deck. The wood has faded to a parched gray, and parts of it are damp and soft beneath my hand. When I was a boy, my father used to tend to the deck, staining it a rich cherry color each spring and sealing it against the rain. My mother kept pots of flowers and tomato plants along the deck every year before this one. A thin vine of one of the tomato plants, now brown and brittle, still winds round one of the rungs. I pick at a chipping piece of wood and toss it over the railing into the tiny square of the backyard that opens to the dock. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I just needed a minute.”

Amira sighs and places her elbows on the railing, leaning her weight over her arms. “Where is Charlie today?”

“Caroline took him to the park tonight.” I picture their faces, my wife and son, and try to let the thought of them lift me up. “I don’t want him to be here every day. I wanted to give him a break. A little fresh air.”

“Maybe you need a break, too,” Amira says.

“I’m fine, Amira,” I say. I add sharply, “This isn’t something you get to take a break from.”

I catch her expression from the corner of my eye; surprise, this time, more than anger. She raises her hand, shaking slightly, to her forehead, and brushes a thick lock of hair from her eyes, then returns her elbows to the railing and looks out across the water. Her lips part slightly, as if to speak, but she says nothing.

From inside the house, my father calls out to Amira. He speaks her name in a hoarse, choked voice. We both turn toward the door, and I try to make out his expression through the checkered veil of the screen. He is still lying flat in bed, his chin lifted to the ceiling. “Amira,” he says again, with more effort, sensing she is no longer at his side. Amira checks her watch. Late evening is fading to the dark of night. “He wants his third cigarette,” she says. It’s one of the few habits he’s held on to.

I reach into my pocket to hand her the box, but I pause, feeling its familiar weight in my hand. It was on my sixteenth birthday that my father offered me my first cigarette. We stood here, on this porch. Then, in the evenings after dinner, while Amira and Omi washed and dried the dishes, my father and I would lean over this railing and share a smoke. Sometimes, he talked to me about business or our relatives, but more often, he liked to listen to my stories. I talked about baseball and wrestling and the amusing escapades of my friends. Very occasionally, he would speak of Baghdad, of his memories

of growing up, of sleeping on the roof with his brothers in the hot summers and going to the coffee shop with his father after temple on Saturdays. And on some evenings, we'd stand in silence, just watching the smoke curl and float in snaking shapes across the water, like mythic creatures of our own creation.

I open the box and run my finger across the cigarette tops, the ridges catching at my skin. It's been five years since I had my last cigarette; my mother and Caroline begged me to quit. Still, I raise the box to my nose and breathe in the heavy smell of the tobacco, already tasting it on my lips. I pull one from the pack before handing the box to Amira. She looks at me questioningly but doesn't request an explanation.

"Amira," my father calls again, his voice breaking over the last syllable.

I watch her slip in the screen door and go to his side. "I'm right here, Abi," she says, placing her palm against his cheek. Then, more quietly, "I'm here."

I place the cigarette between my lips and reach for one of the lighters near the ashtray. The flame catches and I inhale, but the smoke feels harsh on my lungs; it's been so many years. I'm able to stifle the cough and exhale slowly, watching the smoke drift over the canal and slowly dissipate in the air.

Late that night, my father comes to me in a dream and speaks to me of the blizzards of the desert. We sit at a small round table facing a kitchenette window in a house that bears no resemblance to any home I have ever lived in, and yet, even now, I see its details more clearly than those I have seen with my own eyes: the pleated blue-checked valance skirting the window top, the ringed oak table with glossy veneer finish, the two coffee mugs before us on the table, pine-colored and endlessly full. At the

window, a thick, white haze chokes the glass, emitting an audible hum that quivers and threatens to take shape, like the pulsing buzz of summer insects.

In the dream, my father is no longer an ill elderly man, but his younger self, the handsome figure of my boyhood. He sits before me, his cheeks rounded and full, his black hair thick and neatly styled, his dark eyes alert and bright and sparking with pride. I am aware as I sit beside him that despite appearances, he will die soon; yet he has been restored to full health now, and we sit together a last time as two grown men. I tell him I am glad to see him this way, and he lifts his chin and smiles, stands and spreads his hands wide to show off his sharp clothing, the same clothing he always donned in my youth: a satin shirt from Hong Kong, colored a deep midnight blue and unbuttoned at the neck to reveal a tangle of chest hair; white slacks from the Greek tailor in Manhattan, perfectly pressed and hemmed above polished boots; the slacks cinched with a black belt of real Italian leather, a buckle of fine silver.

As he retakes his seat, my father speaks to me in Arabic, and though I never learned the language, in this house, in this dream, I understand perfectly all that he communicates to me. He motions to the white fog curling like smoke against the window pane, its blinding, endless expanse, and likens it to the surrounding swell of a blizzard. When he was a boy, in Baghdad, he tells me, these blizzards rose up from the earth, rather than falling from the sky, and they seized all that lay beneath them with swells of suffocating sand. He recounts how as a young boy, he would watch from inside his home as they rolled through the desert, gathering size and speed like an ever-growing canon ball threatening to crash through the windows. He motions to the thin glass separating us from the surrounding haze. *Sawafi*, he says, *sandstorm*, and though he has never spoken

to me of this before, his words take shape before me, carrying meaning in both their sound and the vivid images they render.

During one such storm, my father says, he was walking home from the market and did not have time to take shelter from the winds. He heard behind him a whispering howl, like the anguished moan of a thousand ghosts, and felt on the back of his neck the hot breath of gasping fire. When he turned, he could no longer see the stalls in the market, nor hear the haggling voices of vendors. The street, the buildings, and the horizon itself had been swallowed by a mountainous mass, which advanced at unbreakable speed and reached for him with stretching, smoky fingers. As he opened his mouth to scream, his voice was seized and silenced by the wind, and the gritty gusts swept down his throat and filled his lungs, the grains of sand needling his insides like shattered glass. The hot, spiking wind burned and tore at his skin, and the particles flew at his eyes, grinding his vision like coarse sheets of sandpaper. He felt, he says, like a human hourglass being filled from mouth to toe with sand, his body immobilized from within.

Strangled, he fell to the earth, the wailing voices of the storm surrounding and deafening him. With all the effort inside him, he listened, straining to hear the secrets of these earthly spirits, attempting to ascertain what anger motivated their destruction. He motions to the window and shaking his head sadly, mouths *urd*—with such torment did the earth brew its own disasters. Many years he has listened, he tells me, but he has never found an answer. He lifts his hands from the table and raises them to the sky—up from the earth itself, he says again, these storms that drowned the desert with its own soil.

He does not tell me how the storm passed, not how long it lasted, nor how he survived. He sips his coffee, grinds the drudge between his teeth. There, beyond the

window, I suddenly see the silhouette of a young boy in the haze, my father. The fog moves and swirls around him like a snaking creature, wrapping his limbs and binding his lungs like ivy. Blinded, silenced, hands raised to the sky, trying to peel from the shrieking wind a recognizable voice, a semblance of an answer. He is at once the grown man at my side, the young boy in the sandstorm, the elderly man of my waking life. And as the dream ends, I am at once watching the storm from behind the window and standing at his side in the desert, inhaling sheets of dust.

Upon waking, I reach for the phone and dial my father. Even as it rings, before his answer, the reality of his condition and his stilted speech resettles in me, and I face again the loss I have felt anew each morning since the onset of his Alzheimer's. It's my mother who answers, and when she passes the phone to my father, I find myself regretting the call, the far flung hope that my father is still capable of providing clarity and comfort. His rasping breath against the receiver is the only sound that lets me know he's there.

"Hi, Abi," I say.

"Hi—Joe," he says, the words overly punctuated and purposeful, dragging through the receiver in a voice not quite his own. No matter how many times I hear him speak this way, my own words still escape me as I reach for a response.

"How are you today?" I ask at last.

I wait, but his breathing only grows louder and more strained, and he offers me no answer. I hear him rustling in the bed, my mother whispering, trying to focus his attention. I want to ask him about the sandstorms, about his boyhood, about Baghdad, about all the things I never thought to know until my father no longer had words to offer

me. In the silence that follows, all the questions I long to ask fall away and settle at the back of my throat like bits of ash.

I tell him I love him; I am not sure if he hears. Omi has picked up the phone again. “It’s a tough day for him,” she tells me.

There’s never a day now that isn’t tough for him, yet we offer these words to each other anyway, as if they serve as an explanation, as if tomorrow might be better. I tell her I know, that I’m sorry, and we talk about her for awhile, about the books and the movies she has been trying to occupy her mind with, about the morning walks she no longer takes, the food my father no longer eats, the friends and family that no longer visit. Before hanging up, there is a pause. I ask her, “Was Abi ever caught in a sandstorm as a boy? Has he ever told you a story like that?” I am not sure what I am reaching for in her answer.

She thinks a moment. “There were many, many sandstorms,” she says. “Some small ones, and some, they lift full dunes over the city. People might be outside when one hit. They could be very dangerous. But this is not something he ever told me. We saw these storms all the time, you see, *abdalek*. To those who knew them, it wasn’t worth a story.”

She doesn’t ask me why I have inquired. In her tiredness, she too often finds conversation difficult. I tell her I’ll come over soon and we say goodbye. I am left staring at my bedroom window, trying to once again hear my father’s spoken Arabic, to hear and to understand. Here, in the waking world, I can no longer recall the sound of his words; they carry all the meaning of half-uttered syllables.

## Sleepwalker

He stirs in his sleep at the sound of the phone ringing—this, the sound that haunts him every night. Two rings before he reaches for it, eyes closed against the darkness. He rests the hollow dome of the receiver against his ear. From within, only echoes, sounds that float to him like whispers of another world, sonar waves pulsing through the plastic. His palm sweats.

‘Hello?’

A voice ushers some formalities. Then, ‘I’m sorry, sir, your daughter—’ The worst words.

He turns over, pushes the familiar words out of his eardrums and into the dark until they are gone. The noises within the receiver gather and still, like children caught playing after bedtime. Silence. Then, his father’s voice, choked by years of pipe tobacco.

‘David—come.’

A simple command; that had always been his father’s way. The deep husk of the voice, long gone since his father’s death, sends an ache into David’s chest. He wants to tell his father that he is now a grown man, not that same boy his father last knew, but it’s been so long since they’ve spoken that he hasn’t the heart to break the news. He opens his eyes to find his father kneeling at his bedside, his eyes two smooth slate stones beneath a creased brow. The smell of aged leather and cigar smoke lifts off his skin. He pats David’s arm twice with a calloused palm and nods at David’s wife, sleeping soundly to his right. ‘Don’t wake your mother,’ his father says. He then turns to the closet door and steps out into green pastureland, where the light of day peeks over the horizon. Without a word, David rises and follows.

--

He wakes in the grass of his own small backyard, the sun's dim light just marking the start of day. The morning dew is cold against his cheek. He pushes himself to his knees and finds his wife sitting on the stoop watching him, her chin rested in her hands, her eyes heavy with the need for sleep.

"You seemed to truly be resting for once," she says. "I couldn't bring myself to wake you." She has Kara's face—the serious pout in her lips, the almond shape of her hazel eyes. He knows these features belonged to his wife first, that she gifted them to his oldest daughter, but now they're a painful reminder of what's been lost.

"I'm sorry," he says, joining her on the stoop. "I wish I didn't wake you." He places his hand over hers, but she doesn't link her fingers with his.

"You should go back to sleep," he tells her. "Get some rest."

He sees then that she has tears in her eyes. They come to her often and then are quickly gone. "I'm awake," she says. She pulls her hand from under his. "I'll make a nice breakfast for Eva." She stands and he watches her go but cannot bring himself to follow. This morning, though he does not know why, he is thinking of his father.

--

David is a boy, crouching in the woods behind his parents' farmhouse and watching his father weave his way between the trees. In the early mornings, his would father slip out of the house to go hunting, and David would follow, crawling through the high grass far enough behind to not be seen. A rifle hangs against his father's side, tucked under his arm like an old companion. At each step, his father eases his boot to the ground, careful not to disturb the leaves. He causes only the faintest rustle. Every few strides, he

steadies his hand against a nearby trunk to lessen the weight of his step. Eyes trained on the brush, moving like a phantom in the forest.

David waits until he has faded from sight, then reaches for the slingshot in his back pocket. He rolls a stone between forefinger and thumb, eyeing the treetops for any sign of movement. The leaves layer in a dense collage over the sky, forming small patches where the light snakes through and speckles the ground. From far off, he hears a branch snap.

He rises and wills his footsteps to fall silent as his father's.

--

At breakfast, while they wait for Eva to wake, his wife halves oranges and grinds them over a juicer until they are hollowed out. She piles each rounded peel atop the empty shells of the others, stacking them on the counter like children's playing cups. He imagines they will reach the ceiling by the time she is done, each skin filling the other and yet always vacant on top. When she has finished, he watches the juice slip from the pitcher and pool at the bottom of a glass, climbing up the sides, always ascending. She places the glass before him on the table and waits with her hands on her hips. Bits of pulp cling to her hair and flushed cheeks. Her eyes are folded at the corners. "Are you going to drink it or what?"

He nods. "Yes." He brings it to his lips and takes a sip, then notices her fingers drum against her hip, his eyes level with her waistline. He gulps the whole glass down and places it finished on the table. She removes it, carries it to the sink.

"Good?" she asks.

"Yes."

He hears Eva's footsteps on the stairs, and then she joins them in the kitchen, long floral skirt swinging around her legs. She sits down across from him. Her eyes had always been the same pale shade as her sister's, like two pairs of faded sea glass pieces beneath thick lashes. The shape of her face is all her own—a fullness in the cheeks, a wide, sunny smile.

“Morning, Daddy,” she says, as when she was an infant and a toddler and a child, as when she was not yet a young teen. Strange, he thinks, how the sound of a word can change over time, how this title as it refers to him belongs only to her voice now.

“Morning, Eva,” he says, and covers her fingers with his palm. Her smile today is weak and tired.

His wife places a full glass of juice before Eva on the table, then closes her eyes as she leans in to kiss the top of her head. She lingers a moment too long, her nose nestled in her daughter's hair, breathing in deeply. With her eyes cast downward, she sinks into the chair beside David. Across from her, an empty seat.

--

In the night, he hears the phone ringing but opens his eyes to find his father kneeling at his bedside, the smell of cigar smoke lifting off his skin. ‘Come,’ his father says, leading him through the closet door. David steps out into the green pastureland and does not ask where they are going. In the distance, birds whistle in the tree tops, beckoning. It's been so many years since he has heard the sound at dawn.

Trailing his father's steps, he gazes out across the flat expanse of land. The high grasses to the east and west nod their heads like welcoming friends, and the pure

nothingness above their wispy tops chills him to the bone. To the north, the thickened wood. They walk toward it with their backs faced home.

--

He wakes off balance to a sharp ache in his jaw and finds himself standing in his own bedroom gripping the doorknob that would grant him entry to the hall. The surprising shock of pain upon awakening is familiar to him now, but it still takes him a moment to find his balance, for the world to come into focus again. As his eyes adjust to the dim light and his jaw throbs, he knows slowly that he must have collided with the door in his effort to exit. He sees his wife has locked the latch at the top of the frame. Another precaution to keep him safe at night.

He turns toward her expecting to find her sitting up in bed, but she lies facing the edge of the bed, covers pulled up over her shoulders. The moonlight filters through the blue drapes and falls across her face.

“Come back to bed,” she says, her voice muffled in the pillow.

He is thinking of Eva, a strange fear flickering in his chest like a flutter of moths around a light. The feeling comes often to him since Kara’s death. He knows Eva is sleeping safe in her bed, but he wants to see her, to glimpse her with his own eyes, to be certain.

“I’d like to check in on Eva,” he says. “Just for a moment.”

“She’s okay, David. Leave her.” She stirs the sheets. “You can’t keep on like this.”

His hand is still on the door. He lets it drop, slips under the covers, presses his chest into the curve of his wife’s back.

She lays her hand against his aching jaw. “Are you hurt?” she asks.

“No,” he says. He laces his fingers between hers. She’s been so far away from him. He wants to say more, but by the time he finds the words, her eyes are closed and she’s drifting off to sleep.

In the dark of night, as his wife lays by dreaming, he thinks he smells cigar smoke, a scent he hasn’t recalled in years. And he is thinking again of his last days with his father.

--

In the woods behind his parents’ farmhouse, his first stone lets loose, bites the air, and drops to the forest floor with a dull thud. David catches the quick flit of a tail passing behind the leaf cover and takes aim again, his forefingers straining against the thick tension of the slingshot band. This time, a sharp crack against the squirrel’s skull. The body falls limp from the treetops, its legs splayed like absent wings as it descends with the speed of a parachute diver. It lands with a heavy thump, tangled in the underbrush. His heart pounding, David thrashes through the chaparral.

There, at his feet, the body of his first kill. He observes it with quiet fascination. The tail stiff and bristled like a pipecleaner. One leg bent from the fall, twisted under the weight of its body, the others extended, reaching for something. The whiskers like brittle gray nettles stuck into the snout. The eyes fixed, dull, and clouded, yet catching the sky, the light in the irises reflected, rather than from within. He looks into them. Sheen, like cracked marbles. All around the body, not the slightest trace of blood.

His father’s voice startles him. “We don’t kill what we can’t eat, David.”

David's shoulders slump, and his eyes fall to his feet. He yearns for praise, for his father to observe the body, to notice the efficiency of the kill. His father kneels beside the slain rodent, his breath sounding heavily in the quiet of the woods. He pulls the underbrush to cover the body, then rises and places his hand on his son's shoulder.

"Come, David," he says. "Let's go."

--

David steps through the closet door and into the green pastureland, trailing his father's steps. When they have reached the woods and crossed into the thicket of trees, David glances behind him to find that he can no longer see the home where his wife and daughter sleep. The faint outline of the house behind him is familiar only in memory, and the woods he stands within are no longer his own. He feels gripped by fear, suddenly, at not being able to sense his wife and daughter's presence, at the possibility of their vanishing. He crashes back through the brush, searching the skyline for his home, but it is nowhere to be found across the empty plains. The sense of loss, so potent and familiar, brings him to his knees. His father's hand on his shoulder again.

'It's time you learned to hunt,' his father says. 'I've been waiting until you were ready, until you were old enough.' His father looks him over from head to toe, his eyes appraising his son as if seeing him anew. 'It seems you're becoming a man now.'

David tries to speak words that he did not already say in this memory, to ask of his wife and daughter, where have they gone?, to scream, I must find them! He moves his mouth but the words fall silent. Instead, he hears himself ask, 'When will I hold the rifle?' It is not his voice, but the voice of a young boy.

His father says, 'If you want to hunt, you must first learn the habits of deer.'

Though he didn't then, David tries now to protest, to declare, I don't want to learn, I don't want to know of death. The words, like hot breath on a cold morning, appear as fog and then are gone.

David trails his father through the wood, and his father points to the tangled branches of a low sweetfern, bare in spots, then farther up the trail, to the nibbled red maple leaves. He explains to David the way deer weave their way quietly through the brush, snacking choicely on sweetfern and maple, on oak, acorns, and pine. He points to the differences in the shapes and formations of the leaves, the long, feathered stem of the sweetfern beside the three-pronged star of the maple leaf, a color rich as cranberries. His father tells how if left undisturbed, a deer will follow the same trail, day after day, munching what it left behind, and will then seek out a spot of cover to chew its cud. All of this, David knows, and yet he hears over again, so that he is not sure whether he walks through a dream or down the very path of the past.

--

He is startled by the sound of the phone ringing and answers it at once, if only to silence the deafening sound.

'Your daughter,' says the voice, after some formalities. He hangs up before the voice can continue, knowing the rest, eyes clenched in an effort to create darkness, face buried in an effort to drown out sound.

Still, he hears the words over again, as he heard them first, feels the cold shock still his body, the words easing through him. Pure paralysis. He hears again his wife, beside him, ask ceaselessly, what is it, what is it, what is it, David, what's wrong—a question he has no answer to.

He rises, unlocks the latch at the top of the door, passes the empty bedroom at one end of the hall, and sits at Eva's bedside. The night often leads him here. He waits by his daughter's side, eyes on the window, as if to ward off some nameless danger. As if by watching, he could make what threatens them tangible.

--

The light touch on the back of his hand springs him into awakening, a flutter of fingertips. Eva is nestled in her heavy heap of blankets, cheek pressed to the pillow, eyes wide and sad and searching. He sits in a hard-backed chair at her bedside, his fingers still scaling oak, his lungs still inhaling the crisp scent of pine. Through the window over Eva's bed, he glimpses their tiny fenced backyard, his wife's small garden patch adorning the back rim, the swingset in the left corner. He observes their neighbor's deck behind the fence, the hard back of their house rising sturdy against the skyline. He lets his eyes settle on the sight of it, reminds himself of where he is.

"Who were you talking to?" Eva asks. With a blanketed hand, she moves a thin strand of hair from her brow. Each night, she grows more frightened by his habits.

"I don't remember talking," he says.

"You were," she says insistently. Then quietly, "But I don't know what you were saying."

"I was just sleeping." He shifts in his seat. "I'm sure it was nonsense."

She looks away from him, picks at a thread of her pillowcase. "Your eyes were open," she says. She looks suddenly as if she might cry, her eyelashes falling over her eyes like a veil. "I thought you were talking to me," she says. "You woke me up, with

your talking. I looked at you, and your eyes were open, but you weren't really looking at me. You were looking some place else."

He searches his memory, but all of it is distant, all of it out of reach. "I don't know, honey," he says, looking down at his hands. "I'm sorry." He looks up and sees in her eyes that lingering disappointment, feels again the strain of not being able to offer her answers, to untangle the senselessness of the world for her. He cranes his stiff neck. She turns over, away from him.

--

Before daybreak, David is a younger man again, only recently a father, and Kara is clutching his hand. He feels again the grip of her tiny hand as she reaches up from her crib, arms waving, to grab at his palm. The first time she reached for him. The smallness of her fingers, the creases already forming around the pencil-thin knuckles, the fingernails smaller than shirtsleeve buttons. He is a young man holding his daughter's hand in the quiet safety of the house he has built for her.

'Your daughter,' says the voice, 'killed at gunpoint,' and after the rest, the receiver falls from his hand.

What is it, what is it, what is it, David, what's wrong. He is on his knees. A question he cannot begin to answer.

--

Kneeling in the ivy, he holds in his hand the three-ponged star of the maple leaf, its outer ridges casting small shadows on his palm. He studies the teeth marks that tore a missing jigsaw shape into the right corner, hears the faint ripping sound he has come to

know well, imagines the leaf wilting to a pulp against the deer's tongue. His father stands behind him, waiting patiently, in silence.

‘Which way did it go?’ his father asks at last.

He drops the leaf and studies the tangles of the thicket, struggles to find patterns in the untamed brush. It appears to him a muddled formation, whole and without distinct parts. His father prods, ‘Look carefully,’ and he feels shame creeping up the back of his neck, settling hot in his cheeks and the tips of his ears. He cannot bear the silence, so he points forward aimlessly, hoping for luck. ‘That way,’ he says.

His father shakes his head. ‘Look again.’

He swallows hard, trains his eyes on the small tips of the leaves. Beneath his foot, a spiny browning oak leaf, half gone. Just to the left, a prickly branch of pine with needles missing. Beyond it, a clutter of empty acorn shells. He traces them together and takes a confident step forward, towards a nibbled sweetfern.

His father follows behind him, then stops him with a touch on the back. He comes in front of David and kneels before him, shifting the rifle from his shoulder to hold it flat across his palms. His father's expression is one that David has not seen before, a hint of mischief in his upturned lips, a hint of pride in his soft-cornered eyes. He offers the rifle forward to David, places it carefully in his untrained hands.

--

He wakes back in his bed, though he does not remembering leaving Eva's room. His wife's arms wrap him from behind, enclosing him in her slender embrace. Her lips graze his neck, her face nestles into the curve of his shoulder. An easy fit. They lie in the

quiet of the coming dawn, woven together, their feet layered over each other, the cold skin of their ankles touching, becoming warm from their pooled heat.

“It’s been three months,” she says softly, then adds, “Three months exactly, today.”

He no longer watches the calendar, the days a dense collage with certain events pasted over and over, thickening with each layer like dried glue.

“It feels so long,” he says, after a silence. “So long to be without her.”

It’s all they can talk about, and yet there is nothing to say. He could ask, as some people might, will it ever feel normal again?, but he knows that it won’t. He could say, I miss her, but he misses her too much for this to come close. He could tell, but wouldn’t, how when he touches her picture in the frame, he feels as if the web-like strands of nerves wind tighter round his fingertips, climb up his arm and bind his spine like ivy, so as to resist the sensation that the chilled glass over her face sends into his fingers, to his brain.

The strangest thing, he thinks, had been the box in which they delivered her. Four-cornered, neat, containing all his joy and all his grief. So tidily encompassed. The only comfort had been its weight, as he lifted it. Heavier than he expected. She had always been a small girl.

He waits for the dawn to break. Each sunrise a painful reminder.

--

Tonight, four rings, two hours after midnight. The voice on the other end of the line ushers formalities, says, ‘I’m sorry, sir, your daughter,’ and trails off. The voice gives a name of a boy as an explanation. The boy, he is told, already dead, a shooting and

a suicide. This time, he curses the person on the other end, curses everything until he is cursing nothing, feels his fingers wrap around this boy's neck, this name he has never heard, wrap the neck and squeeze, his knuckles reddening like blood blisters. He has no image of the boy's face, just an open mouth gasping for oxygen, just the sound of life leaving the body with a strangled breath.

The phone rings again, first sounding like a distant chime, then like the loud gong of church bells, then piercing his skull with shrill shrieks, becoming the voice of a girl, becoming his daughter's voice, crying out in the darkness. Beside him, his wife sleeps soundly, in quiet. He is grabbing at his ears.

He reaches for the phone, and as he clasps it, he is in the woods again, beside his father. He is holding a rifle in his untrained hands.

--

His father looks at him with an expression David has not seen before, and yet remembers, the hint of mischief in the smile, the twinge of pride in the gray-green eyes. As his father takes his hands away from the rifle, a small shiver runs down David's spine. He can no longer discern if this is from fear or excitement.

'First,' his father says, 'you must learn to hold it as you walk. Hold it the wrong way and—' Here he pops all ten fingers wide in one motion before David's eyes. 'Boom! You're gone.'

David does not want to know, but he cannot loosen the rifle from his fingers. He cannot now speak what he did not speak then.

Without explanation, his father guides the rifle into position, his hands like wordless teachers. He turns the tip of the rifle down toward the underbrush, lodges the

butt firmly against David's chest. He guides David's right hand to place it like a shield around the trigger guard, moves his left hand so that it cradles the triangular stock. His father tilts backward to look at him, to soak in the sight of his son holding a rifle for the very first time, and again that twinkling expression sneaks into his face. For an instant, David cannot help feeling anew the pride he felt then, cannot help straightening his stature to appear more like a man.

His father smiling before him, the butt of the rifle pressing his chest, wedged, beside his heart.

--

Come morning, he wakes to find himself in the empty hall, slumped against floral wallpaper, neck strained to one side. He arches his toes, feels the muscles in his legs strain against the pull from his hip. Eva steps into the hall first, looking child-like in a long white nightgown, rubbing sleep from her eyes. Always, dressed in clothes from decades past, embodying that lost grace.

She stops when she sees him, lets out a small sigh between parted lips. 'Dad,' she says, shaking her head slightly. Having to find him this way each morning, he knows, just a reminder of their despair. He runs his hand over the top of his skull, roughing his hair. He looks down to avoid her eyes. She stands still in the hall for a moment, perhaps waiting for him to speak, perhaps trying to find something to say. He longs for mornings past, scooping his daughters up in his arms, words, voices, laughter. He starts to say, I'm fine, to say, don't worry, to say, I'm sorry, even, I'll be stronger—but she walks past him, steps over him, closes the bathroom door. His wife in their bedroom doorway, lines tightening her eyes, grief and loneliness drawing them a new rigid shape.

--

The day passes as always, and he starts in the night to his daughter crying out, twice, the cry of an infant and the cry of a teenage girl. He answers the phone. Silence. A gunshot.

He sees her, back turned, running, fearful. He sees her drop. She looks up at him with her faded sea glass eyes, with her fine cheekbones and slender neck. He pulls her body close to his, tries to shelter her, but as he shields her with his weight, he feels her heart slow with every breath, and he knows it's too late. He's already failed her.

She holds his hand in her delicate fingers, her skin smooth as polished stone. He grips her hand and tries to hold on to her, but he looks up instead to find his father's eyes. Two smooth slates and a twinge of pride.

--

Standing in the cool shade of the woods, his father kneeling before him, the butt of the rifle pressed to his chest, the tip pointed down, towards the fallen leaves. He will learn to fire the rifle, now that he knows how to hold it in his hands. He will learn how to harness its power and how to release it.

Standing there, a boy, he sees the many bodies of the animals he will kill, those he has yet to kill and yet remembers. The brown speckled rabbit, the blood from its belly that pooled into an inky, iridescent puddle, that absorbed into the waxy skin of the still-moist leaves. The plumed pheasant that fell with a squawk, its wings still beating the earth. The duck that dropped heavy from the clouded sky, the neck snapping against a tree branch on its descent, the body turning chaotic somersaults before hitting the ground. That other rabbit, whose head he missed, whose tall, flicking ear had a hole torn through

it from his bullet, the skin tattered and wet purple. The way the rabbit hopped, its feet dragging, its head tilted toward the wound, leaving a trail of blood along the leaf cover.

He feels a nausea he did not feel then, he feels tears he might have been permitted to cry as a young boy, but did not, he feels the delayed dawning knowledge of suffering, of being a cause of pain, of death. The cold fascination with which he watched, his young eyes, his hands, still small, on the trigger.

Yet here, with his father as teacher, he learns anew. He settles the stock in the pocket of his shoulder, just under the collar bone, rests the cold steel against his cheek. With a careful move of the fingers, he releases the safety. Then, he closes his left eye, focuses the right eye to look through the hole in the rear sight, aligns it with the front, a straight path to the target. His right hand trembles against the trigger, his left hand resting farther up, stabling the bottom of the forestock. He takes a deep breath, realigns his sights down range, lets half the breath escape his lungs, squeezes the trigger. The report shattering his ears. Exhale. He braces against the recoil.

--

He wakes to a cold slime crawling over his toes, feels an egg shell cracking in his fist. He opens his hand, studies the white bits of shell clinging to his skin. Moonlight shines through the window onto the kitchen tile, casting shadows that tremble with the slightest movement. He finds the clock. Just after midnight. He has laid an onion and three eggs on the counter and cracked another into the sink. The yolk wobbles over the drain. Omelettes, he realizes. Kara's favorite. He imagines his wife or Eva walking in, finding him this way in the middle of the night, half-dressed, unshaven, making omelettes

in his sleep. Yolk on his toes. The silence that will descend. The worry. The sorrow, abated, sneaking into Eva's eyes.

He cleans the mess and traces his steps back to his bedroom. The door is open just a crack, and his wife is lost in her own dreams. He lays beside her, wills himself back to sleep.

--

The receiver in his hand before the first ring finishes, the voice saying, 'I'm sorry, sir,' mentioning a gunshot, a boy, a name he does not know.

This time, David says, calmly, 'I'm sorry, sir, you're mistaken. Not my daughter. Not that name. Never heard it.'

The voice persists, a gunshot, followed by a second, a suicide, the boy.

David shakes his head. 'No gunshot. No suicide. No boy. My daughter.'

The voice consents. 'A mistake.' It offers an apology. It sounds sincere.

So he is able to see Kara beside him, they sat on the stoop before she left, the last time he saw her, the summer's end, the heavy August heat. She was studying French. She spoke some words to him, trilling syllables he did not understand, yet they sounded so graceful, like music, ringing out in her voice. He did not ask her to translate. It was enough, the two of them, sitting together, warmed by the August sun. Her beautiful French words. In some way, he heard them; in a small way, he understood.

The birds whistle in the tree tops, calling him home.

--

He bends before a thick tree trunk, presses his eye to the sawdusted bullet hole, peers in. The bullet is gone, lodged in the belly of the tree. Permanent. A hidden wound. A perfect shot.

He feels his father's hand clap his back, the gruff voice, the praise. He wills his fingers to put the gun down, thinks, I don't want to know!, screams, Stop!, he smiles, says nothing, accepts the praise. They move from tree to tree, and David takes aim, sometimes sending geysers of soil into the air, sometimes scattering leaves like a rough autumn wind. He shoots until his father is pleased.

His father, standing over him, tells him, 'You'll go off on your own.'

This is a new day in his memory, but here it happens all at once, it happens too soon. There are too many questions still to ask, answers he'll never find. I'm not ready, he tries to say, he wants to whisper, don't leave.

'You'll bring back a deer for us to eat.'

'Okay,' he says. Don't leave.

His father smiles a smile that wishes him luck, a smile that takes the place of words.

'Bye,' he hears his voice say, the voice of a young boy. Don't leave!

His father turns with his lingering smile and is gone.

--

In the middle of the night, at Eva's bedside, he sees the face of a boy form in the window over her bed. A face he has not seen before, a name he has not heard. The sound of a gunshot. Kara dropping to the floor, arms splayed, breath hushed. That watching face.

Before he can gain control of his body, he has crashed his fist through the window, his knuckles torn and bleeding and meeting the empty night air. Eva, in a start, wakes in a pile of glass.

--

A phantom in the forest, David moves through the brush, willing his footsteps to fall silent as his father's. He follows the trail of the deer. Scraps of sweetfern, the feathered stems eaten dry. Cranberry maple leaves gnawed to small ovals. A pine branch like a gangly limb, stripped bare by hungry teeth. He crouches behind the trunk, eyes peeled and patient, waiting to glimpse the deer.

Feeling a sharp pain, he notices a piece of glass buried in the frayed skin of his knuckle, tiny, winking like a star. He gazes upwards. The light of day. A shard of the night sky buried in his flesh.

Ahead, the crisp snap of a fallen twig, a shape shifting between the trees. The smallest movement, the sandy fur almost camouflaged.

Inching forward, silently, his rifle clutched tightly and pointed down, he can see the pinkish tips of the ears flicking front to back, listening keenly. A breeze passes and the deer lifts its head nervously, its jaw frozen, eyes wild and searching the brush. No horns. A doe. He stills his step, stands poised, waits for the wind to pass through the leaves. She lets out an airy, high whistle through her nose, stamps her foot, flicks her white tail. When the breeze has passed, she waits, then returns to picking at a small green-leafed bush.

He takes two quiet steps forward, lifts the rifle to his shoulder, eases the safety down. At the slight click, the deer raises her head in alarm. He already has his hand on

the trigger. He observes her eyes, their keen intelligence, their calm reserve. He hesitates only a moment, focusing through the sights on her eyes. At the sound of the bullet, he watches fear light her irises, a last firework of color, of life, that bursts in her eyes and expires. The eyes lose focus. She falls in her attempt to flee.

--

He wakes to Eva's cry, the sharp sting of glass buried in his knuckles. The window shattered. He recalls a face peering in, a pair of watching eyes, but he understands slowly that there's no one there, just the bright orb of moon in the dark sky, just the low moan of the wind, the chill night air creeping into the house. There is nothing and everything to protect her from.

Eva is clutching her blankets, backing toward the wall, away from him. He sees then that her cheek is bleeding, cut by fallen glass. He spreads his fingers wide, feels the shards shift against his bone. His wife comes through the door then, hurriedly blinking sleep from her eyes, her face pale as moonlight. What happened, what happened, David, what's wrong.

He doesn't have an answer. He is looking through the broken window, a splinter of glass pointed at the moon like a frail axis. Its fine pieces scattered through the sky as stars. A passing cloud veils the moon, and he raises his eyes to the hazy yellow light, lets it soak his face like the morning sun. With his face turned up to the night sky, he waits for the break of dawn.

## Nana Ray's Sparrows

I am nine years old when my brother tells me we will give away our new German Shepherd puppy. We are in the basement, and a thin layer of silence ceilings us. It seeps into the floorboards from above. I am sitting in the far corner, the one near the broken vacuum cleaner and the treadmill, and I am stroking the puppy's ears, the softest points of her fur. She sits with her long snout against the gray carpet as I spread her ears out from her head like airplane wings. I hold the tips between my thumb and index finger. My fingers seem to touch through the cartilage, like pinching stretched silly-putty. "We'll take her to the pound," Connor says, and I let her ears drop. I hear the muffled sounds of my parents' voices above us. The dull press of their footsteps shifts the floor over our heads. We both look up. Even now, no matter how I strain to listen, I hear only murmurs.

--

Nana Ray takes me by the hand and leads me away, into a classroom whose windows open to a blank landscape still waiting to be filled by her words. We sit together in the center of the fourth row, and she points to the boy three seats in front of her. She can only see the back of his head, his neatly combed sandy-brown hair, stiff and glinting under the ceiling light. He wears a collared shirt, buttoned to the neck, white and blue pin stripes. How do you know it was buttoned if you were sitting behind him? I ask. She places her fingers gently against my cheek, turning my gaze, and then as the boy turns to reach into his bookbag, I notice the dime-sized blue buttons lining his chest. I see the side of his freckled face, his pale eyes the color of sandalwood. He smiles the smile I know, the same smile of an old man, only on a young boy's face. Nana Ray is holding her breath. You see, she says, how handsome your grandfather was?

--

We are driving in January in the middle of a blizzard when my mother finds the abandoned puppy. Through the car window, I watch the wind carry the snow in angry waves, like sitting in a submarine at the bottom of a white ocean. The houses in the center of the storm seem more like dreams, traced drawings behind flecked wax paper. Without warning, my mother pulls the car to the side of the road and runs out into the snow. Connor wipes the fog from the window with the cuff of his sleeve, and we watch her disappear into the white haze. I can see her orange hair filling with snowflakes, the trail of her long, brown coat, the black rubber heels of her boots lifting off the ground. As the wind shifts, she fades in and out of view, a blurred outline behind a crystal veil. She kneels in the snow, her arms outstretched, her brown coat pooling around her. We hear her calling, but we cannot make out the words. Her voice is picked up and carried away along the swells of the wind. Through the storm, the puppy runs to her. She runs into my mother's outstretched arms through the drifts of the blizzard, knowing she has found salvation.

--

"We'll give her to the pound," Connor says after my father has found the puppy hidden in the basement. I am holding the tips of the puppy's ears between my fingers. When I hear the words, I feel a fist grab at my stomach and twist. I let her ears drop.

"Why?" I ask.

"I said so." He picks at a thread of the carpet, then looks me hard in the eye. "I decided." He is thirteen years old.

"You're lying." I glance down. "You love her."

My father's angry voice echoes above us.

"I hate her," Connor says.

I rest my hand atop the puppy's head and feel the bony protrusion of her skull beneath her fur. "You love her," I say again. "I know it."

"I hate her." He grinds his fist into the carpet.

I hate *you*, I think to myself. But Nana Ray tells me, You love him.

--

Nana Ray leads me to my mother's childhood home, a white house with blue shutters that sits on a quiet street. I sit with Nana Ray on the wood stoop of their house, watching my mother as a young girl, riding her bicycle through the neighborhood with a sparrow perched on each of her shoulders. The autumn leaves fall around her in kaleidoscope patterns. When she passes beneath trees, the sparrows flit away and fly above her through the leaves. She races them to the end of the street, and when she stops, they descend and settle beside her cheek. She found them inside a fallen nest, two feathered buds in a basket of nettles. She picked worms from the garden and dropped them inside their open beaks. Now, they follow her wherever she goes, singing her presence to the neighborhood.

You see? Nana Ray says, taking my hand. All the animals come to your mother with an instinctive trust.

--

I am not yet nine, and Nana Ray is folding dough at our kitchen table and telling me stories about my grandfather. Grandpa sits with us, but he doesn't seem to listen to the stories. He studies his long, thin fingers and arches them against the table surface like

spider legs. Nana Ray tells me that Grandpa had three brothers, all gone now, but once upon a time they all played baseball in the same league. His brothers were a pitcher, an outfielder, and a first baseman, and Grandpa was the short-stop until he injured his knee at age seventeen. From the dugout, Grandpa watched his brothers' games for four months before he realized he would never play again. He became a banker, Nana Ray says, but he never stopped dreaming of baseball. I am building a mountain of flour with my hands and listening carefully. Grandpa is gazing out the window, maybe still dreaming of baseball. Nana Ray kisses his forehead and wipes her cheek with the back of her wrist. Small spots of flour speckle her round, wrinkled face and her thick, gray hair. "Tell me a story about you, Nana Ray," I say. She forms a pocket of dough. "I love your grandfather," she says, "and your mother. That's my story. "

--

We are in the basement when Connor tells me we will take our new puppy to the pound. Upstairs, our father is angry. He has found the puppy that my mother kept hidden in the basement for two days. We listen through the silence for his words.

"I hate her," Connor says, glaring at the puppy.

I wrap my arms around the puppy's soft belly and press my cheek to her fur.

"Nana Ray says she came to Mommy the way all the animals come," I say.

"Nana Ray is dead," Connor says. "She's been dead for months."

"She's here with me," I tell him. "I feel her."

He looks at me, his eyes stony. He has our grandfather's freckled face. "She's dead," he says. "Stop it."

"She's not," I say. "Not really."

“She’s dead!” he shouts, slamming his fists against the floor. “Don’t you know what that means? Dead!”

I cover my ears. I feel tears press against the backs of my eyes. “Don’t take her to the pound,” I say. “Please.”

--

I am not yet nine, and I am sitting with Nana Ray and Grandpa, building a miniature house out of paperclips. My mother is at work, and my father has gone away. Within a year from now, when Nana Ray is gone, my father will return. Connor is in the house, but he will not sit with us. He stays in his room with the door closed. Nana Ray is allowed inside but she tells me it’s best if I leave my brother be. She wipes Grandpa’s mouth with a napkin as he sits stiffly on the couch. “Your grandpa used to add numbers quicker than any man I know,” Nana Ray says. She lifts his hands and folds one over the other in his lap. “Let’s see. Jimmy, how about one-thousand-seventy-seven and four-hundred-and-twelve?” He does not answer. “Forty-nine and five?” She waits. “An easy one. Ten and ten. Jim, tell me what ten and ten is, won’t you?” Nothing. “Well,” she says. “Not to worry.” She pats his hands. “The past is past.” I place the last paperclip on the roof and point. “Look, Grandpa,” I say. “All done.” He looks past me and smiles.

--

During the months of my father’s absence, I ride my bicycle through the neighborhood, searching for my mother’s sparrows. I imagine the slight weight of their tiny clawed feet against my shoulders, the sharp pricks of their pronged toes poking through my sweater to my skin. I look up into the trees and see a squirrel scurrying from limb to limb. The sky is a clear, spotless blue. I hold out my hand, palm upturned, and

wait for the sparrows to take perch. I would slip their small, thumb-sized bodies into my shirt pocket, gaze into the black beads of their eyes, and pop crickets into their upturned beaks. I would build a nest for them in my bedroom and leave the window open so they could come and go. I would give them beautiful names. Long into the afternoon, I hold my arm outstretched to the sky and wait.

--

When my mother brings the puppy out of the blizzard into the car, the pads of her paws are crusted with ice. Cold clumps of snow cling to the puppy's fur, shaping her like a half-built snowman. She shivers in my mother's arms. When we get home, we wrap her in an old green towel and place her in the basement near the heater. My mother wipes the melted ice from the puppy's pale pink nose. "Don't tell your father," she says. All day, the puppy shakes against the carpeted floor.

Two days later, when my father finds the puppy and goes into one of his rages, Connor says we'll take her to the pound.

"Please," I say, "don't." I see Nana Ray's floured fingers folding dough. She tells me about each of my mother's animals, the litter of kittens beneath the porch, the rabbit with the bent leg, the abandoned mutt, the cat with the clipped ear. The sparrows that flew down to her from the trees. All of them, my mother loved equally, Nana Ray tells me, and I tell Connor her words.

"Nana Ray is dead," Connor says. "Stop it."

From upstairs, raised voices float down to us like whispers.

Connor looks at the puppy. "I'm getting rid of her." He stands and stomps over to me.

I lift the puppy into my arms and run toward the corner, wedging myself between the treadmill and the wall. I kick the vacuum into his path so that it catches his feet, and he falls forward, the weight of his body landing heavy on his chin, his jaw clicking sharply shut. For a moment, I can only hear his heavy breathing. Then a thin line of blood falls down his chin from the corner of his mouth. He touches his finger to the blood and studies the inky red spot that forms on his fingertip. Then he turns his eyes on me. I hold the puppy tightly to my chest.

--

I am not yet nine, and Nana Ray is in her bedroom with the door closed. She hasn't come out for many days. My mother sits with her, but Connor and I are not allowed in. "Watch your grandfather," my mother says. I sit at Grandpa's feet picking M&Ms from the glass bowl on the coffee table and making patterns with them on the carpet. Connor sits away from us, tucked into the corner, his arms draped over his raised knees.

"Grandpa, tell me a story about Nana Ray," I say. I look up at his freckled face and see his eyes fixed somewhere far off. He stretches out his arm and grabs at the air. I wait for him to reach into the past and pull out a memory of my grandmother, but his arm falls to his lap, and he says nothing. I think he is merely too sad to speak.

I rearrange the M&Ms along the fringe of the carpet. I glance at Connor, his face shadowed in the dim light of the room. Here, I turn away from him, but now, looking back, I try to see him. I see his eyes cast downward, his body held stiff. I see his hands wedged between his knees to keep his fingers from curling into fists. Though in this

moment I cannot see his bruises, I know they are there, lining his arms like swollen, purple chicken pox. They fade a little more with each day that my father is gone.

--

Nana Ray leads me through fields of high grass to a white pasture fence, where my mother stands perched atop the bottom rung, her hand poked through the beams, palm flat and piled with oats. My mother calls a name in her small, melodic voice. The mahogany-colored horse in the pasture lifts his head from the grass and trots toward her, his legs springing like a dancer's. He slows as he reaches her, dips his head low, his nostrils flaring as he exhales warm, quivering breaths. He has a rich brown coat, a white blaze across his wide forehead, and eyes the size of chestnuts. He drops his muzzle to my mother's outstretched hand, wiggles his lips over the oats until his soft nose touches her skin. He observes her quietly with his chestnut eyes. I would take your mother here every week, Nana Ray tells me, to visit with the horses. My mother gently places her palm in the center of the horse's brow. Why do you only tell me about my mother's animals? I ask. Nana Ray smooths my hair. She's a hard woman to know, she says.

--

I am wedged between the treadmill and the wall, holding the puppy close to my chest. The puppy whines and tries to squirm away from me. Connor is on his belly against the carpet, studying the spot of blood on his fingertip. He wipes his finger on the carpet, his blood drawing a thin red line, and he stares at me with blazing eyes, breathing heavily. I hold the puppy tighter and try to soothe her. She pushes her paws against my chest and twists herself out of my arms, trotting away from us to the other side of the basement. Connor doesn't go after her. She watches from a distance, ears pricked, tail

wagging nervously. She yelps. Upstairs, my mother cries out. Footsteps pound the ceiling above our heads. My brother doesn't take his eyes off me.

--

I am not yet nine, and we are in the living room watching our grandfather while our mother tends to Nana Ray behind a closed door. Our father has been gone for many months, but soon he will come back. Connor sits in a dark corner, Grandpa grabs at the empty air, and I arrange M&Ms along the floor. My mother appears in the doorway and calls us to her. She kneels down and places a hand on each of our shoulders. I wrap a strand of her long, orange hair around my finger.

"Your Nana Ray is very sick," my mother tells us. "She'll go away in a little bit, and I don't think she'll be coming back."

"Where?" I ask.

"The hospital," says Connor.

I twist my mother's hair tightly in my fist. "Can I see her?"

My mother shakes her head. "No," she says. "But you can say goodbye to her through the door."

Connor turns away from us, trudges to the corner, and sits down facing the wall. My mother stares at his back but lets him remain there alone. I walk to Nana Ray's bedroom door and touch first my finger, then my whole hand, to the wood. I press my cheek against the door's hard, flat surface, and I listen for her voice. I wait for her to tell me goodbye, to tell me one last story. "Nana Ray?" I say. "I'm here." I strain my ears to hear her to answer, but she offers no reply. I lay my whole body against her bedroom door, my nails digging into the wood. I can only hear the sound of my own breathing. My

mother places her hands on my shoulders and tries to lift me from the door, but I press myself closer to it. “Say ‘So long, Nana Ray,’” my mother says. I reach out as my mother pulls me away, my finger trailing the cold metal doorknob. “So long,” I say.

--

During my father’s absence, I sit with my hand turned up to the sky, waiting for my mother’s birds to fly down to me. Long into the afternoon, I search for them, but they never come. At home, when I return without them, my mother is chopping a cucumber at the counter. I am at the kitchen table, drawing a picture on my napkin. The house is very quiet. I study the lines of my mother’s back, the wisps of her orange hair falling around the base of her neck. “Nana Ray showed me your sparrows,” I tell her.

My mother says, “You mean she told you about them once.”

“No,” I say. “She showed me, today.”

She exhales heavily. “Nana Ray has been dead for some time now,” she says.

“You know I don’t like you to talk like that.”

“What did they feel like?” I ask.

My mother stops chopping. She keeps her back to me. “I won’t talk about this with you until you tell the truth. You know Nana Ray isn’t here anymore. Now, when did she tell you about the sparrows?”

I stare at the back of her head. “Today,” I say. My mother starts chopping again, fast, the knife thudding against the counter. I glance at my hands. “What did they feel like?” I ask quietly. She does not answer. The knife clangs.

What did they feel like? I ask Nana Ray. She tells me, They felt like a handful of warm rose petals.

--

Connor lies belly down against the carpet, his eyes blazing and fixed on me. A thin line of blood drips from the corner of his mouth. The puppy whines in the corner, and I am crunched behind the treadmill. The silence from above has evaporated. My mother cries out. The ceiling shakes. Against the floor above us, there are heavy, muffled thuds. Connor pushes himself up from the carpet and advances. I raise my hands to my face and cower against the wall. I listen for Nana Ray's words, but I cannot hear her. Connor stands over me, his hand lifted. I tremble and begin to cry. The puppy yelps. Above us, my father shouts. I cup my mother's sparrows in my fists, two handfuls of warm rose petals, and I slip them into my shirt pocket. The birds squirm, and I wait for them to say 'so long,' but I feel their feathers fan across my face. I open my eyes. The ceiling above us quakes. My brother's fingers, like petaled wings, flutter and still against my cheek.

## Penny Lane

### 1.

Mama got his number from the corkboard at Murph's, a little square piece of torn paper that she carried around in her coin purse until I got on her to call. His sign was simple, not corny and done up like some of the others: *Guitar lessons. Call Jim.* Mama never was one for gimmicks, so she picked his name off the board easy enough.

She booked him for a Tuesday afternoon, and he said he'd come right to our house, make things easy. I was standing in the kitchen when Mama called, practically climbing up her arm to try and listen in on the telephone, but the call was over and done with real quick. "Nice man," was all Mama said. She leaned against the kitchen counter and lit up a cigarette.

I was thirteen years old that spring, and I'd been itching to learn guitar ever since I saw the pin-up of that lady behind the counter of Murph's Music weeks before. I'd wandered into Murph's shop for the first time while Mama picked up some things from the grocery store. The lady in the poster had long, golden hair swept across her forehead, and she wore a pink cotton dress, simple and delicate, that shaped her chest like a fruit basket. Her left leg dangled carelessly over her right, and I imagined the toe of her embroidered cowboy boot tapping to some far-away rhythm. In her lap, she cradled an acoustic guitar, colored a rich cherry oak. Its curves somehow seemed to draw her body. Even though the guitar shielded her hips, I imagined they dipped in along that same slender line, then swelled to form her bottom. That lady looked me right in the eye, and I could almost hear music.

When I'd asked Murph who she was, his body had slouched low across the counter, and he'd closed his eyes and whistled real low, like she came from some place he couldn't ever describe. I didn't know what Murph was thinking when he let out that whistle, but the way his eyes rolled up toward the rim of his blue baseball cap, I could tell he was using them to imagine things of his own making instead of looking at what was in front of him. He looked like people do when they get caught up in a sad, slow song—like the words of the song are holding them fixed where they are but sending their minds someplace else, into their own memories. It was different than the way I'd seen men look at Mama—hungry-eyed as stray dogs—no, more like that lady set Murph dreaming about something. That was it. Right then, I wanted to be a guitar player worse than I ever wanted to be anything in my life.

I begged Mama for lessons for weeks, and she finally agreed to buy me them when I promised to be a good girl and quit getting into fights in the schoolyard. I didn't go looking for trouble, but sometimes I had to put up a punch against the girls at school who were just plain mean.

“Okay, Mama,” I'd said. “I'll quit it.”

She'd given me the eye. “I wanna hear you promise. Cross your heart, hope to die.”

“I promise,” I'd told her. “Cross my heart.” I never did like to say the part about hope to die.

Standing in the kitchen after she finally called, I reminded her, “We've gotta get me a guitar.” I was thinking about the smooth, wooden curves of all the acoustics lined in the window of Murph's, the way their bellies swelled toward each other like the bottoms

of the milk bottles that were delivered to our doorstep, full and fresh, at the start of each week. I imagined the way those curves might sketch my own body when I held a guitar across my lap, drawing the hips I didn't have yet, drawing me a new shape. And I was thinking of the way those guitars hummed when I drew my finger across the strings, the vibrations whispering into my palm, and how Murph said each one had its own voice, its own song. I wondered which one would be mine.

Mama said, "I arranged with Murph to loan you an old guitar from the shop for cheap."

All the vibrations I could still feel tickling my fingertips went mute. "Loan one? Why not buy one?"

Mama sighed. She lifted her frizzed blonde bangs off her forehead and gripped them in her hand, the ends sticking straight out of her fist like a yellow squirrel tail. Mama had worked a late shift at the restaurant the night before, and whenever she did, she wore that damp, sweaty look the whole day long. "Case you get bored," Mama said. "You're always getting bored. I expect this'll be over in a couple a weeks."

I would have told Mama that I wanted this worse than anything, worse than the blue bicycle I'd asked for and hadn't gotten the year before, worse than the green-heeled shoes and the tube of mascara I'd set my sights on and eventually stopped asking for. I'd have told her that I was set to go play concerts for crowds of beautiful men for the rest of my life soon as I got a guitar in my hands, but I knew she would just call me foolish, and I was always setting to show Mama I had sense in my head. Whenever I acted like a foolish girl was when Mama was the most far away from me. "Can't I pick it out?" I asked instead.

She didn't answer, just kept puffing on her cigarette. It had a rim of her pink lipstick on its end, like always. The ends would collect in the ash tray like that, dozens of stubs wearing little pink wedding rings. Even now, all these years later, cigarettes look strange to me without Mama's mark.

"Mama—"

"Penny," she said, her voice thin as a wire, "leave me be." Then she stubbed out her cigarette, walked into her room, and closed the door. I was left staring at the smoke lingering at the ash tray, at Mama's green mug, half-full with cold coffee, sitting atop a pattern of overlapping sticky circles left from beer bottles. A milk bottle, turned on its side in the sink, dripped its last contents into the drain.

I went to her bedroom door, pressed my ear against the thin wood, but I couldn't hear nothing from inside, just the whisper of the blinds shifting with the breeze. I knew she'd be lying in her unmade bed, resting her eyes, willing another headache away. I quietly opened the door, and there she was, laying perfectly still, her hands folded neatly over her belly like a lady from a fairytale who'd been placed under a spell and had drifted ever so calmly into a permanent sleep. Her hair was smoothed beneath her head and lay neatly across the pillow, and her bare toes pointed straight at the ceiling. I crawled onto the bed beside her, studied the thin line of her pale lips without lipstick, the light orange spattering of freckles over her nose, the way her eyelashes fanned across the high ridge of her cheek. She had never looked so beautiful to me.

"I'm sorry, Mama," I said. I pressed my body close to hers, breathed in her scent. Perfume and cigarettes.

She rolled onto her side, away from me. “Oh, Penny,” she said, her voice tired. “Can’t you let your Mama rest? Can’t you ever just let me be?”

I didn’t answer, just lay still on the bed for a moment, breathing in her scent, listening to the quiet exhale of her breaths. Then I left her alone, which is all she ever wanted from me.

## 2.

It was easy to wear Mama out, especially when I asked about Daddy, and I asked a lot. When I was real little, I’d say, “Where’s my daddy gone?”

“What daddy?” she always said.

It was clear enough that Mama and Daddy, whoever he was, never got along too well, but I still wanted to know about him. I wanted to know if I had his teeth, if that’s how come I had freckles behind my ears, or my tangled mess of brown hair. I wanted to know if he could tell a good joke. Did he like coke and sunflower seeds. Did he wear suits or t-shirts. Did he have hair on his toes, like that man from the cigar shop Mama brought home with her once. What did his voice sound like. Anything. Everything.

“Can’t I at least know his name?”

“Far as I’m concerned,” Mama said, “you never had a daddy.”

She never was too concerned with what concerned me. And if I asked too much for the answers I wanted, that’s when she’d get worn out and disappear.

A lot of times, when Mama came back from working a long shift at the restaurant, she’d bring men with her. I’d sit looking through the thin crack of the door, trying to catch a glimpse of them. Sometimes they were business kinds of men still dressed in their

brown suits, men who probably went to the restaurant after a long, hard day at the office and never made it home once they had Mama as a waitress. Other nights, they were the kind of men who lived in trailers outside town on a long stretch of land, and they'd come wearing nothing but an old paint-splattered T-shirt and a dusty pair of jeans. I'd study the features of their faces and try to make out if they looked anything like me. I spent years waiting for my daddy to show up, but of course he never did.

No matter what kind of man she brought home, Mama cracked open a beer and sauntered up close to their bodies on the couch. Most nights Mama would be giggling like a girl, her smile wide and white beneath her pink lips. Back then, I used to think that on those nights she was truly happy. After all, she never laughed like that with me. Other nights, though, I'd hear Mama cry out or say things like, "Stop it, stop it, I said, go easy now," and I'd pull the covers up to my nose in the dark and feel afraid. Usually she'd get quiet again, and I'd hear the men grunting and moaning like farm animals, but once I heard Mama fussing and then the living room lamp crash to the floor. A man with a deep, gritty voice like a Doberman's bark shouted, "You good-for-nothing whore!" Mama yelled, "Get out, you bastard, or I'll call the cops," and then he shouted over her so that I couldn't tease apart their words. I was shaking in my sheets and about to go for the phone myself when finally the door slammed and the house went silent. I came rushing to the doorway and saw Mama locking the bolt on the front door, her hand trembling over her cheek. She was still wearing her apron and light blue work skirt, which was crumpled too high on her legs.

"What happened, Mama?" I asked, still too afraid to step past the doorway of my room. "Are you hurt?"

Mama kept her back to me, like she didn't want me to see her face. "You get on back to bed," she said, her voice wavering.

When I didn't budge, she said in a raised voice, "What did I say now! Go on!"

In the morning, Mama didn't come out of her room to see me off to school, and she never spoke to me of that night again.

Another night I watched long enough to see a man with gelled hair slip the strings of Mama's yellow dress off her shoulders, revealing the bean-shaped beauty mark below her collar bone. Mama wrapped her legs around his waist, and he started tugging at the straps of her lacey bra while she pumped her hips against his. He slipped off the bra to reveal her breasts, pale and full and beautiful in the evening light. Then he grabbed them with his hands, hard, and pinched the pink tips of her nipples. I expected Mama to cry out, but she tipped her head back and moaned like a man. Suddenly I didn't want to watch anymore. A dull fear, or maybe it was more like understanding, pooled in my stomach like still, cold water at the bottom of a well. I lay awake listening to them the whole night with that cold feeling in my belly, my hands covering my flat chest, the buds of my breasts already blooming there. In the morning, he was gone, like all the others, only bottles left.

"Who was here?" I asked.

"No one," she said. "None of your business."

But whenever she had visitors, I'd notice how long through the afternoons that followed, she'd sit on the couch smoking her cigarette, thumbing through the comics section of the paper, her eyes lifting from the pages to wander to the telephone. I'd lay at her feet and take the pages as she finished with them, giggle even when I didn't get the

jokes, try to meet her eye in the hopes that we could laugh together over the same thing, like sharing an unvoiced secret. But Mama read those comics every day without so much as cracking a smile. After a few days of waiting, she'd get into one of her low moods and spend lots of time behind her closed bedroom door. Sometimes, in the late afternoon, I could hear her crying, though she never allowed me to see this with my own eyes, so that often the distant sound of it seemed more like it came from inside my own head—like if I opened the door, I'd see Mama sitting there calmly, her face expressionless and smooth as a stone. Whenever she came out of her room, she'd prepare my meals in silence, place my dinner on the table and disappear to her room again, or else sit in a daze watching the smoke drift from her cigarette toward the ceiling light. The men never called.

One time, Janey from school said, "I know why your Mama don't tell you who your daddy is." She snickered. "It's 'cause she don't *know*. Could be *anyone*." Then she called Mama a whore.

That's how come I slapped her face and got sent to Principal Turner's and had a meeting scheduled with Mama and the teachers to explain my bad behavior. But when Mama asked me what happened, all I could say was, nothin.' So she said, promise, Penny. Be a good girl. I promised. Crossed my heart.

### 3.

When Jim came rolling into our dusty drive that first Tuesday for my guitar lesson and stepped out of his faded brown station wagon, I was disappointed. I'd been hoping for a true rock-and-roller, someone with a pony-tail and torn jeans and maybe even a motorcycle. It was 1989, and Mama had raised me on Bruce Springsteen. Even Mama got

caught up in the energy of his music, and we'd sing along together to his songs on the radio. So I was hoping for The Boss himself—his deep, husky voice that sounded as much like an instrument as the electric guitar he wore strung over his shoulder like jewelry, and his dark eyes that seemed to hold all the meaning of his songs inside them when he stared at me from his photographs. Even someone like Murph, who wasn't nearly like Bruce but had hands I'd seen working the strings of a red fender and a clean, pleasant face of his own, would have done the trick. Jim had a head shaped like an egg, glossy like one too; the only hair he had left was a thinning strip that skirted a semi-circle around his ears. He wore glasses with large, square frames and had on a corduroy button-down, which revealed the small pot of his belly that hung over his beltline where his shirt tucked into his jeans. He walked up to the house with his head down, lugging his guitar like it was his only companion.

Mama was standing behind me at the window. I was breathing in the sweet, heavy scent of her perfume. She'd put on too much, so that the smell of rubbing alcohol mixed with the fragrance and made the inside of my nose tingle. I always hated when she smelled like that. Like she was trying to cover something up. She gave my shoulder a little squeeze. "Now Penny, you mind your manners, ya hear?"

I knew it was an order even though Mama ended it like a question. There was no need to tell me anyhow. I was always minding my manners with adults around, but Mama never seemed to notice.

She opened the door for Jim when he reached the porch, but he was set to knock, so he stood poised in front of us for a moment, his arm raised like a dangling question mark. "Hello," he said.

“Good to meet you, Mr. Royce. I’m Abby. Abby Jacobs.” Mama extended her hand. She was wearing her big blue ring on her knobby index finger, and a small silver band on her pinky. Mama always wore a lot of rings, like she was making up for the one that was missing.

Jim shook her hand and looked over at me. He squinted through the lenses of his large frames. I was skulking behind Mama, my hands behind my back, my eyes down at the ground.

“And this must be your girl,” Jim said.

“Penny,” I said, when Mama looked at me expectantly. “Pleased to meet you.” I offered him my hand too.

His skin felt cold and rough, and my hand felt small wrapped inside his. That was my first time shaking hands with a man. As he shook my hand, his eyes looked off somewhere, not at the yellowing wall paper or the dingy brown couch that sat too close to the door of the house. I wondered what it was he was seeing in his head. “Well,” he said. “Miss Penny Lane.”

“Penny who?”

“Penny Lane. It’s a song. Beautiful song. By the Beatles. That’s you.” He let go of my hand and pushed his glasses farther up the rim of his nose.

Of course I’d heard the song before, and once I’d even asked Mama if that’s where my name came from, but she’d just looked at me like I was foolish again and said, “Of course not, Penny, that song’s about a street.” Really my name came from nowhere special; Mama had just liked the sound of it, and no one else before Jim had ever attributed the song to me. I couldn’t help but smile. Mama pointed down the short

hallway to my bedroom and said, "Follow me." She wanted me to take the lesson in my room so I'd be out of her way, but she didn't explain it that way to Jim. She said, "I set up a nice space for you both in Penny's room," as if she was being hospitable. Mama always liked to make herself appear like a regular housewife, or at least a responsible mother, whenever she was talking to men. I could see with Jim it was going to be no different.

Jim didn't seem to mind though, just picked up his guitar case and shuffled right along. There wasn't far to go. It was just Mama's room, my room, and the combined kitchen-living room at our place. The whole house had a kind of dim haze about it because Mama always kept the blinds mostly drawn, so that thin beams of light splintered through the plastic and sort of hung in the air without meeting each other. All the furniture was brown and all the wallpaper the same boring pink floral.

Mama waved her hand at the small space. "Sorry about the close quarters," she said. "It's hard for a woman getting by on her own. We don't have much."

I could never tell when Mama said things like that if she was hoping people would feel bad for her or that they'd think she'd done a lot for herself, being a single mother. Jim didn't say nothing, just nodded along. When we reached my room, Mama set us down in two chairs in front of my bed and stood with her hands on her hips in my doorway. "You two don't make too much of a racket now, ya hear?" She flashed a smile and wagged her finger at Jim like she was scolding him too. She looked pretty, smiling in the doorway in her yellow cotton dress and white heels. From there, I could only smell a faint hint of her perfume. I wished she'd smile like that at me when we were alone, but I knew it was just for Jim.

Jim didn't seem to mind being scolded like a kid. "Sure thing, Ms. Jacobs," he said. He even addressed her like she was a school teacher. The guitar teacher I'd been hoping for might have told her to lay off.

Then Mama closed the door halfway and was gone.

With the two of us alone in my room, I felt my cheeks flush, thinking how the place would look to a stranger, let alone a grown man. I never got along with the girls at school, so nobody except Mama had ever been inside my room before. Mama always kept our visitors to herself. I still had my dolls lined up in the corner and a purple bedspread with unicorn trim; Mama had never gotten around to remaking my room once I was grown.

"So," Jim said, clicking the locks of his guitar case open, "why do you want to learn to play?"

I thought of the lady in the poster at Murph's, how beautiful she looked cradling that guitar, how Murph's body went limp when I even just mentioned her. It wasn't something I could describe to a stranger. So I said, "A girl needs something to do."

"Mm," Jim said. He had his guitar on his lap now, and he casually played a little melody, as if it was part of the conversation, saying just as much as his words. "Seems to me there's lots of other things a girl could learn to do though. Play a sport. Dance. Do gymnastics."

"Well," I said, "I don't want to do none of those things."

He put his guitar down and reached for mine, which was lying across my bed. Its pale oak was covered with dust and the strings were rusted copper. It looked like it might snap in two if I held it the wrong way. Jim reached for it casually and tuned it by ear, his

fingers plucking out the notes and adjusting them to the perfect pitch, as if he held the right tones somewhere inside him and all he had to do was match up the sounds. From the way he looked, you wouldn't think he could make music seem so effortless. Suddenly he had my interest. I wanted to hear the notes how he heard them.

“How'd you do that?”

“You'll learn.” He handed me the guitar by the neck. “First, the basics.” He kneeled down in front of me and showed me how to shape my hand like a claw, how to press just the fingertips into the strings, keep my knuckles bent, palm lifted, so as not to mute the other notes. With Jim up close, I could smell cigarettes on his breath, like Mama, but it didn't smell awful somehow coming off a man instead of a woman. I kept my back firm and straight against the chair as Jim kneeled in front of me, taking each of my fingers and guiding them to the right places as he spoke, his voice smooth and even as a clearly strummed note. His nails were bitten short, and he had light brown hair on his knuckles. It felt strange to have a grown man sit so close, but Jim didn't seem to notice. He was just focused on getting me to play music.

“Okay, little lady,” Jim said, when we'd finished with how to hold the left hand. “You hold that hand still, let it grind into those strings, and now we'll work on your strumming arm. You've got to teach your muscles to learn these motions, and then you'll go to them by memory.”

Jim showed me how to bend my strumming arm like an L, how to keep the wrist straight as I played, how the rhythm should all come from one motion, not from shaking out the hand like a wet towel. He taught me the names of everything: the fretboard that ran like a plank from the headstock to the bridge, the neck where most of the primary

cords were played, the soundboard where the music vibrated inside the guitar's belly. I learned the letters of each of the strings. I learned how to morph the shape of my hand as my fingers moved lower on the fretboard.

We didn't talk much that first lesson. I was still figuring Jim out, and he was just focused on getting my hands and arms to learn how to hold the guitar. None of it came natural to me. But then Jim shaped my hand into a G-chord, and told me, "Press hard and play."

"But I don't know how to strum," I said.

"Just play."

I pressed until my fingers felt like they would bleed, and then I let my arm find the rhythm. At first, it sounded like a muddled mess, but before I knew it, I was playing some kind of music. I was only strumming that one chord, but it seemed like if I hit it different, the sound was entirely new. When I finished, Jim was leaning back in his chair with his arms folded over the round curve of his belly, nodding his head like a man satisfied at the end of a day's hard work. He was smiling like he couldn't help it, the way I'd seen some of the fathers of the girls at school look when they came to pick their daughters up at the end of the day. He said, "Yep. Miss Penny Lane."

It felt good to have a nickname that someone thought fit, a nickname to replace the one the girls at school called me. They'd chant at me sometimes in wild rhythm—Penniless Penny, Poor, Poor, Penniless Penny—until one of the teachers heard and would send them scattering, tittering to themselves. Jim started to pick up his things, but I was still studying my fingers. They stung like wild and had imprints of the strings carved into them. "It hurts," I told Jim.

He took my hand and brought it close to his face, squinting at my fingers through the large frames of his glasses. He'd been moving my hands all through the lesson, but it startled me to have my fingers so close to his mouth. I could feel his warm breath on my fingertips as he exhaled, and if I'd extended my finger, I could have placed it on his lips. I didn't know then what a man's lips felt like and I wondered, for an instant, if they were harder than a girl's. Then Jim ran his hand across my fingertips, and I could feel all the worn creases of his palm. "They'll harden," he said. "Callous up. Just takes time."

4.

The week seemed to pass slower than usual until Jim showed up that next Tuesday for our second lesson. Mama was working late shifts all week, and though she came home alone those nights, she slept late into the morning and was rushing out for her next shift by the time I got home from school in the afternoon. One time during that first week I tried to show her what I'd learned in my lesson as she was getting ready to leave. I kept my back stiff and straight in the chair, crossed my legs and tapped the toe of my boot as I strummed along on the G-chord like Jim had shown me.

Mama was holding her cigarette between her lips and rummaging in her white purse for her lipstick before she ran out for her shift. I played all the variations I could think of, and even threw in a little melody with my voice when I could, making up the words as I went along. Mama wasn't really listening. She buried the cigarette in the ash tray and smeared the pink lipstick over her mouth in a hurry. She was already walking toward the door, her heels making muted clicks on the carpet.

"Wait, Mama," I said, using my hand to silence the strings. "What do you think?"

She said over her shoulder, “Keep practicing, darlin’. You’ll get better.”

The door closed before I could answer, and I heard the old truck guzzling in the driveway as she drove off. I pulled hard on one of the strings of the half-turned blinds and light came beaming into the kitchen, filtering copper light through all the bottles Mama had left on the counter. I pulled hard on the string a second time, let the blinds drop, then slammed one of the beer bottles into the sink, almost hard enough for it to break.

After that, I spent the nights when she wasn’t home strumming on my guitar, though I could only play that one chord. It rung out high and smooth. I tried it out in all different rhythms, and I played along to songs on the radio, singing loud over the note I was strumming, though I wasn’t really matching the music. I imagined how Jim might look when I showed him how much I’d already mastered the movements and the scales. I imagined him telling Mama how talented I was. I couldn’t have been more glad to see him when he rolled up in his old brown station wagon for our second lesson. Mama answered the door for him, left us be in my room, and then I got to asking him all kinds of questions as we practiced.

“Hey Jim, what do you do besides give lessons, anyway? I mean don’t you have a band of your own?”

Jim was tuning my guitar in his lap. “Sure, I play with a few different bands, picking up gigs here and there around town. Sometimes we make it all the way out to Pinehurst or Sanford.”

Those were big cities compared to where we were in Carthage, two hours of the middle-of-nowhere away from Raleigh. I’d never been to either, and I wondered what they were like. “How do you make it all the way out there?” I asked.

“Murph sets me up with musicians that come through the shop. I had a band I used to play with when I was young, but now I just pick up gigs with whoever is able, wherever is available.”

I wanted to know how long ago young was, but Jim wouldn't say. He'd always hoped his band would take off and go somewhere. Once, they'd toured as far as West Virginia, before things started to peeter out. Everyone seemed to pick up and get lives one way or another—have kids, get married, move away.

“I'm not quite sure how, but I just seemed to stay put,” Jim said.

I'd never talked to someone who'd gone far from Carthage before, and I thought if I kept at the guitar maybe I could have a life like the one Jim had before his band split up. I asked him the name of that first band, and the name of the bands he played with now, and what kind of music they played. His original band had been called Rockwell, after a town nearby that he and his friends thought suited a band name, for obvious reasons. The bands he played with now didn't really have names; it was usually just a couple of guys thrown together, and they'd come up with a name at the last minute just to have something written on the door outside. Usually they picked a menu item or a brand of beer. Jim said he didn't have too many songs of his own anymore, not that he played in public anyway. He was just the back-up guitarist in most of these bands; he wasn't the leading man.

I wanted to know everything Jim was willing to tell me, but he wasn't the type of man who was used to having anyone ask so much about him. After awhile, he said, “Come on, now,” and made us get down to the real business. We did warm-ups of switching back and forth between two chords until my fingers knew how to morph by

memory, then we took out a drumming book that Jim liked to use to teach me rhythm. I had to strum to the beat of the exercises in the book, and the point was eventually to forget the exercise until I was feeling the tempo myself. That was the always hardest part for me; I was always so focused on matching the beat, I practically forgot it was music I was playing.

“Don’t make your strumming an arithmetic problem,” Jim told me. “It’s not step by step.”

Jim had a sense of music I’d never be able to get, though he always told me it just came from a lot of practice. It always seemed to me it came from somewhere else. He picked up his guitar and strummed along to the exercise, his foot tapping in rhythm with the music he was making. Then he stopped suddenly in the middle of playing to stretch out his fingers, studying them with a strange expression on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothin’,” Jim said. He closed his hand into a tight fist. “Forget it.”

“Does your hand get sore from all the playing?”

“Something like that.”

“Something like it, or just like it?”

Jim laughed. “It’s called carpal tunnel. I got it from spending all my time playing guitar since I was a teenager.”

I wondered then if I might end up with a sore hand if I kept at the guitar until I was Jim’s age. I’d never considered that learning guitar could be something painful until I pressed my fingers into the strings for the first time. “What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s like a bum knee for guitar players. It’s when one of the nerves in your hand gets pinched and sends shots sharp as a bullet from your wrist to your elbow.” Jim gently stroked the strings of his guitar. “It’s a strange thing, he said, how the things you love cause you the most pain.”

No one had ever spoken to me the way Jim spoke to me, like I’d understand what he meant even though I wasn’t an adult. Like my listening to him mattered. “Can’t you fix it?” I asked. I wanted to say something knowing and wise-sounding like Jim had just said, but I didn’t have the words in me then.

“I use a special pick that slips onto my thumb so I don’t have to pinch it tight, and I’ve gotten an injection twice before. But you can’t keep getting those, and the pain’s getting worse. It started with a tingling in my thumb and fingers, but now I get burning in the wrist, and sometimes the hand just gets weak.” Before I could respond, Jim straightened up and said, “Anyway, I’ve just gotta grin and bear it. You better get working on that rhythm.”

In the weeks after that, Jim was always rubbing at his thumb while I played, pressing his knuckle down into the joint and turning it like a screw.

Though I’d always listened to the radio here and there to pass the time, it wasn’t until I started taking lessons with Jim that I started learning the names of the bands and songs I heard. Each week, I’d have a cassette tape of the song I wanted to learn ready, and Jim would simply tilt his ear toward the stereo and translate the harmonies into sheet music. His pen moved over the paper as the music played. He never hit pause, just let the song play, untangled the threads of music, matched the notes to the memory of them he held within. I couldn’t hear past the words.

“How’d you do that?” I’d ask.

He’d close his eyes, tap his ear, and say, “Simple. Just listen.”

He could write down a whole song within minutes, hear through the drums and bass to the guitar melodies, and hear just what notes those melodies included. It didn’t matter what the song was—could be Springsteen, could be the B’52s or Aerosmith. I liked a good country song too, so sometimes I picked out Dolly Parton, Willy Nelson or George Strait. I’d pick anything I heard on the radio that sounded good to me. Every week I learned a new song, so that pretty soon I was building my own set list.

When he left each week, Mama would usually offer him some food to take, and he would always accept. I was always worried when the lesson was over how Mama would be. If she’d ask him to stay for dinner, if then he’d stay the night. But Jim never looked at Mama the way most men did. His eyes didn’t wander to her chest or her hips or her legs. Mostly he never looked her in the eye at all, just accepted his food all humble and took it to go. “Bye, Penny Lane,” he’d say, and I’d feel something like pride swell in my chest from being the one that held his attention. I’d watch him walk down our driveway, chewing slowly on a piece of banana bread or biscuit Mama had sent with him, and I’d wonder if he had anyone to go home to at the end of his days. He didn’t wear a ring on his finger.

After he was gone, Mama would set my dinner on the table and leave for her shift at the restaurant. Sometimes I tried to play her the songs I was learning as she got ready, especially if they were Springsteen tunes, but all she’d ever say was, “Keep practicing. Be good,” as she slipped out the door. Some nights, when she got home, I’d hear the men, and the laughter, and in the morning, the air in the house would smell hot and sour. Those

mornings, Mama didn't wake up before I left for school. I'd set the bottles in the trash behind the house, take some of the tip money from her purse for lunch, and say, "Bye, Mama." I wanted her to know I was on my way, but I knew she never heard.

5.

On one of those nights when Jim was still in our lives, Mama came home drunk and loud as ever with another strange man. I was sleeping, and the noise woke me up. I could hear Mama rummaging through the bottles in the sink and then the fridge door whining as she swung it open to look for cold suds. The man who was with her had a laugh that sounded more like a grunt. Every time he laughed, Mama let out a shrill playful scream. I was tired, and Jim was coming the next day, and I wanted to be rested for our lesson. So finally, I threw off my covers and walked straight into the hall.

When I walked out, Mama was dangling sort of sideways off the couch, her face pressed into her arm from laughing so hard. She was wearing a short blue work skirt as usual, and it was creeping higher up her thighs as she slipped off the couch. Her face was sweaty, her yellow hair frizzed, her make-up smeared in little paint blotches around her eyes. She was taking swigs from a glass bottle. The man sitting next to her had thinning black hair combed sideways over his scalp, stubble on his chin, and a round, pig-like nose. He didn't look anything like me. As I walked into the room, he swung his legs onto the coffee table, spilling two bottles of beer across the carpet, which sent both him and Mama into hysterics.

That's not Daddy, I thought, though I was really old enough to know Daddy would never be coming home.

When Mama saw me come into the room, she didn't do much, just laughed and said, "Well."

The man said, "Hi there, little lady."

Then they kept right on with what they were doing. Like I wasn't even there.

I picked up one of the glass bottles on the side table and peered inside, swirling the amber liquid around so it swung up the sides of the bottle. Then I tilted it back and took a small sip, letting the bubbles buzz against my tongue. It tasted awful, like bitter, spoiled juice, and I felt my face tighten and scrunch as I forced the swallow down. The man pointed at me and laughed, said "Look!," and Mama laughed too, so I took another sip, a big one that time, swallowing it in one big gulp. I felt it burn the back of my throat. As I forced the second swallow down, Mama's face suddenly went still. She stood and walked over to me, teetering in her heels. Then she slapped me across the face. I felt the skin on my cheek tingle and tighten before I felt the bottle fall from my fingers and the lukewarm liquid spill sticky over my toes. I felt like fireflies sprung sparks into my cheeks. Mama had never raised her hand to me before.

Mama said, "What the hell you wanna be, a whore, a goddamn whore, a teenage whore, a teenage drunken whore."

The man stood and grabbed at her arms, trying to quiet her. "Hey, calm down there, okay, just calm down," he said, but Mama turned on him and began shouting at him instead, told him to mind his damn business, to keep his damn mouth shut, and finally to get the hell on home.

He lifted his hands and held his palms out in front of him as he backed toward the door. "Fine," he said, "fine. Have it that way." He slammed the door shut behind him.

In the silence that followed, Mama turned to face me again. Her hands fluttered to cover her mouth, as if she was just realizing what she had done. After a moment, she folded her hands over her chest and said, "You should know better, shouldn't you? You should know better. Ain't I always telling you to be a good girl?"

I didn't answer, and she sat heavily on the couch as if some force had pushed down on her shoulders. She continued talking, more to herself now. "You should know better. Ain't I raised you right? You should know better."

I stood still, touching the spot Mama hit, feeling the skin go numb.

6.

The next morning, I started to collect the bottles as usual, the ones from the table and the counters and the ones that rolled onto the carpet or even under the couch. Then I remembered that it was Tuesday and Jim was coming. I left the bottles where they were. I wanted him to see them. I wanted him to know Mama was a drunk.

Mama still hadn't come out of her room even by the time Jim arrived after school. When he came into the house, he glanced around but didn't say anything, not about the bottles or about Mama's absence. When we got inside my room with the door closed, he said, "You okay, Penny Lane?"

"Mama and I don't really get along so much," I told him. The words just came out like a spilled secret, though I didn't know why this was something I'd always decided to hide.

Jim looked at me carefully through his thick lenses, folded his arms over the curve of the guitar. He said, "It's hard sometimes, getting along with the person you live with." He said it like he knew.

I told him that sometimes it barely seemed like Mama lived there at all. I told him about the men. About Janey calling Mama a whore. About getting sent to Principal Turner. About not knowing Daddy. About hoping he'd come home. I wanted to tell Jim about the night before, but it was still too hard for me to get the words out.

When I finished talking, Jim strummed quietly on his guitar. "When you feel really bad, Penny," he said, "you just have to close your eyes and play. You gotta imagine a place you want to be and take yourself there." He closed his eyes and kept on playing, louder and louder. I wondered where it was he was going to. I picked up my guitar and joined him, strumming my own melody, and he adjusted his song so that we were playing a duet. Then suddenly, Jim stopped playing, a pained expression crumpling his face. I looked at his hand and saw that the fingers hung down unnaturally in different directions like they were each being pulled by separate threads. Jim drew his hand in close to his stomach and dropped his head.

"Jeez, Jim," I said. "That's getting real bad." I was afraid for him then, afraid of what this meant for us and my guitar playing.

"Damn," he said. "Damn." He pressed his knuckle into the joint. "This happened again last night at a gig of mine, and we had to stop playing because I couldn't get control of my hand. It's happened before, but usually I get past it. This time the band had to forfeit the money for the night."

“It was just the one time though,” I said quickly. “It’ll get better, won’t it? It’s just a bad spell.” I was thinking of Mama’s low moods, how they came and went.

“I’m not sure, Penny,” he said, looking past me at the wall. “Seems like less and less guys are willing to play with me these days, the more word of this gets across town. It’s not just the guitar, either. Sometimes I’m doing something regular, like opening a peanut bar, and I have to stop because my muscles feel so weak, like my hand isn’t even attached to me anymore. There’s pain in the night, and in the day it feels like my fingers are limp and swollen, even though they look mostly the same. I get this tingling feeling, and then they go numb, and I lose my grip.” I seemed to come into focus for him again all of a sudden, and he said, “Anyway, this isn’t anything to be burdening your mind with. We’ve got work to do.”

I didn’t know what to say, and I didn’t want any of it to be true, so we didn’t talk for the rest of the lesson. Jim just sat back, closed his eyes, and listened to me play while he rubbed at his thumb, his knuckle grinding at the joint. When it was time for him to go home, he turned at the door and slipped a cassette tape out of his back pocket.

“I almost forgot,” he said. “Your song is on here. I want you to listen to it.” Then he handed me some blank sheet music. “Case you wanna learn it yourself.”

I took the blank pages in my hands and imagined filling them with chords I could hear myself. After he’d gone, I put in the tape and started to listen. I hadn’t gotten through the first verse before Mama was pounding her fist against the wall between our rooms.

“Damnit, Penny. Turn that off.”

I listened for one more minute, straining to hear past the words to the chords underneath. Then I switched the stereo off and let myself get used to the silence again.

7.

That night after Mama hit me hard and Jim left, I spent hours sitting in front of my mirror while she was working, just holding my guitar. Not playing it, just holding it. I brushed my bangs across my forehead, combed my hair until it fell silky and straight across my shoulders instead of hanging messily in frizzed knots. I put on my only dress, a powder blue one Mama had bought me when we still went to church, and smoothed out the wrinkles against my body. I posed myself, leaning over the guitar just so, tilting my chest forward, though my dress rose high to the neck. I crossed my knees, extended my left leg, attempted to dangle my foot in that perfect careless arch. And all the while, I listened to “Penny Lane” on repeat on my stereo. I imagined men in the crowd going limp like Murph when they saw me on the stage. It didn’t matter that the song was about a street; I imagined they were singing it for me.

The next day, I went by Murph’s on the way back from school. I’d saved some money from lunch so that I could buy a new pick and a set of strings. As Murph rang me up, I studied the lines of the lady’s posture, the expression in her face. I practiced her smile, the lips upturned so slightly it looked like her mouth was curved naturally that way, so that you imagined her face wasn’t capable of frowning. I tried to soften the muscles of my brow to imitate her wide, doe-eyed gaze.

When I got home, I snuck make-up from Mama’s room and tried to paint my face like the lady’s in the photograph. Then I faced the mirror. I had Mama’s frizzy hair, her

square cheek bones and hard jaw, her thin lips. In her make-up, my eyelashes were thick and sticky, my lips red as a child's crayon. I was looking at Mama's face. I slammed the base of my palm hard into the mirror, and a thin crack formed at its base. Then I went inside the bathroom and washed her off. I put "Penny Lane" on the stereo, and closed my eyes like Jim said, strumming my guitar along to the song. I was on my own stage, in my own pink dress, and the men were wilting and singing for me.

8.

It was a lesson soon after that when everything went wrong. Jim showed up, and we got right to work as usual, started with my warm-ups. I did my chord switches between C and E-minor, then E-minor and D, then D and C. Then I handed Jim the last song he'd try to write down for me—Springsteen's "The River." We listened to Springsteen croon away on the stereo, and Jim's hand was moving over the page like usual when suddenly he dropped the pencil and it rolled over his toes onto the carpet. I saw Jim's face was all twisted up with pain. I reached for it quickly, as if I put it back in his hand fast enough, it would be like it never happened, but Jim waved his good hand and stopped me.

"No," he said, his face firm with determination. "Let me." He reached for it, but his fingers only hovered over the pencil, and he couldn't seem at first to land them on it. His eyes strained with focus as he closed his fingers ever so slowly around it, and the briefest expression of victory passed across his face. But when he finally brought the pencil between his forefinger and thumb, it rolled out of his grip again and landed close to my feet. Jim brought both hands to his knees and sat staring at it.

“Have you been to see the doctor?” I asked.

“He thinks the only option left is surgery.” He laughed, but not like he meant it.

“Don’t think I can afford that. Can’t afford health insurance, can’t afford surgery.”

I was too young then to know how all that worked, but all I wanted was for Jim to be able to still play the guitar with me. “What are you gonna do?”

“I dunno, Penny. Keep teaching, I guess. Save up. Hope for better days.”

His hands looked strange and empty. He was looking around my room, away from me, studying my pink floral wall paper and dolls and collectibles like he was seeing them all for the first time. It was hard to see his eyes through his thick lenses. I didn’t know what to think then, but now, I see him for what he was. He was a man who once dreamed of being a musician and now found himself teaching in a pink room whose only audience was a row of dolls.

He was quiet for a long time, which wasn’t like Jim. I didn’t know what to do, so I did the only thing that seemed right to me. I put down my guitar and stood hesitantly by his side. I reached out my hand, unsure of whether to give him a pat on the back, a rub on the shoulder, a touch on the cheek. A full embrace. Mama almost never touched me. I lifted a single finger and placed it there, on the hand that hurt. My finger settled right in the one of the permanent creases of his skin, one of those that only forms on hands and elbows and knees, one that marks the way our body moves. In the silence, I could hear both of us breathing. I was too nervous to see what Jim’s face looked like. I didn’t know what I wanted it to look like. Jim just sat still as stone. He didn’t draw his hand away. He just let me touch his hurting hand in the quiet of my room.

It was then that Mama came through the door. I let my hand drop and turned round and Jim stood up, started smoothing his jeans. Mama's face went still. She looked back and forth between the two of us, and I felt like we were meant to explain ourselves. When neither of us spoke, Mama did.

"It's quiet as a mouse all through the house, and I figured I better check if there was actually guitar playing going on in here. Turns out I was right. There wasn't."

"My hand's hurt bad today, Ms. Jacobs. Penny was just trying to help." Jim was hanging his head while he spoke, like he was ashamed of something, which made me feel ashamed too.

"I'll bet she was."

"No, ma'am. Not like that."

"Jim was hurt, Mama," I said, my voice rising. "That's all."

Mama gave me a look that said to keep quiet. She pressed her hand up against the doorframe, and her whole body seemed to tense against it. "Mr. Royce, I'll show you the door," she said, her voice forcibly even and controlled. "I expect this'll be the last we'll be seeing of you."

I bit my lip to keep the tears back. "Mama," I said. "Don't do this." I looked to Jim, but he was still hanging his head, the balding top of it glossy under the ceiling light. "Tell her, Jim," I said. "Tell her we didn't do nothing wrong."

Jim wouldn't even look at me. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he said to Mama. "I can show myself out." Then he placed his guitar in the case, clicked the latches shut, hung his head, and walked out. I heard the door close quietly behind him.

Mama still stood in my doorway, her hands poised on her hips. She stared at me hard and said, “You whore, Penny. You little goddamn whore.” I closed my eyes, tried to imagine myself someplace else. Mama kept saying, “Why can’t you be a good girl.”

9.

I went by Murph’s one time long after Mama gave my guitar back. The lady was still there behind the counter, still tapping her embroidered boots, still smiling in her pink dress. I walked in the store, trailed my fingers along the fretboards of some of the guitars for sale, felt the coarse steel of the strings graze my fingertips. It’d been months since I played, but my calluses still dulled my sense of touch.

Jim’s sign was down off the board. I asked Murph if he’d seen Jim around lately, if he was still playing gigs and still teaching. Murph said that Jim was having trouble with his hand lately, that he seemed to have gone his own way. I didn’t like to think about Jim off alone somewhere without even his guitar for company, so I pushed the thought away. Murph asked why I stopped taking lessons.

“Got bored,” I said.

I was about to leave the store when I hung back a second to take a last look at the lady behind the counter.

“Hey Murph, who is she, for real? I mean, what music does she play?”

Murph smiled and motioned for me to come close. “Let you in on a little secret,” he said. “She doesn’t actually play. Found her in a calendar of pin-up girls and seemed like she was the girl I’d been lookin’ for all my life. A guy’s gotta dream, right?”

All I could do was nod.

When I got home, Mama said, “Where you been?”

“Nowhere, Mama. Just school.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” I said. “Cross my heart.”

She lit up a cigarette. Served me my dinner and was gone.

10.

The first time I handed Jim a cassette tape, I watched him tilt his ear to the stereo and translate harmonies into sheet music. His pen moved over the paper as the music played. He never hit pause, just let the song play, untangled the threads of music, matched the notes to the memory of them he held within. I couldn't hear past the words.

“How'd you do that?” I asked.

He closed his eyes, tapped his ear, and said, “Simple. Just listen.”

Sometimes, when I hear “Penny Lane” on the radio, I think of Jim and wonder where he is, if his hand ever healed, if he left town and made a life for himself some other way. Then there have been times over the years when I've introduced myself and some chance stranger has pointed his finger at me, winked, and said, “Penny Lane.” And always then I remember Jim.

But mostly, these days, when I think of Mama, I imagine I'm putting a song on the stereo, holding pages of blank sheet music in my hands, and trying to listen.

## Calico

Maya was walking the long walk home from the bus stop down Dowd Road when she found her calico cat lying dead across the double yellow lines of the pavement. She was nine years old, a half mile from home, surrounded by hayfields. At first, when she saw the body, she thought it was another possum or maybe a raccoon, caught darting blind in the daylight toward the small wooded stretch of land along the left side of the road. But then she noticed the slight bend in the white tip of the tail, from where a brick had fallen from a pile in the barn years before and snapped the bone clean in two. She stopped ten feet from the cat's body and sat down in the middle of the road. From there, Maya could not see the blood staining the cat's belly, just the stillness of the body, the ends of the cat's fur, colored like a pile of autumn leaves, lifting slightly with a passing breeze. The tail stretched in a flat line against the pavement, and the white tip pointed at Maya like a stern index finger. She pulled her legs close to her chest and pressed her cheek into her knees.

The empty road ahead suddenly seemed to stretch on too far, like a neverending road that might have been in one of her mother's stories, where bears and ghouls and dragonflies whispered in the trees, and where every bend in the path led to another adventure. She thought that if this were her mother's story, a bumblebee might fly down from the trees with a sweet healing honey, and the bumblebee might buzz all about pouring the honey on her cat until, like glue, it sealed the open wound in the cat's belly and held her together again. But her mother was gone, and Maya didn't know where a story like this might end.

She looked again at the carcass in the road, at the stiff tail that pointed at her. She longed then for her father's worn face, his deep-set eyes that seemed folded into the skin of his brow, his short, red-brown beard that felt like chopped pine needles against her palm, and then suddenly, without meaning to, she saw him bent over her mother's limp body in the barn, the beige undersoles of his yellow workboots turned toward her, the corners of his plaid green shirt coming untucked from his jeans. Maya was there. The chickens had sounded in a murmuring chorus as Maya's mother fell from the horse's frantic kick to her chest, and now her father was cradling her mother as if she were a child, holding her with the kind of tenderness Maya had only seen her mother show to their barn animals. Upon remembering, Maya placed her hands over her eyes and whispered, "Papa." She searched for more words, but they suddenly seemed far away, out of reach.

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Her father was still working at the lumberyard, still had an hour left of stocking southern yellow pine and the hour drive home from Randleman in his old blue pick-up when the boss came out to tell him there was a call for him at the front office from a lady by the name of Mary Ellen. Mary Ellen was a long-time friend of his wife's who'd been looking after his daughter in the afternoons since his wife passed away a month earlier. He never received phone calls at work, not even from Jane when she was still alive, so he knew before he got to the office that it would be bad news, that something would be very wrong. Mary Ellen's voice had its usual warm tone.

"Now I'm sorry, Frank, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but Maya wasn't at the house today when I came to pick her up. I went inside, checked all the rooms, the yard,

the barn, but she wasn't anywhere to be seen. But now listen, I'm sure it's just fine, Jeremy said he saw her leaving school at the end of the day with the rest of the younger kids, but I ran home to get on the phone and tell you just as soon as I could, just in case you knew something I didn't. Maybe you forgot to tell me you made other plans for her today?" She got it out seemingly in one breath as he listened silently, staring through the half-turned blinds at the men still working in the yard.

On the days when she was able to, Mary Ellen picked Jeremy and Maya up straight from school, but two days a week she worked an afternoon shift at the local diner and couldn't get Maya until four o' clock. Mary Ellen had offered more than once to have Maya come over to her place and stay with Jeremy on those afternoons, but Frank had always politely declined, saying simply that Maya was a shy girl, and he thought she might feel strange being alone with a thirteen-year-old boy. In truth, it was Frank who didn't want Maya alone with the boy; there was something strange about Mary Ellen's son, a certain callousness to him that had always rubbed Frank the wrong way. Once, he'd seen Jeremy walking through the schoolyard, swinging a dead squirrel by its tail.

"No," Frank said evenly, "no, I didn't make other plans." He was already reaching into his pocket for his keys, but he wouldn't let himself think of Maya's face, not the scattering of freckles over the bridge of her round nose, not her powder blue eyes that were the same shade and shape as her mother's. He would not think of the way her eyes looked, full of hope and empty of promise, when he caught her sneaking glances at him this past month as they ate their meals together in near silence, she hesitantly sharing minute, observant details with him in her chickadee chirp voice—how she'd seen the sandy brown cow on the neighbor's land ripe with foal, how the dogwood in front of the

school had sprung into white bloom—and he nodding his head, searching for things to share with her, for things he might be able to teach her. Night by night since Jane’s death, Maya had been growing quieter, but Frank wasn’t sure if it was from grieving or simply because Jane had always been the one Maya talked to. Maybe Maya had run off now. He pushed the thought away—he just needed to focus on the long drive ahead, just on getting home to find her. He knew all the places to look. She’d be there, walking along the white fence posts at the edge of the property, just like always, the little calico cat trotting behind her through the high grass.

“Oh lord,” Mary Ellen said, “what can I do, Frank?”

“Drive over to my place and check the neighbor’s land, the cornfields, the pastures. She likes to wander. Check the stores in town. If you can’t find her, then just stay at your house and wait. She knows she’s supposed to be there. She might just turn up.” Mary Ellen lived a good ten-minute drive from his place, so it would be a far walk, but she lived just at the edge of town, and maybe Maya had wandered in to explore the shops where she’d used to run errands with her mother. There wasn’t much on the three-block-grid of Carthage, North Carolina, but if Maya was missing Jane, that might have led her there. It might have led her anywhere, for all Frank knew.

“Okay,” Mary Ellen said. Then, a bit shakily, “We’ll find her.” He could imagine her, standing in the kitchen with a dish towel in her hands, wringing it like a chicken’s neck in her nervousness. He’d have told her to have Jeremy stay at the house and wait while she went out searching, but he didn’t want the boy in charge of Maya if she did turn up. He hung up, told the boss it was an emergency, and started the long drive home.

Maya sat in the road with her cheek pressed to her knees for some time, watching the clouds move through the sky. Not a single car passed. She was thinking of when she'd first found the kitten hiding in the barn, nestled in the shavings of her mother's horse's stall, small and frightened and fluffy as a newborn chick. The kitten had opened its wide green eyes as Maya entered the stall, but it didn't run from her, and Maya kneeled in the cedar shavings and waited patiently so the kitten wouldn't feel threatened. Maya's mother had taught her, even then, young as Maya was, that animals have a sense for the kindness in a person's soul and that you have to let them seek out the kindness in you instead of rushing it upon them. It was best to open your hand to an animal and wait. So Maya did.

Soon enough, the kitten teetered over to Maya, her paws sinking into the cedar shavings, and the shavings sticking in her fur. When the kitten stretched her half-pink, half-black nose toward Maya, the whiskers tickled Maya's hand like the wispy tips of the hay that grew in their fields. The kitten's mother was nowhere to be seen, and Maya's mother said it must have gotten separated from the litter, then crawled inside their barn looking for some place warm to sleep. She showed Maya how to nurse the kitten from a bottle, and Maya held the warm, tiny body in her lap and watched the scratchy pink tongue lap at the bottle's top. She made the kitten a bed of shavings in the hayloft, tucked it in an old green rag, and kept the barn doors shut tight at night. She gave her kitten a name. Callie. Callie the calico cat. She kept her safe.

Maya lifted her head from her knees and looked at Callie's body lying in the center of the road. She stood and walked closer, the white toes of her sneakers dragging a

bit on the pavement. She knelt down beside her cat and buried her fingers in the soft calico fur. Callie was frightened. She needed to be taken home, to be kept safe. Maya took the cat in her arms and carried her, the body still warm, the tail hanging limp and swinging like a pendulum across the top of Maya's pink shorts as she walked. She carried Callie down the windy road, bringing her refuge, bringing her home.

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When Frank pulled into their gravel driveway, ready to search, Maya was there, rocking calmly in the rocking chair on the front porch and holding the calico cat to her chest. Frank let out all the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. His chest dipped low over the steering wheel, and he rested his forehead against the sticky vinyl for a moment. At last, he let the looming, incomprehensible fear of loss shudder through his body and pass away. Maya was home. He'd found her. He'd never lost her.

Frank lifted his head, took the key out of the ignition, stepped out onto the gravel, and called to his daughter. She did not turn to look at him as he got out of the truck and said her name, not as he walked up the drive and onto the porch, not even when he kneeled down in front of her and saw that the cat she held so tightly to her chest was dead. Its head hung limp over his daughter's arm, and its eyes had the still, absent gaze of the dead, its pupils wide as if permanently holding some last vision within. Jane's eyes had looked just the same. It was then Frank saw that the cat's blood was drying on his daughter's pink wildflower-patterned shirt and that smears of it lined her small hands and thin arms. A thick, pungent smell of ammonia hung in the hot air, and it took him a moment to realize she was covered in the cat's urine. Horse flies buzzed about her and settled on the cat and her arms, but she didn't even flinch as they touched her skin.

“Oh, Maya,” he said, placing his hands on her shoulders. Maya was still rocking now, still looking away from him. He took her fingers and pried them from the cat’s fur, though she held them stiff, like bared claws. As he loosened her grip, the cat fell into Maya’s lap, exposing the open wound in its belly and the intestines coiled inside. The cat’s head tipped toward him so that he looked straight into its still eyes. He covered his nose and mouth with the back of his hand, the stench and sight of the cat suddenly nauseating him. He had to rock back onto his heels and stare at the floor of the porch for a moment, at the dark lines and knots running through the wood. When he turned his face back to his daughter, her palms were facing up on her lap, her fingers still gripping at the air. He lifted the cat, the hair on his arms rising, and placed it on the porch.

“Maya,” he said, shaking her gently. “Please talk to me.”

Maya had been quiet with him recently, but not like this. He stroked her blonde hair with his bloodied hand, placed his fingers under her chin, tried to turn her face toward his. Her eyes were empty as the acres surrounding the house. He needed to jolt her out of wherever she was, so he placed his hands under her arms and tried to lift her to her feet, positioning her white sneakers flat against the porch. When Frank let go of her, her knees buckled and she crumpled to the floor, her body as feeble as the dolls she used to drag around by the hand when she was a toddler. Frank took his daughter in his arms, trying to remain focused, and carried her inside the house, though he did not know where to take her, what to give her, how to help.

He stood in the doorway, his eyes scanning the sunny living room. Everything was still as Jane had left it; a red blanket she had sat beneath the night before she died still lay crumpled on the blue striped couch, and a vase of white daisies, long dead, shed

their dry, browning petals onto the pine coffee table Frank had built. Two hand-carved statues of cardinals, her favorite, sat perfectly placed beside the vase. Frank turned away from them, and looking up the stairs to the door of the bathroom, realized suddenly that the best thing to do would be to get Maya cleaned up. He took a deep breath and started up the stairs. "It's all right," Frank told Maya as he carried her, the old, wooden steps creaking with each step he took. He repeated, softer, to himself, "Everything's all right."

When he got her to the bathroom, he placed her in the white tub, clothes and all. She sat herself up without protest, her back rigid against the ivory back of the tub, but she kept her eyes fixed straight ahead. He wondered what she was seeing, if the image of the dead cat was planted before her eyes like a hovering apparition. He allowed himself to wonder, just for a moment, if she was thinking of her mother. Thank god, Maya hadn't been there to see her mother get kicked, but maybe she imagined now what her mother would have looked like. "Maya," he said again, placing his hands on her shoulders and leaning close to her face to try to meet her gaze. "Please, baby. I'm here." She only shrunk from his touch, her body coiling inward like a frightened animal curling around its exposed belly.

Frank turned the faucet on and let the water run across his hand, watching it turn pink with the blood it lifted from his skin and carried down the drain. The sound of the water pounding the bottom of the tub made Maya's silence seem less drastic, and he felt calmed by the noise, calmed by the sensation of the clean water rinsing his bloody skin.

When the water was warm, he picked up the blue plastic pitcher sitting next to the tub and let it fill. Jane used to give Maya her baths in the evenings, and in the past month, Maya insisted she could do it herself. He remembered how his own mother used to tip his

head back and place the ridge of her hand along his hairline so that the water didn't drip in his eyes as she poured it over his head. He remembered how gently his mother had scrubbed his scalp with her fingers, how she had poured the water slowly and evenly, so that the warmth of it seemed to absorb into his skin. He didn't think a father could have that kind of gentle touch, but he tipped Maya's chin up with his fingers and placed his hand against her forehead, pouring the water over her hair and letting it fall down her back to soak into her floral shirt. With her face turned up toward his, the freckles over the bridge of her nose each looked so perfectly placed, as if someone had painted them with a fine-tipped brush. "Shh," he told her as she sat silently, her eyes still seeing something his weren't. "Shh," he said, as he might have said to calm a hysterical child. He did not allow himself to think that he might only be reinforcing her silence.

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As Maya sat in the tub while her father washed her hair, she was not thinking of her mother, but of standing under a waterfall with her mouth open to the falling stream, swallowing the water with big, thirsty gulps. The clothes clinging to her body felt like a second skin, and she imagined wriggling out of them the way a snake sheds its hide, leaving it intact at her feet to slip back into whenever she wanted. Her father's large hand against her scalp felt coarse as splintered wood, and drops of the water that he spilled over her hair trickled down her forehead, slow like beads of summer rain crawling down her window. And then Maya thought of catching rain drops on her tongue, and the way the rain drops were really like a bit of blue sky that she got to taste, and how they tasted like nothing. And then she thought of holding her tongue out at church to receive the white wafer, and how she held the wafer on her tongue for as long as she could, feeling it

dissolve into mush, into nothing. And she thought how her body had the ability to make things disappear. Like by holding her index finger up to the sky in just the right way, she could block out the whole moon. Poof. Gone.

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After Frank had soaped her hair and clothes and rinsed her clean, Maya sat shivering in her wet clothes in the center of the tub. With her clothes clinging to her thin body, she looked more frail than unusual, undernourished even. Thick strands of her blonde hair, darkened from the water, stuck to her cheeks. Frank pulled the plug on the drain and watched the water get sucked away into the pipes.

“Maya,” he said, “can you get yourself into clean clothes?” He imagined her suddenly smiling and turning to look at him, as if being freed from a kind of magic spell that might have been in one of his wife’s stories. Maya only pulled her knees closer to her body.

He placed his hands on the side of the tub and braced his arms against it. He’d have to make her change out of her clothes. He didn’t want to force her, to push her even further away from him. He touched the backs of his fingers gently to Maya’s cheek and let them rest there. Her skin was cold to the touch. “I’m going to get you into clean clothes,” he said firmly, a little louder than he meant to. Then, a bit softer, “You don’t have to be frightened.”

He took the corner of her wet shirt in one hand, peeled it from her skin, and tried to press her knees down from her chest as he lifted it, but she held her body rigid, her arms wrapped tight around her legs. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he took both

of her wrists in his hands and pried them from her knees, but as he pulled, Maya's face twisted and she let out a sharp cry, shrill like a puppy's whine. He dropped her wrists. "Did I hurt you?" he asked.

She turned her face away from him. He sat kneeling before the tub, his t-shirt wet against his belly, his empty hands turned up at the ceiling. Maya's wet hair dripped in even rhythm onto the bottom of the tub. Frank sat back onto his heels and pressed the base of his hands into his eyes. "I'm trying to help," he said. Maya's dripping hair ticked against the basin like the second-hand of their grandfather clock.

The telephone rang loud in the silence of the house, and Frank dropped his hands from his eyes. Maya sat still, her face still turned from his. "That'll be Mary Ellen," Frank said aloud. He felt the tension in his muscles go lax as he remembered that he had her there, that there was a woman to help. He had forgotten about Mary Ellen since he arrived home, and he felt guilty suddenly as he imagined her sitting alone in her house, waiting and worried, her eyes fixed on the door or scanning the front yard for a sign of his daughter. He couldn't have been home more than a half hour. He reached for the green towel hanging on the rack and wrapped it tight around Maya's shoulders. "You wait here, okay?" he said. "Don't you go anywhere."

When he got Mary Ellen on the line, she was frantic. It felt good to speak and have someone respond. He told her everything. "I don't know what to do for her," Frank said. "She won't even look at me." He was rubbing his temples and trying not to think of dead cat lying on the porch that he still had to bury, but he saw again its wet intestines, twisted like the tubing under the hood of his truck.

“I’ll come right away,” Mary Ellen said. “I’ll bring Jeremy with me.” Frank knew she had no other choice but to bring him, but he also knew that when Mary Ellen was with Maya, Jeremy would follow him around, like he always did, and the last thing he wanted right now was to occupy the damn boy. When he got off the phone, he took a rag from the cabinet, wrapped the cat’s body in it and placed it behind the house so that Mary Ellen wouldn’t have to see what he and his daughter had seen. He’d bury the cat later, when Mary Ellen could sit with Maya, and he wouldn’t have to leave her alone.

When he went back upstairs, Maya was still sitting in the middle of the tub, huddled in a little ball, the towel pulled tight around her. He kneeled on the cold tile and lifted her into his lap, holding her shivering body close and hoping his embrace would give her warmth. He was trying to imagine what Jane might have said to Maya now, how she might have said Callie was in a better place, that the body was ugly but that Callie wasn’t in her body anymore, that she was with God, that she was safe. He tried to bring himself to say these things to Maya but couldn’t; he no longer believed them, not since finding Jane lying between the haybales in the barn, her body not like something left behind, but like a trap into which she had dissolved.

Mary Ellen’s voice came at last from downstairs. “We’re up here,” Frank called to her. He heard her tell Jeremy to wait in the kitchen and then her footsteps ascending the stairs. She came through the bathroom door, her round, ruddy face stricken with worry. She was wearing a blue floral dress that shaped her hips, and her brown hair was tied up with wispy strands falling about her face. There was a plainness to her—not like Jane, a blonde belle—but a homeliness that spoke of where they came from that Frank had always found appealing. Without hesitation, Mary Ellen lifted Maya from Frank’s

arms, kissed the girl's face, and began speaking words of comfort to her. "I know you're scared, sweetheart. What a horrible thing that was for you to see, but we're going to take care of you, and you can talk to us just when you're ready, and you don't have to talk about what happened, not unless you want to." The words flowed out of her, and Frank was struck by how natural it was for her to be nurturing. He wondered if it would always be a struggle for him to be the kind of father he needed to be now. He left them together and went to do what would be easier for him—the manual work of burying the cat.

When he got downstairs, he found Jeremy poking through the cabinets, humming to himself and tossing one of Jane's carved wooden cardinals in the air. Frank stiffened at seeing it being handled so carelessly. The boy spun around to face Frank, hiding a smile. "Hello, sir," he said. He had a pale face covered with orange freckles and a false charm in his green eyes. His sandy brown hair was the same color as Mary Ellen's, and it hung in a shaggy cut over his brow.

"You put that down," Frank said, the sharpness in his own voice surprising him. "You don't go around touching things that aren't yours."

Jeremy spread his hands wide in mock innocence and placed the bird on the table. Frank felt like slapping him silly to give him the discipline his own father hadn't. Jeremy's father was a drunk that had taken off six months back, and Mary Ellen was too soft to get after Jeremy the way she should. "I'm going outside to bury Maya's cat," Frank said.

Jeremy's eyes lit up with interest. "Can I help?"

“If you want,” Frank said. He didn’t want the boy with him, but it was better than leaving him alone in the house to get into things or go bothering Maya. “It’s only going to be a small hole.”

Jeremy followed him out to the yard, and Frank inhaled the fresh breeze floating over the wide acres of his property. The red barn sat in the right corner of the yard, empty since his wife’s death, and white fence posts lined the far edges of the land. Frank lifted the stinking bundle he had placed near the door and carried it towards the barn to bury the cat there, along with all the other things he longed to forget.

“That smells something awful,” Jeremy said, walking quickly at Frank’s heels to keep up. “Bet it looks something awful, too.”

“It does,” Frank said.

Jeremy tugged at high blades of grass as they walked, then dipped down to reach for a stone that had caught his eye. Frank always thought he acted too young for his age, and looked it too—he was skinny as a broomstick, and moved clumsily, like a young boy who hasn’t yet grown into his frame. “You think I could take a look at it?” Jeremy asked. “I’ve never seen a dead cat before.”

Frank shot the boy an angry stare. “You should wise up before wanting to see a thing like this.”

“Sorry, sir,” Jeremy said. “I was only curious is all.” He tossed the stone he’d picked up into the air and swung at it with his hand.

When Frank reached the barn, he placed the bundle down on the ground and fetched a shovel from inside the barn and then set to work. He pressed the shovel hard into the soft earth and threw large clumps of soil over his shoulder while Jeremy stood by

and watched. After only four scoops, he had a hole large enough to bury the cat. He placed her body in and covered her up with the dirt without pausing to wish her peace. It was over, done. After he'd shot Jane's horse, it had taken over an hour to dig the hole, even with the help of the tractor. He'd buried it at the far edge of the land, where he wouldn't have to see the unearthed soil and be reminded of what he'd done. Jane wouldn't have wanted it that way. She'd loved that horse so. Still, when he thought of her, he could see her riding bareback across their pastures, her long blonde hair swept up in the wind, surrounding her like a mane.

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Maya did not protest as Mary Ellen changed her clothes and combed her hair, and she allowed Mary Ellen to place her in her warm, pink bed and tuck her in tight, though the sun was still peeking in through the blinds. Mary Ellen leaned in and gave Maya a kiss on the forehead. The brown wisps of Mary Ellen's hair tickled Maya's cheek, and Maya could smell fried oil from the diner on Mary Ellen's clothes. Maya's mother had always smelled of fresh soil and spring grass.

"What you need, little lady, is some good rest to forget about all this mess," Mary Ellen said. "Are you hungry? Maybe I'll fix you and your daddy something nice to eat, if you'll eat it. But you just lay here and close your eyes and think of happy things. I'll be right downstairs, chatting with your father. You just give a holler if you need anything."

Maya heard her words, but as if from somewhere far away. The sound of Mary Ellen's footsteps travelled out the room, down the stairs. Silence filled her bedroom. Maya thought of the last story her mother told her, where the great oak tree in the forest

had a single golden leaf buried among all the layers of green. A young girl who lived in the tree tops and slept in bamboo hammocks near the stars found the leaf glimmering in the dim evening light, its gold beam shining and dimming like a firefly's tail. The gold leaf felt warm in the girl's hands. She knew it was something special. She could feel its energy pulsing in the cave of her hands, but she did not know what she was meant to use it for. That was the last Maya knew. She never heard how the story ended.

Jeremy poked his head into the room through the doorframe and then stepped in, standing with his hands on his skinny hips. He raised one eyebrow, and his hard, green eyes gleaned with their usual mischief. Maya wished he would go away.

"Heard your cat died," Jeremy said. He stuck his pinky finger inside his ear and swirled it around.

Maya turned on her side to look away from him. She cupped her hands to make a cave and imagined the light of the golden leaf filling up the space between her fingers.

"I smelled it," he said. "It smelled like piss." He closed the door behind him.

Maya was not listening. She brought her cupped hands to her face and peered inside, separating her fingers so that light slipped in through the cracks and glowed before her eyes.

"Your dad buried it, you know," he said. "It's gone now. So you can quit moping about it."

Maya knew that Callie was safe, wrapped inside her old green rag in the hayloft of the barn. She had brought her home.

Jeremy sat down on the edge of her bed, reached into his pocket, and began tossing a small, round stone in the air. "I bet its brains were coming out of its eyeballs,"

he said. “If it still had eyeballs, I mean. Maybe its eyeballs fell out of its skull and went—” He clapped his hands together sharply. “Splat! When the tires ran over them.” He chuckled to himself, his laugh breathy and snickering.

Maya placed her hands over her ears. She was thinking suddenly of her mother’s horse, of the smell of oats on his warm breath, of the white star in the center of his brown forehead that looked like it had been picked straight out of the sky.

Jeremy grabbed her ankle and tugged at her leg. “You can’t just quit talking forever, you know,” he said. “Why don’t you tell me what it looked like. You should consider yourself lucky.” He tossed the gray stone up in the air and caught it with both hands. “The only dead bodies I’ve seen is squirrels and roadkill. Always wanted to see... oh wait, your cat *was* roadkill.” He laughed again.

A brief glimpse of Callie’s open stomach, its wormy, entwined insides, pushed its way into Maya’s head, but she buried her face into the pillow and closed her eyes tight. She breathed in the fresh scent of the clean cotton and pulled her foot up under the blankets so that Jeremy couldn’t touch her ankle again. Her feet felt cold. At night, once Maya’s father agreed to let Callie stay in the house, she used to sleep draped over Maya’s bare feet, licking her toes. When the house was still and quiet and her parents were asleep in their bed, the cat’s tongue had tickled Maya’s skin, and its body had felt soft and warm.

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Downstairs, Frank sat with his head in his hands at the wooden kitchen table while Mary Ellen cooked pork on the stove.

“I can’t make anything too fancy now, Frank, because I’ve gotta get home and make Jeremy his supper, too,” Mary Ellen said as she sprinkled the pork with salt, pepper, and garlic powder. “But after the day you’ve had—” She pursed her lips and made a *tsking* sound.

“It’s more than is necessary,” Frank said. He considered asking her and Jeremy to join them for the meal, but it didn’t seem right, all of them eating together like a family. He wondered how meals had been at Mary Ellen’s place when her husband was still around, if he’d come home hot and heavy after working construction all day, if he’d dipped right into the bottle. More than once when Jane was still alive and Mary Ellen had been over doing whatever it is women do together, Frank had noticed bruises on her neck and arms. When he’d asked Jane about it, she had said that Mary Ellen loved her husband fiercely, that they were having problems but were working through them. Frank hadn’t bought it; whenever a woman says she’s working through something, it just means she’s training herself to accept something she doesn’t like about her life. You’d never hear a man say a phrase like that.

“I’m sure after a good night’s rest, she’ll be just fine. It’s a horrible thing to have found the poor babe alone like that in the state it was in. Especially after losing Jane.” Mary Ellen’s voice dropped over the last phrase, as if she was thinking she shouldn’t have said it. The pork sizzled on the stove. She sniffed loudly, uncomfortably, maybe fighting back tears. It was rare that Frank had heard Mary Ellen talk about Jane without seeing her eyes welling up. It had been such a shock, to everyone. There was a

strangeness to his days now, a constant sense that the life he was living wasn't really his. After dinner each night, he used to come home, tip back in his chair, and watch Jane play with Maya near the fireplace while he smoked his cigarette. Jane told her stories—she was always inventing them, at all hours of the day. At night, as Jane got ready for bed, she would take out the tape recorder and Frank would listen as she worked through the stories aloud. The stories might last for days, weeks, and she didn't want to lose her place. Then, as she taught Maya how to braid hair, how to care for the barn animals they'd kept, how to weave a necklace from dandelions in the fields, she'd take Maya away to these other worlds of her creation. Now, Frank came home and watched Maya play alone. He tried to talk to her the way Jane had, but he was never sure what to say.

“What if she's not okay in the morning?” Frank asked, his voice hoarse. “Do I send her to school? What would she do there? What would her teachers think?”

Mary Ellen placed the wooden mixing spoon down on the stove, wiped her hands on her apron, and came and sat down at the table in the chair opposite Frank. She placed her hand over his. It was the first time he'd been touched by anyone except Maya since Jane died. Mary Ellen's skin felt smooth against his worn hand. “If she's not speaking in the morning, you bring her right over to me,” Mary Ellen said. “I'll watch her for the day, and Jeremy can play with her when he gets home from school, just like they've been doing these past few weeks.”

Frank nodded. “Alright then,” he said. What other choice did he have?

Mary Ellen closed her fingers around his and squeezed. “She'll come around, Frank. Don't you worry.”

But come morning, Maya still lay silent in her bed.

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Sitting in her father's old blue pick-up on the way to Mary Ellen's house that morning, Maya kept her body turned toward the open window, feeling the wind sweep her face like a broom. She lifted her fingers to the breeze, imagining it was something she could catch and hold in the palm of her hand, the power of it swelling against the undersides of her knuckles, waiting to burst. What had the girl in her mother's story used the light of the golden leaf for? Did she hold it up to her ceiling of stars and set it loose into the sky? Did she bury it in the soil to see what would take root?

Maya's father turned on the radio, and a man with a voice deep and hollow as a barrel crooned his song into the wind. Sometimes, on the road, her father would sing along to the songs on the radio, his voice deep and gritty with cigarette smoke. Maya imagined he was singing just for her. But today, he had his eyes focused on the road ahead, and his hands gripped the steering wheel tightly. When Maya looked at his eyes, sad as a basset hound's, she felt as if a hand closed around her throat and held her voice in its fist. She looked away from him, to the empty sprawl of hayfields, to the cows with their noses to the ground. Had the girl swallowed the leaf and held its golden light inside?

As they turned onto the street where Mary Ellen lived, her father switched off the radio and pulled the truck suddenly to the side of the road, the tires kicking a cloak of dust into the air. Maya could see from the corner of her eye that he turned to face her, but

she looked down at her hands, folding them again into a closed cave. Her father laid his hand over hers, and she could see the worn creases of his skin around his knuckles.

“You don’t want to talk to me?” he asked. “Even if you decide to talk to me, you don’t have to go to school today, if you don’t want.”

Maya turned the lock of the music box that held her voice and swallowed the key.

Her father moved his calloused thumb over her hands. “I just want to hear your voice,

baby,” he said. “Any word will do.”

A word, a word. And Maya was in the yellow classroom of her school, sitting at her desk, tracing her teacher’s words on the sheet of paper, *scarecrow, somewhere, yourself*, then letting her pen follow the movement in the lines below, shaping her letters to fit inside the dotted blue lines across her page, *scarecrow, somewhere, yourself*. A word. *Hayfield, horsefly, horse, fly*. And before she could think to stop, Maya was tracing a word in the air with her index finger.

When she’d finished, her father was staring as if seeing something vanished.

“What was that?” he said. “What was that?” When she did not answer, he said, “Write it again. Slower.” Then, “Please.”

A word, a word. But it was gone.

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Standing on Mary Ellen’s doorstep while his daughter silently picked pebbles from the driveway, Frank felt like a child seeking comfort at the end of a bad dream. The hot morning sun warmed the side of his face, and the birds sang their sunup songs in the

far-off fields, but it seemed yesterday had never ended, that time rolled on without setting right all that had gone wrong. At night, he always went with his bones aching, with his skin worn from wood, but the mornings usually brought renewal.

Mary Ellen's face appeared behind the screen as the door swung open, her features silhouetted by the morning light. She looked past Frank's shoulder to where Maya knelt piling stones into a small, gray mountain.

"Not a peep?" Mary Ellen asked.

Frank shook his head. He thought of Maya's finger tracing invisible letters in the air. He considered telling Mary Ellen about this but chose not to. What was there to tell? Maya was not speaking.

"You go on," Mary Ellen said. She stepped out from behind the screen door in a green dress and apron and patted his shoulder. "I'll take her."

Frank said his thanks and walked away. As he passed Maya, he stooped down to let his hand graze her fine hair, still soft from the shampoo he'd washed it with the night before. He waited to see if she'd respond to his touch, if she'd look up to say goodbye. But she kept her head to the ground, building her mountain of gray stones.

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The whole day long, Mary Ellen busied herself around Maya, chatting away to her as if Maya wasn't keeping her voice locked away inside. She first set Maya up at the kitchen table with paper and watercolor paints while she went about cleaning the house. Maya swung her legs back and forth over the rim of the chair, letting the motion rock her

body as she swirled spring colors onto the clean, white page. Yellow bled into blue bled into green bled into orange orange orange.

“You should have just seen this family that came in with their newborn to the diner, yesterday, little chick,” Mary Ellen said while Maya worked. “Blue eyes bright as polished sapphire. Only babies have eyes that blue. And the shape of his little nose! Sometimes I wish I could be a midwife, just to see their brand new fresh little faces all the time. You ever seen a baby, I wonder? ‘Course you have, somewhere, but there’s nothing like spending time with one, holding their warm wriggly bodies to your shoulder. The smell of their breath like fresh milk.” She chuckled to herself. “‘Course, you don’t care about any of that right now, nor you shouldn’t. But one day you will, one day you will.”

Maya listened while she worked, her page blossoming into a field of wildflowers. Later, Mary Ellen prepared ham and cheese sandwiches on fresh baked grain bread for lunch, and they ate them outside on the back stoop, looking out into the open yard. Mary Ellen’s yard was smaller than Maya’s, but it was large enough that when Maya walked to its edge some afternoons, the house looked the size of a small shed in the distance. After lunch, Mary Ellen weeded the vegetable garden at the back of the house, and Maya escaped to the edge of the property, where she sat weaving long necklaces of dandelions as her mother had shown her to do. Maya sat braiding the green stems together until late in the afternoon when she heard footsteps in the grass and looked up to see Jeremy approaching.

“Well, if it isn’t little miss deaf-and-dumb,” Jeremy said as he sank to his knees beside her. His white t-shirt was dirty with dust, his hands sticky and smelling of freshly peeled orange. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.” He held out his sticky hand.

The long, yellow grass waved across Maya’s arms, hiding the lower half of her body. She broke a dandelion stem in half, felt the flimsy green flesh inside its skin.

“Don’t you know what that means?” Jeremy asked. “That’s what they call people too stupid to speak. People like you.”

Maya plucked a new dandelion from the ground and tied the two stems together in a tight knot.

“Whatsa matter, cat got your tongue?” That time his whole skinny body shook with laughter. Maya’s hands stilled. A word. She could feel it swelling inside her, but she swallowed it down like a pill.

“I been cookin’ these up all day,” Jeremy said. “Too easy.” He stood and started kicking at the grass, his arms loose and wild as flapping wings. “Hey, come on,” he said. “Aren’t you gonna talk? You can talk to me. I’ll cut it out now. I don’t mean no harm.”

Maya took the two flowered ends of her necklace and looped the stems together in a final knot, stringing it around her neck like a garland. She pushed herself up, wiping the grass stains from her knees, and started walking quickly toward the house. Jeremy trailed her.

“Hey,” he said. “Talk to me, why don’t you. You always talked a little before.”

When Maya quickened her pace, he reached for her wrist and tugged, hard, wrenching her shoulder blade. “I said, you talk!” His voice had the sound of a sneer in it.

She could feel the anger in the grip of his fingers. “Don’t you walk away when I’m talking to you,” he said. “Didn’t your mama teach you manners?”

Maya hung her head, her eyes focused on the wispy grass tickling her knees. Had the girl kept the golden light swallowed in her fist until it soaked its strength into her fingers?

“Don’t you want to see your cat again?” Jeremy asked, his voice a whisper, his breath hot and sour with citrus. “I know where she is. I could show you how.”

Maya could feel the patches of fur at the backs of Callie’s ears, soft as feather down, and she could see the cat’s bent tail bobbing in the grass as she trotted at Maya’s feet along the edges of their property. She could hear the quiet hum of the cat’s purr in the middle of the dark night, could feel the rumbling warmth of the small body spread over her toes. How Maya would love to see her one last time, if only to hold Callie’s head between her two hands, to close her open eyelids, place a kiss on the tip of her black nose, and say sleep, sleep. Then Jeremy tightened his hold on Maya’s wrist, and her bones felt like thin, breakable stalks in his hand. She pulled herself from his grip and ran, the high grasses stinging her calves as the house loomed larger and larger with every step. She could hear Jeremy exhaling heavy breaths behind her, and she lifted her feet as high as they would go, imagining that her ankles would sprout wings and kick her up, up, up, into the clouds until she landed on the warm face of the sun, her body beaming like a ray of orange light. But then she heard Jeremy’s heavy breathing mix with his laughter, and she knew he could have reached out and caught her whenever he wanted. He was only delighting in making her afraid.

When Maya reached the house, Mary Ellen was chopping carrots at the kitchen counter and humming a high tune. With Mary Ellen's back to her, Maya could almost pretend she was her mother, could close her eyes and wrap her arms around Mary Ellen's aproned waist and imagine that her mother had come home.

"Hey there, little chick," Mary Ellen said, turning to face Maya with a smile. "Your father will be here soon enough."

Maya sat at the kitchen table and touched her finger to the dried watercolor paint as Jeremy came through the back door.

"It's about time you got started on that essay," Mary Ellen said to Jeremy, her hands moving to her hips as she faced him. "Don't think I've forgotten. It's already a day late."

Jeremy grinned his false smile at her, revealing the large gap between his two front teeth. "Course, Mama," he said. "I'll go get to work now. Just wanted to say hi to Maya."

When Mary Ellen turned back to the stove, Jeremy pinched the skin of Maya's arm as he headed toward the stairs. The surprising sting of it almost brought Maya's voice to her lips, but she swallowed it back down before it escaped. She ran her finger along the bubbled surface of her painting, letting the colors seep into her mind. But she could not stop thinking of Callie's green jewel eyes going soft with love whenever she gazed at Maya's face.

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When Frank arrived at Mary Ellen's that evening, he peered in through the screen door, and Mary Ellen called to him from the kitchen to come inside. "Got my hands tied in here, Frank, so you come right on in," she hollered.

His arms ached from the day's work and the enthusiasm in her voice was nice to return to. She had the kind of voice that would welcome a man home at the end of a long day, that would say "Hi, sweetheart," and offer him a hot dinner of carved turkey and gravy biscuits. Jane had a voice like that too. As he stepped inside, he saw the house was hot with smoke, and the smell of cooking steak and collard greens woke the hungry pit in his stomach. For a moment, he could not help but imagine the peep of Maya's voice greeting him hello, and then the three of them sitting down to a warm dinner, talking the whole night through with the spring breeze lofting through the open windows. He'd have preferred if Jeremy wasn't there. When he reached the kitchen, Maya was bent over a drawing, a wilting dandelion necklace strung around her neck. She did not look up to see him. Frank found Mary Ellen's eyes, and she pursed her lips and shook her head no, answering his question before he had to put it into words.

"Aren't you going to give your daddy a hug, little chickadee? He's had a long day." Mary Ellen asked. It was a mother's way of telling a child what she should do without being stern, Frank knew.

Without raising her eyes to Frank's face, Maya tucked her drawing under her arm, then hopped down from the chair and walked past him to the door. He reached out for her as she passed, but he felt her turn her face away from his touch as his fingers brushed her cheek. In an instant, Frank felt a pocket of angry words swell inside his throat and heat rush to his face, and he forced his hands down to his side, afraid of the frustration he'd

felt tense inside his fingers against his daughter's face. He raised his eyes to find Mary Ellen observing him sadly, as if he were an old, failing barn animal. Her cheeks were flushed from the kitchen steam, and the humid air lifted damp wisps of hair from her brown braid. She placed the wooden spoon down on the stove and wiped her hands on her apron, then walked to where Frank stood and laid her palm on his shoulder. Frank felt his muscles tense from looking straight at Mary Ellen's face while they stood so close. He was close enough to see three fine creases folded at the corners of her brown eyes. He looked down.

"Come now," she said quietly, glancing over his shoulder to where Maya waited just outside the screen door. "She'll come around."

"She seems angry, doesn't she?" Frank spoke in a whisper so that Maya could not hear, but the coarseness of his voice surprised him, and he had to clear his throat to speak again. "I don't know why."

"Maybe she's just missing her mama," Mary Ellen said, letting her hand drop from his shoulder to fiddle with the string of her apron. "And she's just getting used to the idea that you're all she's got. You know how it is. Anger don't always make sense, does it?"

Frank thought of the anger that used to be bruised into Mary Ellen's arms. "No," he said. "No, it doesn't." She'd never asked him what became of Jane's horse. He was grateful for that.

"You know how she loved that little cat. And she's just a young thing. It probably feels to her like losing her baby. A girl's always got that mothering instinct in her, even from the time she's a child. Any toddler toting around a baby doll oughta tell you that."

She pulled tight the loops of the bow that rested against her full waist, then looked up and smiled. “But anyhow. Just give her some time. Don’t press her none, and she’ll let you know when she’s ready.”

Frank turned to look over his shoulder at Maya. She was sitting on the top step of the porch with her body folded over her knees. “And school? What am I to do about that?”

Mary Ellen shook her head. “I don’t think that will do her any good. Not yet. You bring her over here again tomorrow. She doesn’t cause me any trouble.”

Frank nodded. “Thank you.” He folded his hands at his beltline. “You have a nice night now.”

As he turned toward the door, Mary Ellen reached for his arm again. “Are you sure you don’t want to stay and have dinner? What are you poor things going to eat?”

Frank looked past her to the round oak table, set for two, then back over his shoulder to where Maya sat alone on the porch. He didn’t know what was best for her, if she’d want to be at home, in her own room, or if she’d enjoy the company at Mary Ellen’s. For a moment, it barely mattered—he felt a longing for normalcy grow like a hunger in the pit of his stomach. He placed his left hand over the one Mary Ellen had laid on his arm and met her eyes. It was quiet enough in the house to hear her breathing. Then he looked down and saw the gold wedding band on his finger lying atop Mary Ellen’s hand. “I think I better take Maya home,” he said. He drew his hand away slowly and shoved it into his pocket. “Thank you.”

Mary Ellen nodded and dropped her eyes. “Go on now.”

That night, after he'd fed Maya a dinner of fried eggs and bacon and tucked her into bed, he sat in the dark listening to the wind whine against the shingles. The walls shuddered with the distilled gusts coming through the glass, and the water whispered its way through the pipes. He was more aware than ever of the house's emptiness, of the way sounds echo within hollow spaces, calling out a need like the hunger he'd felt grow in his stomach earlier that evening. He was lonely for Jane. He used to fall asleep to the sound of her voice as she told her stories to the tape recorder, seated at the vanity with the long line of her back to him, the ridges of her spine visible beneath her pale blue nightshirt. The tapes were still there, in a box under the bed. He knelt down and pulled the box out, the dust on its top clinging to his fingers. When he lifted the lid, he found dozens of tapes inside, each containing the foundations of some far-off place in Jane's mind. He had never seen them piled together like this, had never stopped to consider the number of stories that the years of Jane's life had afforded her. He picked the tape from the top of the pile and held it in his hands. It wasn't labeled. He swiped his thumb across its smooth plastic case, as if a title might appear by magic beneath his touch, and then he slipped the tape in the player and covered his ears with headphones so that Maya wouldn't hear. And there was Jane's voice—the lilt in the final sound of each word, the sing-song melody of her sentences—she was there, still weaving that final story she'd begun to tell.

Frank closed his eyes and listened. It was the story of the girl with the golden leaf. Jane's voice led him into a dense forest, where a great oak tree held a single golden leaf buried among all the layers of green. There, in the forest, a young girl lived alone in the tree tops. She slept in bamboo hammocks near the stars. One night, when the girl was

feeling most alone, she found the leaf glimmering in the dim evening light, its gold beam shining and dimming like a firefly's tail. It felt warm in her hands. She could feel its energy pulsing, but she did not know what she was meant to use it for. As the girl began to wonder, to imagine the possibilities, the tape clicked to a stop. The sudden, sharp click that brought the absence of Jane's voice sent an ache into his chest. Frank placed his hand over his heart, closed his eyes. Then he rewound the tape and listened again and again, until he was mouthing along with the words, until he had learned the story by heart.

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When Maya opened her eyes to the morning light, she could hear crickets and locusts humming their songs in the fields. She pressed the base of her palms into her eyes until blue circles of light swelled like inkblots and burst beneath her eyelids. The crickets chimed like high bells, and Maya imagined them rubbing their wings together fast enough to start fire, using their whole bodies as instruments. She longed to lift up into the clouds, her body a beam of orange light, her fingers fluttering to cry like a violin.

"Maya?" It was her father's voice, and there she was again, in her own pink room, the morning light filtering through the shades to dance across her bare, cold toes. "I've made breakfast," he said. It would be eggs again and half-burnt toast. She wanted to crawl into the cave beneath her bed and lay there the whole day through, cast shadow puppets on its ceiling, watch their moves mouth like talking ghosts. She would shape a horse with her hands and let him dance above her head, his body emitting from her fingertips, let loose from somewhere held within. His shadow made from her light.

But her father was in the doorway with his heavy, heavy eyes and so she followed him downstairs and sat with him at their kitchen table while her mother's cardinals sat by watching, still as carved stone. Her father swallowed the last of his coffee, then folded his hands atop the table and sat staring out over the fields. The big barn like a dollhouse in the distance.

"Your mother wanted another child," her father said, as if to himself. He was gazing at the rising sun, and the fields were golden with its light. "A sister for you, maybe. That would have been nice. But we couldn't, though we tried." He rubbed his hand across his beard. "She wanted the horse then. A second child. All she wanted was creatures to care for. That was her way."

Maya could remember how the expression in the horse's eyes was soft as molten molasses, how his gold-brown irises were ringed like the circles inside a tree trunk that mark the years of its life. She could remember her mother holding his great, magnificent head in her arms, the way he rested into the slight frame of her, his eyes closed as if lost in a dream.

"Maybe you'd like another cat," her father said, but still he was not looking at her. "We could get you another cat."

But Callie had been the one to find Maya, to appear in the barn as if from nowhere, needing her help. Later, she had lain in Maya's lap with her broken tail, whining softly while Maya smoothed her long fur against her body, stroked her whiskers so that Callie could feel the gentle touch of her hand over the pain.

Her father slid a blank page from the end of the table to beside Maya's plate. He laid a pencil down on top of it. "Will you write to me?" he asked. His deep-set eyes pleaded with her as much as his words. "Even just a yes or no. Just a word."

A word. Maya stared at the empty sheet, its blankness emitting silence. A word, a word, but she had none. All she had was her voice, locked away inside. She could feel the weight of her father's eyes watching her, waiting, but eventually he looked away, placed his head in his hands. He looked worn and tired as her mother's horse after a long gallop through their pastures. Had the girl taken the light of the leaf and rubbed it into the trunks of the trees she tended, healing them, giving them strength?

Her father left the plates dirty on the table and started for the door. Maya followed, longing to call out to him as if he were somewhere very far away.

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On the road to Mary Ellen's, Frank had Jane's voice playing in his head—strange how he held the sound of it within, as if her voice spoke from inside him. He kept the windows down so that the breeze swept him up, so that the rush of it through the truck filled the silence. He would have to do something to stop this. Otherwise, he'd be standing by watching his daughter fade, her voice drifting into the distance like someone speaking while walking away from you, back turned, the volume of their words easing into silence. Should he speak and speak until she offered a response? Punish her? Make her go to school the next day? His own father would have forced the words out of him with a belt.

After they pulled into Mary Ellen's drive, Frank followed Maya to the bottom of the steps, then stood there waiting for Mary Ellen to come to the door. The screen door creaked as she cracked it open and Maya slipped inside. Mary Ellen stepped out onto the porch, her brown hair loose around her round cheeks, her blue dress catching the breeze and waving around her thighs. She shaded her eyes with her hand, squinting against the burn of the morning light to see him. He smiled, dipped his head in greeting. She fluttered her fingers to wave goodbye.

Jeremy stepped out onto the porch from behind his mother, and the screen door clapped shut behind him. He was dressed like a gentleman today in a short-sleeved plaid button-down, his hair parted and slicked with water instead of hanging in his eyes. Still, he looked like trouble, his smile beaming off his face like a mask. "Good morning, sir," he called loudly while waving his whole arm above his head. His voice cut the quiet serenity of the early morning.

Frank raised his hand. "Morning," he said.

"We'll take good care of her, don't you worry now," Jeremy said. "I'll look after her as soon as I get home from school."

Frank wondered what exactly the two of them did together—when Maya was still talking and he'd come to fetch her after work, she'd only speak of the things she did alone, the pictures she drew, the games she invented while playing in the fields. When he'd ask her about Jeremy, she'd just say they played together some. Mary Ellen often spoke of how she delighted in watching them together in the yard, the two of them following each other around like a pair of siblings. Mary Ellen had had the same trouble as Jane with having children—it was part of what had drawn them close over the years—

and so she was blinded with joy at seeing her only son behave like an older brother. She pulled Jeremy into the crook of her arm, kissed the top of his wet head.

“Good day now,” Frank said. He could not shake the feeling he had toward Jeremy, but maybe the boy was just lost for guidance. He’d lost his father, after all, and even when the man was still around, he’d not been much of a father.

When Frank was back on the road, he slipped Jane’s tape into the stereo and let her voice play until he hit the highway and her words were swallowed up by the wind.

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At Mary Ellen’s that afternoon, Maya folded a flock of origami birds. She poked holes into their middles with a pencil and strung them together with string, then held them up to dangle in front of her eyes and flap their paper wings. Up into the clouds, to sleep in a canopy of trees. To reach up into the night sky and steal a star to place between her mother’s horse’s eyes.

All the while, Mary Ellen sat on the sofa, folding fresh laundry over her knees while Maya creased the squares of paper into symmetrical folds. She talked and talked, and Maya listened, but her stories did not lead Maya away to other worlds like her own mother’s had.

“Jerry, now he’s the owner of the diner, he said he’s gone looking around for some new cooks,” Mary Ellen said. “That’s because Richard burned his hand with the frying oil, practically cooked it up to serve, and can’t make a fist strong enough to even

hold a spatula at least for another couple of weeks. Now, take a fancy restaurant, the kind of place you've gotta drive miles from here to find, and they've got one main cook, maybe two, because all their dishes are made special, and you can't make it how they make it even if you were to follow a recipe word for word. It's something about their touch, their tastebuds—like an art. But take our place now, and anybody can flip a good burger and fry up some chicken and potatoes and plop it on a plate ready to serve. I could even do it myself. But the boss only likes men in the kitchen. Funny really, because cooking is a woman's job, but once you put a title on it and start paying a salary, it becomes a man's. The world don't make sense that way, little chick. But I just keep my mouth closed and bring the people their food like I'm supposed to. Keep a smile on my face. That's how you gotta get through life, I suppose.” She stood and hoisted a basket of wet clothes, carrying it to the yard to string on the line to dry. Maya followed her, her trail of paper birds fluttering behind as she stepped out into the wind. Mary Ellen clipped the shoulders of her many-colored dresses to the line with clothespins, and the breeze billowed through them so that they looked like a line of graceful dancers empty of the women that wore them. Jeremy's T-shirts, washed clean, waved like flags in the wind.

After Maya ate her sandwich for lunch, she took the birds outside and ran through the fields, letting the breeze lift them up like a kite, their paper bodies weightless and white against the clear blue sky. Had the girl given the golden light to the birds that lived with her, locking it safe inside their beaks? Would they fly the light up into the clouds and return it to the sun so that it would shine warm magic down on the whole forest, so that the raindrops beading on the leaves would glitter with gold?

She spent hours that way, running with her eyes closed against the sun, the air burning fire into her chest, the birds flapping in the sky behind her head. She was waiting for the power of their wings to lift her like a balloon, to carry her up, up, up to the heavens where her mother lived with God, and she was imagining how she'd look down past her dangling feet to where she'd left the world below, when suddenly a hand closed around her ankle and sent her sprawling onto her belly, knocking all the air that had made her weightless from her lungs. The birds fell in a crumpled heap over her hand.

“Where ya running to?” Jeremy said.

She was face down to the ground, her chin stinging with dirt, but she could feel the heat of his body beside hers as they lay hidden in the grass. She pushed herself up on her elbows and tried to stand, but he grabbed at her wrist and pulled her back down.

“What’s the big idea?” he asked in a whisper, his mouth close to her ear, though they were too far from the house for anyone to hear. “Listen, don’t try to run. I want to show you something.” He tightened his grip on her wrist. Maya could feel her heartbeat pulse against his fingers. “You better stay shut up and do what I say, or I’ll hurt you so bad you look worse than that cat of yours. I’ll send your eyeballs through your skull, understood?”

Maya nodded her head in answer, her eyes shut tight so he couldn’t get to them. Then Jeremy pinned her wrists down above her head, and Maya squirmed and wriggled and kicked, but he sat down on top of her, his knees flanking her waist so that she couldn’t breathe. She felt his cold hands slip under her shirt and creep like spiders up her belly. She didn’t realize until she heard the shrill pitch of her own voice that she’d cried out.

Jeremy thrust his hand over her mouth, muffling her cry, his green eyes wide with surprise at first, then lit with satisfaction. She could taste the salt on his skin. “Go on, scream if you want,” he said. “Your daddy’s not here to hear you.”

Before thoughts could take shape as words inside her brain, Maya opened her mouth and bit down on his hand. She felt his bones bend beneath her teeth. Jeremy drew his hand back with the short, high yelp of a hurt dog, and Maya clawed herself out from under him, her fingernails sinking into the dirt as she pushed herself to her feet, but Jeremy caught her hand and wrenched her arm so hard that she lost her balance and fell backwards. Then he stood, still gripping her wrist, and dragged her through the grass. Maya felt the hot friction of her body against the grass burn into her side, and her breath escaped her in heavy gasps as her stomach knocked along the ground. A pain crawled from her shoulder to her wrist like a line of fire ants that scattered and stung her with sharp little bites. For a moment, the sun was gone and all she could see was dark as the night sky.

She opened her eyes to find Jeremy crouched beside her like a crab, his eyes wide with interest. From the way he studied her, Maya felt as if she were a glowworm in their classroom science project, moved from canister to canister as the children watched and waited—when did the worm shine and when did its light go out?

“You’re not going to run now, are you?” Jeremy asked. She could feel his breath on her face. Maya realized only then that he had let go of her arm. It felt dense and heavy as stone against her side. She shook her head no and strands of her blonde hair fell across her eyes.

“Good,” he said. “Because you know now I mean business. You know you better do what I say, right?”

She nodded yes.

“No funny business, right?”

No. She shook her head.

But as he pressed her shoulders into the ground, Maya lifted her arms and clawed at his open eyes with her fingernails. Jeremy fell back onto his heels and grabbed at his face, and she crawled on her belly like a black rat snake through the high grass until she reached the fence. And then, without pausing to think where she was going, Maya ran until she flew.

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Frank was sorting and stocking the pine by grade to prepare it for planning and finishing when he received the second call from Mary Ellen. “That’s twice in a week,” the boss said when he entered the yard to deliver the call. “Everything okay by you?”

Frank nodded and apologized as he made his way to the office, but the smallest bit of hope swelled inside his chest. Maybe Maya had finally spoken. Maybe Mary Ellen could not wait to share the news—she didn’t know better about calling him at work. But when he heard Mary Ellen’s voice on the line, she was frantic again.

“Now I’m sorry, Frank, but I don’t know what else to do but to come right out and tell you. The kids have gone missing. I was in the bedroom putting fresh sheets on Jeremy’s bed and he’d gone out into the yard with Maya, and when I came downstairs, they were gone. They can’t have gotten far, and I’m going to go drive and find them

quick as can be, but I needed to tell you, you know, in case you arrived here to find nobody home.”

Frank felt anger flush his cheeks and form his hand into a fist. That damn boy. That damn stupid boy.

Mary Ellen was still going. “Now don’t worry—everything’s fine. I can’t imagine why they’d run off, probably just looking to get into some trouble or adventure in town. That’s Jeremy. But I’ll find them, ya hear? Don’t worry.” The tremor in her voice betrayed her.

“I’m going to come straight home in case you can’t,” Frank said. “I don’t like the sound of it. Not one bit.”

“Okay, Frank. I’m sorry.” He could hear the tears choked in her throat.

“Go on,” Frank said, clenching the phone cord in his fist. But then he imagined her hanging up the phone and placing her head in her hands to cry, her empty house echoing with her sobs. He could see her driving around town swallowing down her tears, short for breath as she called their children’s names. So he said, softer, “Don’t cry now.”

Then he hung up, told the boss it was an emergency for the second time that week, and got in the truck and drove.

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As Maya ran through the neighbor’s farmland, she was thinking of her mother perched atop her horse as he galloped across the acres of their property, how her mother had always said riding was as good as flying, the wind in her hair, her feet off the ground,

her mind in the clouds. Up, up, up, safe into the sky, swinging in bamboo hammocks in the trees. The light of the stars beaming from between the horse's eyes.

She ran past cattle, who raised their heads from the grass to watch, past the lone houses, past the pine trees on Dowd Road, the crisp scent of them tingling in Maya's lungs, past the bales of rolled hay that slept like golden beasts in the fields. And Maya knew, suddenly, that the only place she had to run to was home. Her shoulder ached from where Jeremy had wrenched her arm, but Maya ran until the fear left her bones.

When she saw the red barn at the corner of her property, she slipped through the fence rails and flew toward it, knowing it wouldn't be long until he came and found her, until his fingers crawled all over her. Maya stopped in front of the barn, laid her hands against the chipping red paint, then slid the wooden beam that held the doors closed from its latch and heaved her weight into the right door to push it open along the tracks. Maya slipped inside and pulled the door shut behind her with all her strength, and then she fled into the horse's stall, flinging herself down into the shavings. The crisp scent of hay and cedar mingled with the musk of manure was still trapped in the chill air. She hugged her legs tight to her chest and buried her face into her knees. And then Maya was there again, the beige undersoles of her father's yellow workboots turned toward her, the corners of his plaid green shirt coming untucked from his jeans. Her mother's body limp on the ground, her blonde hair full of cedar shavings. The horse's nostrils quivering. She listened, expecting to hear the rifle shot again. But inside, it was silent. The rafters creaked and moaned overhead.

Maya opened her eyes and raised her face to the ceiling. The dim light filtering in through the high windows hung in the air like golden dust. Maya laid her palm flat before

her and watched flecks of light collect on the surface of her hand like bits of paper gold. It was the golden light of the sun. She held it in the palm of her hand.

Suddenly, Maya heard Jeremy's footsteps thudding through the grass outside. She backed up into the darkest corner of the stall and looked up to the rafters overhead, wondering if she should climb out of his reach. She felt her heart flutter inside her chest like a broken wing as she waited for him to fling open the doors, for the light to hit her face, for his hands to crawl across her bare skin. Instead, she heard him heaving exhausted breaths, and she heard dirt kick against the side of the barn once, twice, three times. There was a pause, and Maya sucked air deep into her lungs, afraid even of the sound of her breath. Dirt scattered once more against the wall. And then she knew—he was digging Callie from her grave.

Maya imagined Callie sleeping there beneath the earth, waiting for Maya to put her to rest, to close her eyes to this world and open them to another. What would Jeremy do to her? She thought of his crawling fingers, of his cold touch, of the hard grip of his fist. It was Maya's job to keep Callie safe. Even now, she had to keep her safe.

Maya pushed herself up from the ground and walked slowly to the barn doors, her fingers shaking as she slipped them in the space between the doors and pulled herself through. She walked with slow, uncertain steps around the side of the barn until she saw Jeremy. His back was to her, and his white T-shirt was sticking wet to his spine. Jeremy pressed the tip of the shovel into the soil with his foot and then tossed the soil into the air so that it fell down like dirty rain. He leaned against the shovel and stared into the open grave, then turned round to face her. His pale skin was blotchy with the blood that had risen to his cheeks, and his hair was wet with sweat and clinging to his forehead.

“Okay,” he said, “okay, you little brat. Now I’ll give you something to see.”

Maya stopped still and let him come for her, let his fist close around her wrist, let him drag her by the arm to the open hole of dirt, let him push her to her knees in front of Callie’s grave, let him press her hands into it as he laughed like a screaming pig, until her fingers were not touching Callie’s soft fur but were buried in her cold, wet intestines. Maya’s fingers sunk into a belly of worms, and Callie was a belly of worms, and Callie was dead, and her mother was dead, and Maya was there. The beige undersoles of her father’s yellow workboots were turned toward her, and the corners of his plaid green shirt were coming untucked from his jeans. The chickens were murmuring, and her mother’s body was limp on the ground, her blonde hair full of cedar shavings. Her mother’s bay horse stood quivering in the corner, its nostrils flaring. Her father wailed like a wild animal, like the cackling howl of the coyotes Maya sometimes heard at night. Then he placed her mother down and, trembling, unlatched the locker on the far wall, took out the rifle, and pointed it at her mother’s horse. At the sound of the gunshot, the horse fell heavy to its knees, and Maya watched as a ribbon of blood seeped from the white star between its eyes. It lay with its cheek in the shavings, the blood soaking them red, its vacant gaze fixed on Maya.

Jeremy was laughing. Maya looked down and watched a maggot squirm out of Callie’s eye socket. Callie was dead, and the horse was dead, and her mother was dead, and Maya could no longer bear to see.

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When Frank pulled into the drive, he went straight round the back of the house, knowing Maya preferred the fields to being inside. He didn't know what had led her away from Mary Ellen's, if she'd even left by her own choice, but all he had to go by at a time like this was his gut. There was no time to reason. He raised his hand to his brow to shield his eyes from the sun as he scanned the fields. At first, there was nothing, just the grasses bending with the weight of the wind, but as his eyes came to settle on the red barn, he saw the back of Jeremy's head above the top of the grass. Frank exhaled a shaky breath; at least the boy was here, in Frank's reach, and he could now do something about whatever the boy had gotten into.

Frank started at a jog toward the barn, and as he drew nearer to it, he could make out the shovel propped against the wall. Then he heard the faint sound of Maya crying and saw her bowed in Jeremy's grasp, a mound of fresh soil piled to their left. Frank felt his legs stop working. The cat. The boy had come to dig up the cat. Frank took off at a full run then, his fingers tightening into fists, and as he drew closer, he saw Jeremy pressing Maya's hands into the open grave, heard the boy's high laughter over Maya's sobs. Frank struck Jeremy across the face with the back of his hand, sending the boy sprawling onto his back with Maya still locked in his grip. Frank struck him again, this time drawing blood from Jeremy's nose, his own knuckles aching from the impact. Then Frank pried his daughter from the boy's grip and lifted her. As he held her sobbing in his arms, the sound of her voice nearly broke him to his knees. Papa, Papa, she cried, her body pulled close to his, Papa, Papa.

Frank backed away from the boy, who was splayed in the dirt with his bloody hands, backed away from the carcass of the cat, writhing with maggots. “You sick, sick boy,” Frank said, “you bastard.”

He still felt rage flexing in his fists, but he had Maya in his arms. She clung to his neck, and he cradled her as he had when she was an infant, as when she’d first opened her pretty blue eyes, and Jane, sick from labor, had whispered into his arm, our darling, our darling. “Did he hurt you?” Frank asked her, dreading to find out the answer for himself. “Did he hurt you?”

He sat down in the grass with Maya in his arms and checked her body over, the crook of her wrist, the bend in her knee, her soft stomach, but he could see nothing except the blood on her hands, nothing except the fear in her eyes.

He looked up to see Mary Ellen standing in the fields some feet away from them, her hands over her mouth as she registered what was taking place before her. Jeremy was pushing himself up from the ground, blood dripping from his nose, and from where Mary Ellen stood, she could likely see the unearthed grave, the shovel, Maya shaking in Frank’s arms.

“What have you done?” Mary Ellen cried, staring at Jeremy in disbelief. “What have you done?” When Jeremy did not answer, just hung his head, Mary Ellen turned to Frank and came toward him with her hands outstretched and shaking. “Frank,” she said, “what happened? I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

But Frank could not think of her then, could not bear to comfort anyone else. He just needed to be alone with his daughter. He shook his head as she approached. “Just leave us be,” he said. “Please, just take that boy and leave us be.”

She stood still for a moment, then swallowed hard and nodded her head. Without looking at her son, as if she could not bear to really see him, she took hold of his wrist and pulled him away with her. The boy didn't protest, and Frank watched him go.

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Maya was safe inside her father's arms as he carried her inside and held her hands under the warm water streaming from the faucet. She watched it turn pink and carry the blood from her fingers down the drain. When he had soaped and dried her hands clean, he knelt down in front of her and faced her with his heavy eyes.

"There was a great oak tree in the forest that held a single golden leaf buried among its layers of green," her father said. Hearing her mother's words from his voice, Maya felt the lock inside her chest turn and open.

"There, in the forest, a young girl lived alone in the tree tops," he said. "She slept in bamboo hammocks near the stars. One night, when the girl was feeling most alone, she found the leaf glimmering in the dim evening light, its gold beam shining and dimming like a firefly's tail." He took a breath, his voice faltering over the words. "It felt warm in her hands, and so she knew it was special. She could feel its energy pulsing, but she did not know what she was meant to use it for."

Her father took her hands and together, his hands and hers formed a cave that held the light. He looked at her and waited. "What was she meant to use it for?" he asked. "What was the purpose of the light?"

Without knowing the answer, Maya opened her mouth to speak.