

Gardenia
a novel by SarahBelle Selig

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Summary

Ellen is 29 and disillusioned with her advertising job in New York when she receives an email from a woman named Isa, for whom Ellen's mother Lacey abandoned her family twelve years prior. In the email, Isa asks Ellen to meet, so that she can explain her affair with Lacey—who was almost two decades older than her at the time—and what happened in the years following the affair's discovery that led to Lacey's eventual mental and physical collapse. As Ellen travels back to coastal North Carolina to face the one woman she has long blamed for her mother's disappearance, she must confront the responsibility she, her father and brothers share in pushing Lacey towards Isa, and reconcile with the abuse that her family—including her mother—has inflicted on Isa in the years since.

Gardenia is told in three intertwined novellas. In “Dig”, Lacey begins a string of reckless acts in an attempt to assert herself amidst her lonely motherhood, including an affair with the young, black Isa. In “Sow”, Isa recounts the story of her relationship with Lacey to her now husband, detailing her attempts to save the woman she loved from addiction while coping with her own increasing isolation from friends and family. Finally, in “Reap”, Ellen visits her mother's former lover and reflects on expectations of motherhood and womanhood amidst the rapidly changing landscape of women's rights post-#MeToo. In each novella, the main character makes a different choice on what to do with her trauma, when faced with the opportunity to leave it behind.

An examination of the unbridgeable distance between the sexes, culminating in a meeting between the two women most haunted by Lacey's absence, *Gardenia* explores victimhood, women's sexuality, how we leave each other and—as each woman discovers—how we never really do.

Gardenia

“One day you finally knew
What you had to do, and began,
Though the voices around you
Kept shouting
Their bad advice,
Though the whole house
Began to tremble
And you felt the old tug
At your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
Each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
Though the wind pried
With its stiff fingers
At the very foundations,
Though their melancholy
Was terrible.
It was already late
Enough, and a wild night,
And the road full of fallen
Branches and stones.
But little by little,
As you left their voices behind,
The stars began to burn
Through the sheets of clouds,
And there was a new voice,
Which you slowly
Recognized as your own,
That kept you company
As you strode deeper and deeper
Into the world,
Determined to do
The only thing you could do,
Determined to save
The only life you could save.”

- Mary Oliver, “The Journey”, 1986.

PART 1: DIG

I knew I'd have to do this. Even early on, I had a feeling it would be me sending this and not her. I've written it hundreds of times in my head, decided how I'd explain what happened the night she left, why your mom did what she did. Why we didn't tell you. But on the page it felt false and flat and you wouldn't believe it because you don't know me. So I'm asking you to meet so that you can know me and you can see it in my eyes when I tell you that I'm telling you the truth.

I'm still not positive this is the right thing to do though I'm positive your mother would kill me if she knew I was contacting you. But Lacey isn't here anymore and hasn't been for a long time. You're old enough now to handle it and I'm old enough that I've got to stop being scared of it and just move on so I figured, sure, Is, let's write to the one person in the world who you have absolutely no business writing to and tell her how much better you understood her own mother than she did. I severely hope it doesn't come off like that. I know you adored her and she you and you're probably as fucked up as I am after all this, but shouldn't that help us set aside all of this mess between us and just exist as two women who loved and lost someone dear to them? Two women who, at the end of the day, are sporting the same scar?

I know you feel like you didn't have a choice in any of this, but I don't feel like I really did either. I'm sure it's affected you in ways you're still sorting out. Me too. You value family and I know you think I eat family for breakfast but I value it too. It just wasn't your family that I valued. It was ours, Lacey and I. And at the end we both lost our family anyways. You loved your mother and I loved your mother and I know that doesn't make a difference but maybe it does. You wanted her back and I tried to send her back for you. More than once. She wouldn't go...

Lacey

2006

Today Beth Armbruster was complaining about her husband making empty promises and I remembered when Dev and I rented paddleboards out on the beach, years ago. They were big cumbersome things that my arms were just long enough to hold. The kids were probably five, seven or so, back at the house with Dev's mom so it was just the two of us. We carried the boards along the hard sand beach from the rental shop, past Jack Russells and pale bare-butt toddlers and a few canoodling twenty-somethings, until we made it to the jetty where the waves didn't break as hard. Dev was in the water before me, his wetsuit a little loose on his rear and short at the wrists but fine everywhere else. We'd rented the wetsuits and I remember saying they smelled like stale urine and kelp. I struggled to get mine up onto my shoulders and did pliés on the sand until it was upright enough to zip.

By the time I finished squeezing myself in, Dev was already nearing the first break in the waves, a natural at anything to do with salt water. When I was in, I lingered in the shallows, kneeling and wobbling on my board, holding the paddle like a tightrope walker. He was far enough away so I couldn't see his face but I felt his eyes roll, looking back at his inland-born wife, about as natural in salt water as a house cat. He looked towards the waves in the distance, the paddleboarders and surfers catching long rides, then back to me.

"You okay?" he yelled.

I lied, giving a flimsy thumbs up, fingers still clasped around the paddle handle, but he'd already looked back to the surf. "You go on, honey!" I called after him. "I'm fine, I just don't want to be in the waves!"

He didn't argue. "Wave your paddle like this if you need me, okay?" He lifted his paddle above his head, dipped it left and right like a showgirl. I nodded and mimicked. He gave a little *Surf's up!* stance on his board, turned with a single stroke and was gone, a black silhouette among many.

I made a slow, broad arch around the break, keeping close to the jetty, and was soon out in the open water of the wide channel. I stood, unsteadily, and paddled parallel to the shoreline, close enough to see the moms and dads and dogs and kids out for their Sunday strolls. Finally out of sight of the surf behind me, I returned to my knees and paddled out, out, out into the channel until the water was calm. Lazy catamarans took wide berths around me, hands raised and drinks lifted or no acknowledgment at all, which suited me fine. Out here the tide was stock-still

and I lowered down until I was sitting on my heels, then took myself onto my back. I stretched one arm out and let it dangle in the cold water.

No one would notice if I fell in. I turned onto my belly and dipped my arm lower into the water. I felt it slip cold beneath the sleeve of my wetsuit. I rested my cheek on the board and pushed past my elbow. *Closer, closer*, the water was saying.

I thought of what my funeral would be, immortalized in cheap painted frames on my friends' dressers, forever thirty-eight. My sister's pathetic sobs, Al and Col in too-big suits and Ellie in a little pastel dress and Dev playing the widow role so well, handing out pigs in a blanket on paper plates and talking about all the joy I brought him and how lucky he felt for the years he had and humbly accepting babysitting offers from his friends' wives, golf rounds with the guys. I snorted and sunk my arm lower into the water, almost up to my shoulder now. I closed my eyes, dizzy.

I noticed a seal in front of me then, probably fifteen or so yards ahead. Brown slick skin slithering in and out of view. Small ripples cascaded towards me, the microscopic movement beneath my board, pulling me out of my trance. I pulled my arm from the water and watched him for a moment, my forearms beneath my chest and chin propped up on the hard board. Then I sat up cross-legged and started paddling towards him.

"Hi, little one," I said brightly.

But the closer I got, his slithering became more violent and he barked at me, thrashing in the water. He ducked beneath the surface and torpedoed towards me, just inches beneath the surface and he came past my board, his big inquisitive eye oddly alert. Down he went again, and shot up just a few feet away, teeth bared.

I scrambled backwards with my paddle, whipping the board around and digging my toes into the grip, every muscle in my body clenched to keep me upright. I moved away as fast as I could, back towards the surf, back towards Dev. I looked towards the shore. No hands to foreheads, no pointing in my direction, no one making any moves towards me. I didn't want to die, suddenly. I looked towards the surf, trying to find Dev in a sea of black neoprene.

I raised my paddle, dipping it left and right like a showgirl. Back and forth until my arms ached. No one raised a paddle in response.

I told the story to Beth today and she laughed and then frowned. Frances was nodding her head at an angle like she had water stuck in her ears but I don't think she quite understood what I

meant. So I told them: Dev said he'd come get me if I waved my paddle but he didn't. All these years I've been waving my paddle and he's been surfing.

Beth asked me if everything was okay and I said yes of course, it's always okay. But she stopped complaining and when she said goodbye, she gave me a really long hug, so I guess my story worked.

—

I drive past the dance studio every day. Just before the pink gas station that didn't used to be pink and the China Express with the neon fish tank in the window and the good kung pao. The studio has a two-story sign out front. The wall facing the road is all glass windows so I drive by slow. Sometimes I even pull into the parking lot of the rose nursery across the street and watch them. Well past 9pm every night, the lights are on and glaring and too yellow. It's like watching an animation or an old cartoon, the bright square screen and quick miniature figures dancing along it, bordered by black, black, black. Tall, lanky, dark-haired men whisk short, stubby women along the open floor of the ballroom. It's mostly older and elderly women, but there's a few teenage girls from what I've seen, in Nike shorts and tan legs and strappy heels and always laughing with their heads tilted back. I imagine the accents of the men, Russian and Ukrainian and Guatemalan. There is one woman who must be near ninety and is always in gowns fit for Hollywood, beaded and trimmed with feathers. I've seen her in the grocery store at 8am in her gowns and a full face of makeup. She is more glam at 135 years old than I am in my forties.

There's one small female instructor, a lithe, tight thing who wears see-through tops and pink or black bras beneath them. She is always in high waisted pants and never smiles when she dances. She's mostly with the older men. Unlike the male teachers whose movements are spherical and willowy, her motion is angular, sharp, her chin one point of a triangle and her elbow another. I wonder if they'd let me dance with her or if I'd get one of the willowy men, Kyrilos or Ivans or Aleksanders.

I thought of going in again today but then I thought of myself on display for all of MLK Jr. Road like a prized ham in her best dress and continued driving.

—

Every October I prep for Christmas by spending exactly half my time at Southpoint Mall and the other half ordering from dog-eared catalogs and websites with advertisements for Japanese porn.

Ellie skipped soccer practice today because of an ankle that's not actually injured when you're not looking at her and came with me to the mall. We started with Dev, the usual new socks, a black leather belt exactly like every other black leather belt he owns, and new collared shirts and blazers for work. I phoned Luke at Nordstrom that I was coming and he'd already pulled his favorites by the time we got there, cool blues and lavender purples and deep chocolate browns. A new sports coat and a quarter zip. Dev still wears the slim fits though I can't imagine they're comfortable. Ellie sipped on a mocha frappuccino from the e-bar as we circled the big display tables, using the straw like a spoon to eat the whipped cream then sucking on it loudly. She has horrible taste in clothing but likes to help, so I let her buy what she liked and then pulled Luke to the side and told him to hold the ones I like until tomorrow and I'll swap them discreetly. She's never noticed or hasn't said.

In Hollister, Ellie helped me pick out two graphic tees for Alex and boxers with polar bears on them. It's so poorly lit in there and smells like teenage desperation and skunk. There were two shirtless teenage boys flanking the entrance. As we walked in, I asked one where we pick up our headlamps and gas masks and he just smiled and flexed and looked like he wasn't breathing. Ellie flirted by sticking her nose up at them.

We shopped for Ellie and Col at Gap. We picked her out some of those layering tank tops she likes to wear two at a time like Alex's girlfriends do and plaid Bermuda shorts, and we got Col some plain t-shirts and undies and cute short-sleeve button-downs. I saw her glance longingly at Spencer's but my feet hurt and their clothes are horrendous so I ignored her.

She wanted Max Orient for lunch so we went to the food court. We walked past all the Chinese ladies giving free samples and pretended to be deciding what to eat, so they shoved barbecue chicken and sweet and sour pork towards us on upturned toothpicks and only caught on after our third lap. Ellen found it hilarious so I put on her sunglasses and wrapped her scarf around my head like a burqa and donned an accent but the women weren't fooled, which sent us both into a fit of giggles that made me pee slightly like I'd sneezed, which only made Ellen laugh harder.

Ellen saw some of her friends in too-tight, too-short denim skirts lingering near Haagen Daas, so I went to Auntie Anne's for a diet lemonade to avoid their mothers. I wanted a cinnamon pretzel but didn't buy one.

Dev would be far too curious about the fact that I'm keeping this thing so I keep it in the pantry behind the baking supplies. I tuck it beneath my book, a Mary Higgins Clark. I keep my books hidden because then they are just mine, my little world to escape to when Ellen and Col are at school or a friends' and Dev is somewhere doing Dev things. Working, I suppose.

It's a habit I picked up from my mother, who only read when she got drunk and very late at night. Or it just happened that those two things were what happened when she was alone, which happened rarely enough that she had to combine the two. She loved John Le Carré and romance novels and sometimes I'd sneak in to read the sex scenes while she was out of the house.

I always just assumed my mother liked to stay up late. But now I get it. My father was always up early in the mornings, loved that hour just before dawn, couldn't lay still. That meant by the time Mother got downstairs, he'd already dirtied the sink, left his pocket tissues on the counter, taken in a shit in the guest bathroom and left skid-marks on the bowl. He'd already existed all over the place for an hour before she got out of bed. But when he went to bed at night, that was mother's time. My mother was a clever woman.

When I got old enough, I'd watch her. Come nine, usually, she'd look over at him dozing in his chair. She'd sweetly tell him to go to bed, that he'd feel good with a full night's sleep. Kiss him. Here, I'll get you a glass of water to take up with you. Even put ice in it. Ushered him upstairs like a sleepy child, rubbing at his half-closed eyes. Off you go. And when she heard the bedroom door shut, she'd tiptoe over to the bar, pour herself a doubled-up White Russian and go and sit in his chair and turn the channel on the television. She liked watching football games and Hee Haw and Hawkeye in M*A*S*H so she'd stay up until midnight watching all the shows he didn't like.

Sometimes she'd prune the plants but usually she didn't do anything at all, just sat and sipped and enjoyed the non-John noise. But sometimes she'd get out her book from behind the

flour and read and giggle and rub her bare feet together under the velvet blanket. Sometimes I'd come home from parties and we'd sit there and be drunk together and make the cat dance and wiggle his legs. Then she'd get tired and go upstairs and brush her teeth alone at the his and hers sinks and go to bed buzzing. If she was lethargic in the morning, my father poured her a large cup of coffee and she was fine an hour later.

For a long time, I assumed my father didn't know, that it was my mother and I's secret. But once, when I came home from school one winter, I fell asleep on the couch and he shepherded me upstairs and said, "Let your mother have her time." I watched him more carefully then, the way he checked his wrist around 9 o'clock, how he never stayed up, how he clenched his eyes shut too tight in his chair, the one time he came back from the grocery store and I saw a bottle of coffee liqueur in the sack.

I thought it was all a bit messed up and sad until I had a John of my own. And now I keep my journal behind the flour, same as her. Need my time, same as her. I watch *Dancing with the Stars* and give extra water to the plants (my John always says I over-water them) while my John is asleep. A few of the pots overflow, little tiny waterfalls over the sill and off the cupboard shelves. I don't dry them. My John would say something about the chipboard, but my John is asleep. And can't nobody touch my books.

—

It's Tuesday so I was in my tacky blue apron at Home Depot, watering the flowers. Joan wasn't there today and neither was Dale, so it was nice and quiet in the Garden section apart from the ricket of flat-top metal wagons navigating the wide aisles. Most of the wheels don't work properly so often the discount shelves get knocked over, which is not technically part of my job description so I leave seed packets or plastic pots or hand shovels strewn across the floor and pretend I don't see them.

The large front windows and clear plastic roofing make it feel like a greenhouse in there, thick with humidity and the smell of wet soil. But I like it. Children rarely visit and I don't have to speak much and the managers are old and kind when I'm late. They barely pay me anyways. I'm there to fill time and because Dev insisted I spend time "out". I spend most of my hours drifting in and out of blankness in my head, and the rest of the hours I talk to the flowers and tell

them about things. Dev told me once about his lonely friend who went to the strip club to talk to the prostitutes and I suppose I feel like that often.

Men and women shuffle in and out of my section and they all look so old until I hear them on the phone, talking about school drop-off or going to their kids' school play with that awful musical number.

Anyways, today, two girls were over by the hanging plant section, the pothos and Boston ferns and heartleaf philodendrons reserved almost exclusively for college freshman playing at adulthood. The older customers never travel to that section unless they have their teenage sons and daughters in tow. That's typically around move-in day in September and January, the students all with lanyards around their necks and the parents with college t-shirts and dotting grins and long lists. But it's November and these girls looked a bit older. One of them was strawberry blonde and squinting and frowning deeply at the plants like it was giving her an eye exam. The taller one was black and gave the frowner a side squeeze, picked out a plant from the shelf and examined it from all sides. The frowner girl looked at her phone, groaned and then answered a call, drifting towards the soil aisle with a scowl.

I continued spraying the pansies with the rain nozzle and watching the water bubble and fizz and soak into the soil.

"Excuse me, how much sun does this need?"

The taller girl was standing behind me, holding a snake plant in my direction. She frowned but her frown looked stranger on her face than the other girl's, as if she doesn't do it often and it was difficult for her muscles to maintain. Her brown hair was flicked out at the ends and she was in long denim shorts and a light blue camisole. She had muscular, smooth calves, framed by mid-calf socks and those checkered slip-on vans I bought Alex for Christmas last year. I looked at my own calves, the spider veins developing below my knees, the old blue Birkenstocks I'd had for years with the chew marks in them and my toenails with month's old polish on them. I tugged on my apron to pull it lower over my exposed thighs.

"Those things are impossible to kill," I responded. "You could lock it in a basement or take it to the beach and it would be fine."

"You had me at basement. Not much light where she'll be going." She gave a pat to the side of the pot.

I nodded to her friend. "I've never seen anyone so upset in the Garden section before."

“Bad breakup. Consolation plant.”

I laughed and that seemed to make her happy. I tucked my nozzle into my apron pocket and reached for a blooming Christmas cactus.

“Here,” I said. “Pretty and pissed off.”

“Oh my god, it’s perfect,” the pretty, tall black girl said.

A few aisles away someone’s dog was peeing on the rhododendrons. I whistled and snapped and it stopped, backed away, then trotted back and sniffed it.

She told me I had a fantastic whistle. I told her my fifth-grade teacher taught me at basketball game, which is true, and that teacher is now dead thanks to a full canister of oxycodone, which is also true. We stood there in the aisle for a few minutes, practicing our whistles with our fingers in our mouths and making plenty of spit bubbles and fart noises with our lips. Soon we were giggling. The friend came back, her knuckles white against the phone.

“I am swearing off men,” she said.

“I’ve been telling you all this time,” pretty, tall black girl said. “Give women a try. They’re not assholes and they’re better at giving head.”

“Ew, no thank you. I don’t even like my own vagina.”

“Don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it,” I said, having never once tried it. Frowner looked shocked, and pretty, tall black girl raised her eyebrows at me and smirked.

“I see you,” she said, looking impressed, I think. I sensed the conversation was over so I went to the rhododendrons and washed off the pee.

I made eye contact with her once more before she left, while she was in line at check out. Neither one of us smiled and I can’t explain it but you know when you make eye contact with someone and you just *feel* it? You feel the sex and it takes you both off guard but you know you’re both thinking about a bathroom stall and their hands on your waist and it lingers? It felt like that.

When she walked out of the door, I took a long lunch break and thought of nothing else but her for the rest of the afternoon. I took deep breaths in the mirror and while I sat on the toilet I thought of running my fingers up her calves. She sees me, she said.

—

There was a meteor shower last night and we walked out to the golf course because the sky was clear. Alex is home for fall break and even he came along, although he bitched about it and texted the whole time, which made it hard to see the stars and everyone complained. Dev insisted we take the big quilt from our bed (I spent the morning picking cherry bombs and grass off of it and scrubbing off the mud because it won't fit in the washer) and we spread it out on the putting green and laid on our backs and Col and Ellie made snow-angels in the sandpit. Sand-angels.

Before the shower started Dev pointed out constellations and Col asked questions. They made up stories. Then the shower started and everyone went quiet, except for echoing oohs and aahs from the kids. Dev was next to me and it felt foreign, awkward, having our arms touching like that. I waited. If he would have just held my hand, held me, touched me, for gods sake. But he moved away, almost imperceptibly, the hairs on our biceps still touching but as if a cavern had opened up between us, and finally he stood and walked silently toward the forest at the far end of the fairway.

Ellen wanted to know where he was going, called after him, and there she went with Col, her ever-present tail, and there was Alex trudging back to the house, the tacky yellow light of the phone against his face, and then it was just me. My ankles were cold and I kept watching and waiting and there was a star, finally, one to have all to myself. It seemed redder than the others. In a hurry, angry. I wished on it with everything I had but didn't know what to wish for so just generally yearned at the universe, thrust my longing at the sky and hoped the gods would sort it out.

I envy the astronauts. They are always glamorous, ageless, despite the horrid orange NASA puts them in. I picture myself staring down at myself from the International Space Station, laughing at the smallness and narrowness of everything. To me I am standing still and the me up there is rotating thousands of miles a minute, but to her she is stationary and I am the one upside down, trapped in a perpetual summersault.

I would like to go to space someday. To me that is the most courage I can imagine, greater than war journalists or firefighters or the men who jump into the ocean from helicopters to save drowning people. To suit up in that big marshmallow-y suit and let a man behind a desk propel you miles and miles away, towards darkness and a million tiny holes in the sky with absolutely no surety that you'd ever have to come back here to our sad, blue-green speck with all

of its trash and monotony. I can't fathom doing it but it also makes so much sense to me, why you'd want to. Go but not die, necessarily.

We shuffled back to the house by midnight, Ellen and Col riled up. I laid up in bed for at least an hour and imagined myself making that last walk towards the rocket along a tiny narrow bridge, a zit-faced NASA boy clipping me into my seat with a tap on my helmet and a thumbs up, the sweat beneath my suit as we bridged the atmosphere and stratosphere and finally were nothing and people turned off their TVs and went back to their stovetop dinners.

I've got chigger and mosquito bites on my biceps and ankles and rear from the grass and they bothered me all night long.

—

After dinner today I went our room and sat on the bed and cried for no reason at all. Everyone was home but I've gotten so good at crying silently and I'm quite proud of it. I can do it while I make the bed, while I shower, while I cut veggies or water the garden, you name it. When you're a mother you get good at that. Sometimes when it gets real bad you have to throw a hand over your mouth and try not to inhale too sharply and you stuff all of that pain and that panic back in and shove it down into yourself like a fist in your throat and you sit cross-legged with your hands on your knees and you wait to unravel like a hem but you don't because you can't, because you're busy and it's been years and it would be too hard to explain it all, so you stand up and go back into the living room where they're all watching American Idol and no one's the wiser. But sometimes it's quick, like the grief is just waving hello.

My mom got the sadness right about now too, when we were out of diapers and out of the house most weekends and things got real quiet and she had to spend more time with my father. You can see it in the photos: she looked happy before we were all around, and then she had toddlers climbing all over her and looked just fine, and then we weren't around anymore and there were just less pictures entirely and when we did take them she didn't look that okay at all, like she'd stapled a look on her face, like the staple went just between her brows. She used to eat grilled cheese and Chinese chicken salad but then she just started snacking, not really eating, never really sitting down for meals, just eating cold sauteed green beans from the fridge with her fingers and leaving half apples everywhere and then eating nothing at all. By time I got my

license Mom was equal parts Amaretto and snark and collected sour housewives as friends like people collect Hard Rock pins.

I can think of one photo where she's looking out at the ocean and my dad is facing in, towards the house, reading a book. I always imagined the moment as a happy one, took it with me to college even, but now when I look at it, I put my thoughts into her mind and the only thing I can think of is, *How did I end up here on this porch married to a man who will sit with his back to an ocean view?* And I think now, I'm the ocean view and Dev's not looked at me in a long time, not really. It feels like he took one look at me and decided I would suffice and married me and has been looking everyone else but me ever since.

How many times did Mom go into that Master bed and cry cross-legged and I didn't know? Did she feel claustrophobic in that ugly one-story house? Did she hate the way my father tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and his ring went tap, tap, tap on the leather cover? The way he sang to the dogs in the morning but yelled at his children? Did she ever stretch her arms out and say *get out, get out, get out?* Did she ever want to leave? Did she ever try? Did she ever cheat on him? Did it kill her?

—

I switched shifts with Joan and offered to take an extra one for Dale, which made him worried because I only do that when I'm messed up about something up home. Pretty, tall black girl didn't come back for my first shift or my second but she did today.

Her name is Isa. Her frowning friend was nowhere to be seen this time and she needed soil, and we talked about soil and not-soil and made names for the gnomes in the décor aisle. We each carried a bag of soil to her car, a little green Jetta with a sizeable dink in the back bumper next to a big Obama sticker and a pendant necklace hanging from the front mirror. When we opened the trunk there was a case of beer with a fist-shaped hole in the top, a soccer ball and grassy cleats, a pungent dog collar and two empty bottles of Gatorade.

“Sorry, it's a mess in here. Do you work here all week?”

“Whenever I want. My supervisor is in my supper club so she lets me take shifts when I need to get out of the house.”

“Kids?”

“Three, but sometimes it feels like twelve.”

She nodded and closed the trunk loudly. I panicked as she got into the driver’s seat and started to close the door, but I didn’t know what to say so I just wiped my dirty hands on my apron and raised one in a wave.

She hesitated and pushed the door back open with her foot and said, “By the way, I meant to show you in the store. Check it out.” She put two fingers in her mouth and whistled flawlessly. I whooped.

She pulled her two wet fingers out of her mouth and held them up like a girl scout, smiling. “It’s all in the fingers,” she said, looked down me and back up again, and at that closed the door and left me standing in an empty parking spot and a muddy apron and with absolutely no pulse at all.

—

We voted for McCain today. It’s still a few weeks early. We went to Christ the King, the line was a little bit long and we saw Jean Service. I never don’t see Jean Service out. She stalks me at Harris Teeter like a horse girl in elementary school and I make quick laps with my cart and stare real hard at my grocery list to avoid her eyes.

Dev doesn’t talk about it much but he’s a conservative. I mean, it’s obvious to anyone paying attention, but still, he doesn’t like to talk about, with the city development council work and all. Doesn’t want people questioning his alliances, calling him a racist, criticizing him at all, really. But at dinner parties with our close friends and after a few beers he talks. Gets defensive and lists off all the ways McCain’s a hero, though nobody said he wasn’t.

Voting is a funny thing. We talk and talk and watch television and debate over liquor-fueled dinners and it’s all community and unity and togetherness and party but really when you get down to it, to the actual task of voting, you’re completely alone, flanked by cardboard dividers hiding other people just as confusingly sweaty as you are. We all get nervous, so the place always reeks a bit like mildewed carpet and stale body odor. Why? We all came in here with our minds made up. We’re all literate (or most of us). It’d be pretty hard to screw up a few bubbles.

I'll tell you why. Because *everyone* lies. Either they're lying about who they're voting for or they're lying for their reasons why or they're lying about the fact that they studied all the candidates and are making an educated decision like the dutiful citizen they are. No one knows anything. We all just guess. We vote how our friends are voting. How our parents are voting. How our kids are voting. I texted Alex to remind him to vote but he won't, I know. He's too busy failing seminars and fucking up girls' lives. He'd vote for McCain too.

When I got to my cardboard box I thought of Isa and her blackness and the Obama sticker on that beat up bumper missing a few screws. I thought of his speeches, of hope and change and disruption and justice. I thought, I could use some of that. So I filled in the bubble next to his name. I flipped the pencil around to erase it but realized it was pen and thought, well, that's that, then.

When we left, we put our ballots in the box and went to the car. Neither of us spoke. Did he do it too? Of course not, he voted for McCain. We both did. Of course.

A tiny insurrection but it felt big good. I put my "I Voted" sticker on the mirror above my sink at home as a reminder. I hope she comes back so I can tell her what I did.

—

Dev was off early this morning for the annual work retreat in Beauford that he hates, so before the kids woke up, I poured my coffee and went upstairs and took the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition from the coffee table with me. I pulled the curtains back closed (I always open them before I go downstairs in the morning) and turned the television volume up and flipped through the pages, all the tan, oiled female bodies coated with sand in only the right places. The women were tiny or curvaceous, completely naked or wrapped in furs. A few of them were quite muscular, the boxers and hockey players and gymnasts. I got to the body paint section and tried to imagine the bodies being painted, the strokes of the wet brush against their naked skin, but kept getting distracted by how it would look on me, how the paint would crack around my cellulite and how they might play down my lopsidedness.

I found one woman who looked a bit like Isa. She was kneeling in the shallows and the water line was barely touching the bottom of her suit, just between her legs. I touched myself looking at that little line of fabric, perfectly straight like that, which no woman's is. I'd have to

tuck and tape to get mine to look like that. I thought of Isa's and wondered what hers would look like.

I floated all morning, feeling like a naughty teenager who got away with sneaking out. I made breakfast burritos for the kids to celebrate and drizzled maple syrup on the inside and poured ridiculous piles of ketchup on their plates to dip them in. And when Dev called to ask what I'd done this morning I lied and said I'd chatted with my sister on the phone and read the comics and had a bowl of cereal.

Isa came by my shift this morning and brought me a coffee. Well, she brought a coffee and a hibiscus tea and said she'd drink either and I thought the coffee would calm my nerves, and now I've been shaking all day. We sat on one of the garden benches for sale and she propped her feet up beneath her. I taught her what all the plants mean in a bouquet and she taught me about the Fibonacci sequence. She's training to be occupational therapist. I told her I needed a therapist and she knew I wasn't being dumb but making a joke and she played along, put on an accent and asked me, How does that make you feel. I said, I'm scared almost all of the time, and she put her sunglasses up on her head and grabbed my wrist and didn't say anything at all.

I've slept with Isa. Oh, I can barely stand to write it but I have no one to tell. I should feel guilty but Lord, I haven't felt this awake in years and it feels as if I've done nothing wrong at all. I'm standing in the pantry now, with the light on and the door closed behind me and I'm writing it down in here and then will shove it way back behind the powdered sugar and the Christmas sprinkles. I've slept with a woman. Two days ago, I hadn't even known what one meant by saying "I've slept with a woman"—*who does the sexing? what qualifies as sex when neither has anything to insert? where is the line between just kissing and real sex?*—and now I've gone and done it and can say confidently that I've found the line and we crossed it at least three times in rapid succession.

Yesterday morning Isa came to the shop—“under the guise” she said later but she pronounced it wrong—of buying fertilizer for the soil she bought on the second day we met for the plant she bought on first day we met. But we didn’t even notice until we got to her house that we’d both forgotten to bring the fertilizer and then she admitted that she already had a bottle at home. That was where she kissed me first, in the front seat of her car talking about fertilizer.

Her hand was quickly between my legs and touching over the heat of my jeans and I was moaning so loudly I was embarrassed. I thought of the fact that I hadn’t showered since the night before or plucked my nipple hairs in a week and wished I could.

When we got into the house her roommates were on the couch and we couldn’t find a way to get to the bedroom discreetly, so we had to sit with them for a while. I’d smoked pot a few times between in college and at dinner parties with Dev when we were younger and fun but this contraption they had was new and impressive. It bubbled when you sucked on it and it hits you twice as fast as a joint and three times as hard. Her roommate had grown the weed himself in the backyard. I was smoking homegrown weed on the couch of a woman who still had roommates and whom I had just kissed.

By the time we made it to the bed, we were dazed out of our minds. Isa has these lights strung up all around the ceiling of her room that fade from red to green to blue to purple and back again. I laid down on her bed to watch them and she laid down beside me. I asked her if she’d seen *Meet Joe Black* and she slid towards me and started kissing my neck.

While she undressed me I told her, “I am a liar, a cheat, a hypocrite, and a slut.” She said, “That’s fine,” and slid her finger inside of me. We fell into each other to Kenny Chesney singing “One bottle of wine and two Dixie cups” loudly from the other room.

Having sex while stoned was disorienting enough but having sex with a woman for the first time doubled the confusion and made me feel nauseous. Perhaps it was guilt but Dev and the kids were so far from my mind that I doubted it. In Isa’s bed I was a fifteen-year-old at a house party trying to get dared to kiss one of the girls, making out with Jessica Peters and trying not to seem too eager, too desperate to touch her. In Isa’s bed I was a sixteen-year-old with a pillow and a healthy imagination. In Isa’s bed I was a freshman in college trying to figure out why Sydney Klein was teasing me, trying to decide if she wanted me to kiss her and hating myself when she didn’t. In Isa’s bed I kissed Jessica and Sydney and Isa and myself and my college TA and Al’s ex-girlfriend Sarah. Having sex with Isa was like finding a dusty VCR halfway through

the tape that you hadn't seen in years and starting right from there, right where you found it, right in the middle of that scene that you used to rewind when you were alone. Of course, neither of us had a VCR to shove in the other's slot, we were two slots and I was stoned and it was all very confusing. I'm sure I fumbled my way through it but she didn't make me scared. I assumed all women scissored like I'd seen in videos and discovered that it's horrifyingly intimate and slimy and sore.

Afterwards I told her I hated my husband and she kissed me and told me everyone does. So I asked her, "Why do we do it?" and she responded, "Because what else would you do?"

What else would I do? I said the first thing that came to my mind: "I would never eat a pimento cheese sandwich again."

She was pulling up a fresh pair of underwear and turned to look at me. "You hate pimento cheese sandwiches?"

"Passionately. I've never told him and he makes them for me."

"Well, whose fault is that?" She put on an oversized t-shirt and Nike shorts, straddled me, bit my lip, then went out the door into the kitchen.

I realized a few minutes after she dropped me back off at Home Depot that my apron was wadded up in her back seat. I made an excuse to Jody that my daughter had a school emergency during which I cried (to explain my eyes) and I'd left the apron on my countertop at home. She didn't ask questions.

I've had such an appetite since then that I've just put toaster strudels in the toaster and I'm in the pantry eating a chocolate chip Chewy bar dipped in peanut butter. It's like I've been starving myself and can't get full.

—

I was driving around Woodcroft with Ellen after dropping Col off at soccer. I drove past our old house on Winterberry Ridge. Sometimes Ellie and I drive past together to check it out. They've added this random flower bed right in the middle of the front yard with baby Maples on it that block the view of the front door, which they'd painted over a few years ago. The first time I saw it, that pretty hardwood door we'd had ordered for months and months, with two crisscrossing grooves along the front in a big x-marks-the-spot, painted a cherry red, I'd idled in

the road and cried. Now the red was darker, more wine, which suited it better, another layer of cheap paint over perfect hardwood.

Today there was a McCain sign in that floating flower bed. The monstrosity of a Chevy that's normally in the driveway was gone and the road was quiet. So I turned to Ellen and said, "Watch this."

I put my hazards on and popped out and ran into the yard and pulled the sign right out of the soil. The grass was wet so I sunk in and left muddy tracks from the road and back. I got grass all over my toes because I was in Birkenstocks, wet, cold grass all the way up to my ankles.

She whooped and hollered as we drove off. I had told her about Obama and she was super proud of me.

I couldn't very well drive around with the sign in my backseat though, seeing as I voted for McCain, of course, so we drove behind the Harris Teeter and put it in the dumpster.

This is where the town's drug deals are made, my fifteen year old told me.

How do you know that, I asked.

Alex bought a weed brownie here once, she said.

Oh, I said.

She asked me if I'd tried weed. I thought of Isa and the lights and said no, and then yes. Sometimes I don't know how to mother. Oftentimes. More often than not.

She said, did I tell you I tried it?

When?

Last year on 4-20. At Harper's house. One of the Mexican boys from our biology class had a joint.

Oh, I said. *4-20. Mexicans. Joints. At a girl's house. In April of last year Ellie was fourteen.* And? I asked.

I hated it. I kept thinking my chest was going to fall off.

I laughed. How would that even happen?

I don't know. But it was going to. I knew it. I *felt* it.

I understand that, I thought. Sometimes I feel like my face will fall off, but usually I'm sober and it's just me thinking too hard about everything.

Trust your feelings, I said.

I stayed up all night worried about the footprints I'd left in the grass and thinking the cops would come find me and I'd have to explain to Dev why I stole a McCain sign out of the front yard of the house we haven't lived in for six years.

But then I thought, it's a damn sign and they can't arrest me for that anyways. But then at 2am I was on the desktop in Alex's room just double checking "can you get arrested to removing political signs in front yard" and apparently I'm going to jail. My dad always said I'd either be a president or prisoner someday but he wasn't sure which (he'd been pretty disappointed lately because all I do is water flowers and reproduce and am wholly uninteresting) and now at least we'd have something exciting to talk about. But then I remembered he voted for McCain, too.

I haven't lost any sleep over sleeping with Isa, though.

I went back to Isa's for the apron today and we did it again. This time was slow and methodical and I was unbearably self-conscious. She noticed and made me stand up in front of her floor-length mirror and show her the places I hated. She was thorough and very solemn, the first time I'd seen her that way. It made her look younger. She didn't laugh at me the way Dev has or tell me how silly it was or how good I looked. Instead, she stroked every spot, kissed it, held it. She grieved with me, grieved the way I hated myself, grieved the war we were all stuck in, this interminable feeling of being foreign to your own body. I understood then why some women can't conceive of being with a man when they could be with a woman. A body with the same urges to stretch, to bloat, to grow thick dark hair in some places and fat in others, a body we're always trying to change, cut off, suck in.

She showed me the places she hated on her own body and I saw them. She wasn't showing me nothing. She wasn't showing me perfect skin and taut thighs as I'd expected, as I'd believed she had. She was showing me stretch marks and ingrown hairs and disproportionate lateral muscles and an outie belly-button and moles and rolls when she squatted on her heels. She mentioned her calves and I told her about that first day in the Garden section when I sat in the bathroom stall and imagined running my fingers up them. And when we were finished listing our

grievances, she kissed me hard and intentionally and we fell into bed with each other more desperate even than we'd been the first time.

While we were naked, a knock came to her door and we tittered like school children, our hands over our mouths. "Occupado," Isa said and I was feeling brave and stuck my other hand between her legs and she moaned with her mouth closed and pinched my arm. Which made me feel braver and I explored her with my fingers and she grinded against them. I studied her features, how her brow furrowed at certain movements, and rose at others, and when they went flat and bored I would panic and shift and they'd furrow again.

I told Isa that now that I've been with her, I regretted every time that Dev and I went to bed together. She told me not to be stupid. That Dev and I made three children together. That Dev had given me many years of beautiful sex, and those moments made this sex beautiful too. She told me, "When you're walking through the forest with me, you'll be able to experience more beauty because you've walked through that forest before with Dev and whoever else and you know where you're going. You'll notice more things and look up at the leaves and the birds because Dev showed you how."

She doesn't know. Doesn't know Dev hates birds. Doesn't know that when Dev is inside of me, I'm walking in the forest alone. It was the first time I'd felt any distance between her and me, her not knowing that. I asked her to lunch and she said yes.

—

Obama won the presidency. Dev sputtered and cursed a few times then let it be. Isa cried when it happened and called her parents and I think it made her really sad that she doesn't have a lot of black friends. But she was happy I voted for him. We got little Obama keychains and I keep mine in the glovebox in my car and I slip it on now when I see her.

—

It's Thanksgiving today and on the radio they said we should make gratitude lists and just generally be as good as we can. Thankfully I've spent the last twenty-five years of my life trying really hard to be good so I'm a natural at this point. I've got my holy face on all day and have

only thought mean thoughts twice and it's already 10:43am. One of my thoughts was about Gale, my checkout lady at the grocery store who likes to pry. The second was about Dev but I don't need to repeat that one.

Here it goes, Lacey Andrysick's 2006 gratitude list:

1. My double oven.
2. Store bought apple pie from Fosters.
3. Ellen and Col, my little helpers. Col mashes potatoes and makes a mess, Ellen makes the cornbread for my stuffing and washes the cranberries for my sauce, meticulously picks out the rotten ones like maybe they were poisoned.
4. Alex is home from school for the weekend. I should be grateful for this.
5. Isa Isa Isa Isa Isa
6. Living seven minutes from the store is very convenient.
7. This is a very little list.

I was up early watching the prep for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. We always threaten to go in person but we've never been. The people look cold and the parking would probably be horrible. Still, I'd like to see the marching bands.

Ellie likes the parade too. She comes down in her pajamas and falls back asleep on the couch. I light a fire with the gas starter. I set up all the wood for it last night. It's cold and even the bluebirds on the house outside look cold. I like to watch the mama bluebird duck in and out of the house, alert and angry.

Last year Dev brought us all outside to show us the bird eggs in there. He'd been talking about it all afternoon, "I'm going to show you all the eggs when the kids get home." But by the time we'd gotten there, Ellen and Alex both sweaty from basketball practice, a garden snake had climbed up the pole and gotten in and eaten them all, was all coiled up fat and happy with four little orbs vibrating inside him. Dev kicked down the house and decapitated the snake with a shovel and all the kids cried, even Alex, though he tried to hide it. In the background I whispered, *but it's a garden snake, it won't hurt anybody*. But nobody heard me, and the snake died anyways.

This year the house is back up but a bit crooked and there's new eggs but I'm convinced it's the same mama, though Dev says otherwise.

Just look how much sadder she is this year, I say.

She's not sadder, Lacey, he responded. Look, look at her hopping around like that. She looks so happy. Your mind is playing tricks on you.

My mind is playing tricks on me. I shake my head at mama bird and she shakes her head back.

I know it's you, I tell her telepathically. I see you. I can see that you're in pain.

She shakes her head again, remorseful. Mothering is sacrifice, she says back.

You're better at it than I am, I say.

Well, I'm a bird.

That's true. Can I get you some nuts?

Peanut allergy, mama bird says, shaking her head again. She shakes her head an awful lot.

I told Isa I'd keep her some stuffing, because mine was the best. She's going to her parents' house in Kill Devil Hills for the holiday and is taking a friend with her. I was very good (see?) and didn't ask who the friend was but she told me anyways: one of her roommates who has nowhere else to go. She didn't tell me not to be jealous. She doesn't tell me to be anything.

I've been to Kill Devil a long time ago, a year or two PD. Pre-Dev. It's a drive-through town, on the way to Kitty Hawk or Duck. I remember the pretty dunes, though. Pretty dunes and pretty Isa. When I think back, she's on the beach there, looking at me, even though that wouldn't be possible, even though she'd only be eleven or so, even though we'd never met. It's funny how we can put people in memories any which way we like: old, young, dead, alive. In my dream a few nights ago I was playing with Isa on that beach. She was Col's age, and we were building sandcastles.

She's bringing me some of her mom's stuffing back too, says she always comes home with just enough to make a really good Thanksgiving sandwich and that she'd share it with me. That would mean a lot to me, I said, and cried a little, which made Isa look at me all strange and sweet.

Anyways now I'm at the store buying more sausage for my stuffing because Dev made it for the boys for breakfast and they've probably changed the channel to football so Ellen's all mad with the cat up in my room. I wish I had nowhere else to go so I could go to Isa's parents' house for dinner.

Even though he doesn't know what it is, Dev's always been acutely aware of my drifting and seems to need me more when I'm needing him less. He follows me around like a beat dog. He wants back scratches and comes up behind me to hug me at the sink and yesterday brought me a bouquet of Calla Lilies. I took one to Isa and she laughed at me so I laughed back but hated myself for the rest of the day.

When Dev touches me now, I close my eyes and think of her. Of her touching me, of him touching her, of me touching them. He's just on top of me but I feel so absent to the scene it's as if Dev is next door having sex with a woman and I'm in the kitchen reading the newspaper. He's never too rough but he's insistent. Insistent. Insistent. Insistent. And when he finishes between my legs it makes me feel ill, like he's filling an empty hole that's not mine and I'm being forced to watch. The sex feels invasive. I'm physically cold while he's inside me and it hurts in my stomach. It didn't used to be this way and sometimes when he touches me, I've been so riled up thinking about her all day that it does feel good and I want him to screw the thoughts out of me.

Last night Dev and I were in bed and we were done so quickly that we didn't even work up a sweat. He held himself up with hands on the bed on either side of my face and grunted like an old man while he did it. Afterwards, he spooned me and then when I put my hand back behind me to pat him goodnight he tugged on my shoulders and pulled me around until I was facing him.

He said, "Sometimes I want to tap on your forehead and say, 'What's going on in there.'"

He gave my forehead a little tap for dramatic effect. But frankly I don't think he wants to know. Not really.

I'm wrapping presents for the kids and for each one I try to think of a present I would get Isa. I put Dev's names on the ones I don't feel too attached to. But he came in and wrote Santa on a few of the good ones so they're in his handwriting that all the kids know, even though I picked everything out, made lists all year, went out and bought them all. But it's his money at this point so I guess that evens the score.

While I was wrapping, I remembered one Christmas morning when I was a kid and Mother came downstairs with no pants on and out of her mind from low blood sugar. I didn't know what a diabetic episode was at the time. All I knew was that Mother was rambling and stumbling and laughing like a drunkard in a pair of my father's tighty-whities. Dad took her upstairs with a glass of orange juice and a granola bar and nursed her back to sanity. My oldest sister took over downstairs and finished the cinnamon rolls and cut the honeydew for breakfast, put the coffee on for everyone else and made hot cocoa with marshmallows for me. I cringe now thinking of the questions I asked that morning, how I nagged my sister about Mother, when was she coming downstairs, why was she acting silly, how my sister was quiet and sat up very straight and played toy cars on the table with me and faked a pretty smile.

Dev was writing Santa on a pair of hockey cleats for Ellen when that memory came back to me. I looked at him and wondered if he would bring me orange juice and a granola bar if I lost my mind, too.

—

Nadia has just left her annual voicemail saying she won't be able to make it to the party. Ellie and I giggle at the receiver. Every year she calls the landline and leaves the same message, that she's so sorry to miss our holiday party but she's taken to a headache, or chest cold, or sciatica (sp?), or whatever the hell else she can think of, and she would hate to be the grumpy old grinch bringing down all the fa-la-la so it's probably best she stay at home. Three years ago by the mailboxes I told her I was making my aunt's Devil's Chocolate Cake and so now she always adds "I'll hate to miss that cake" though she's never once tasted it and has probably forgotten it was chocolate at all.

I hope when I'm Nadia's age, I have the guts to call the host of the party and say, "Look, I don't like you, you don't actually like me, you only invite me because I live two houses down and you don't want me to drive past and see a party I wasn't invited to, and your guests always drive over my grass and leave muddy trenches in their wake so please if you could tell them to stop driving like bloody idiots or I'll slash their tires." Or just have the guts to not arrive. Or maybe actually like my friends and go because I want to go. How refreshing that would be.

I put the nice string lights on in the back garden, picked up dog poop with the big shovel and tossed it over the fence to the Nichols' yard, replaced the tea-lights and Ellen goes arounds and lights them just before 6:00. The old-hats come in first: the Upchurchs, the Looneys, the Wardens, the Morgans, the Carrs, the Browns, the Blacks, the Uzzles. They're all dressed in Christmas red and dangly dreidel earrings and plaid sweaters, and they've brought homemade treats on glass platters covered in sticky wrap or porcelain bowls with lids that fit. The new-school arrives later with children in tow that go off like pinballs to all corners of the house and bottles of wine put into wine bags without tissue, mostly with unsigned tags. By the time they've loaded up a plate with mac-n-cheese balls and kiss cookies, a few of the old-hats have already gone home. The teenagers sulk in the corner and I watch Ellen flirt with the Jackson boy with the gluten allergy.

The new neighbor Lydia has red hair and her children are freckle-faced delights who eat baked brie and only have one slice of chocolate cake each. Lydia has collarbones like bird's wings and I imagine the two of us in Isa's bed, which seems to be the only place I can now imagine women. Dev is pushing on the round little bone at the top of my spine with his thumb while I talk to her. He's always done that, put pressure right on the joints. The knuckle of my forefinger, the thin bones of my foot, the two knobs where the top of my pelvis meets the base of my back. Pushed, rubbed, rolled around.

I felt like coconspirators, Lydia and I, though she was shifting her gaze equally between Dev and myself like an oscillating desk fan. I was likely a sexless old hag to her but just the possibility of me crossing her mind in the way she was crossing mine made me pity Dev and her abominable-snowman of a husband, in his down vest and patchy beard that stretched down his neck. I didn't just want to kiss her. I wanted to absorb her and then eat lunch with her inside of me. All at once I was envious of her, sorry for her, wanted between her legs, wanted to hold her, wanted to sit across a table from her and do nothing but watch her sip wine until the glass was empty.

But the thing I felt most surely was that I commiserated with her deep in my bones. That for both of us, life surmounted to this, kiss cookies and holiday parties with too-warm red wine and monotonous conversations. Perhaps women don't need cocks to make love to each other because we're already inside each other in a way. We don't need 6-inch ugly alien probes to force our way in because we're allowed in, recognized. Welcomed home.

I told her none of this obviously but talked about the geese on the pond and told the story of an infamous former neighbor named Wendy who hated the geese so much she put cages out and tricked a goose into one of them and then locked it until the goose died in front of all the others and left it there until the Homeowners Association complained. She used to swerve her car to hit them and laugh when the turtles drowned the goslings and once when the kids were young, I saw her by the pond throwing stones at them and she held the stones behind her back and lied to my face when I asked her to stop.

Lydia found this story horrifying and put her hand to a chest like a Hollywood damsel, which only further pronounced her birdy collarbones. I had a fleeting vision of her in a cage and throwing a stone at her so I pretended that the sausage balls needed a refill and skedaddled.

We were an hour in and Jennifer Nichols was already well-oiled, swinging her drink like a homeless drunk. I wouldn't have invited her but she bakes a fantastic egg casserole that makes an appearance at our house every few months. Heaven knows why because I have never once delivered anything to her. Plus she's furiously funny when she's drunk which she almost always is. I look chaste in comparison, which I adore.

Bill and Jan are talking to Donna and Dallas about the disease killing all the fish in the pond. Lisa, who is really quite clever when she's alone with the women but acts like a nitwit around her husband, is next to her husband and whining like a child about the delay in the club renovations. How could anyone think of anything other than Isa?

I busied myself refilling glasses which made it easy to say hello to everyone without actually speaking to anyone. I think I spend only a handful of minutes at these parties having a real conversation about anyone and that's completely fine with me. But I feel my heart beat a little faster as the first guests start to leave. I start pleading with each of them in my head: please, please stay longer, please love this deviled egg, please love me, please stay. I try to get people to sit back down. Can I open another beer for you? Please just stay a little longer and don't leave so it's not just me and him and my children who terrify me.

But by 9 o'clock Dev is standing and yawning and joking with people to get out but he's never been good at pretending to be joking. The men don't take notice and keep chatting but the women do. The happy ones usher their men out of the house quickly but the rest of us linger, not even liking each other but trying to stay still and keep the conversation moving. And when they do leave, the lingering ones, I swear they all look at me funny, like they're sorry, not just for me

but for them, that now we go back to our homes where we'll sit like birds until next December, in our little cages so our husbands can throw rocks at us, back to our home to wrap presents for our children full well knowing that all we'll get in our stockings is new bras and chocolates our husbands picked up from the gas station on Christmas Eve, and then when the kids go to college and grow up and have their own then it's just you and your husband and bras you won't even wear, that don't even fit your saggy tits.

They hug me goodbye again and then the house smells like soggy sausage balls and flat beer and everyone is gone.

—

It came up in conversation yesterday that I like to sit on the left side of people because I think the left side of my face is ugly. That's not true, she said, you were sitting on my right when we kissed for the first time. She remembered.

—

Alex didn't want to go to chapel for the Christmas eve service (the Panthers were playing and he despises the wait) so Dev offered to stay home with him. So Col, Ellie and I went together. We went early and got up close. The children's choir was in those awful red sweaters again but we saw the Gillespies and Tedeschis and Neimanns and I felt so pretty in my stockings and black velvet dress. And because Dev wasn't there I could sing along to In Excelsis Deo as loud as I wanted, so I sang and sang all the notes and Ellen and Col sang with me and played Tic Tac Toe on the program.

The chapel was decorated with candles, real candles, and wreathes and large printouts of children in Haiti. I like to watching the people in their white robes come down the aisle, like they're getting married to Christ. The teenage boys are gangling and awkward and trying not to drop their staffs.

I gave Col and Ellie each \$10 to put in the offering cup for the Haitian kids and we all took communion together, real wine and Sweet Hawaiian bread and I thought, wouldn't it be better if we just sent them the bread then maybe they wouldn't keep starving. Ellie wants to look

poised these days so she took a graceful sip and wiped her mouth with the tip of her fingers. I see Col take a big sip of the wine and giggle at Ellie, stumbling back to his seat pretending to be drunk. Other mothers look at me as we walk back and give amused smiles, knowing smiles, compatriot smiles and I duck my head and say *Amen* to each of them, and *God be with you*, and *Jesus saves*, pious as I am.

I don't believe a word but I adore the tradition. Ellen believes though, her pale little fingers squeezed together in prayer and her eyes clenched shut. She's started going to YoungLife now, has all the wristbands and car stickers (though she has no car so puts them on her bedroom mirror) and backpack patches. I see how badly she wants to believe, and I think she thinks she does. I bought her a pretty silver cross with turquoise rocks on it from Albuquerque last year and she cried and held it to her chest like a saint. We've always encouraged them to decide their own beliefs and told them that's why don't go to church, so that they can believe what they want, but really it is just too much effort. *Once a year is enough*, I'll tell them on judgment day.

I should probably believe in something to be in here, this big, cold, stone chapel, I thought. So I thought of Isa.

Sam delivers the sermon, the only Brit in North Carolina, must be, and I think half of the women in the crowd come just to hear his accent. They probably do sinful things with those sermon words while their husbands fuck them at night.

After the service, we went out of the way to see the best lights at the far end of Woodcroft, the ones that have their own radio station and twinkle along with the songs, Colbie Callait and Mariah Carey and Keith Urban Christmas. We sat in a line of cars, red taillights and hot tailpipes fogging up the windows, inching forward until we were in the very front and the show was just for us. We lingered for longer than our fair share, horns in chorus behind us.

When we got home, Santa had left flannel pajamas in the sunroom for each of us, navy plaid for the boys and pink with red reindeer for Ellie and myself. I could tell Col and Ellie were giddy, even now, so I played along, thanking Santa, saying the same line that he must've done a first round and gone back to get more. Santa's like God to Ellie: she wants to believe but knows better, wants it all to make sense and stay the same and get rewarded for the good she does.

While I was gone, Dev and Alex had taken the celebratory bottle of wine off the centerpiece, the dinner bottle, and had since taken it down to a third full. I hid it in the cupboard with the peanut butter so I could have it, decanted a cheap bottle and put that on the table.

I put the ham in the oven, finished the sides, shooed the children upstairs to change into their pajamas. Alex wouldn't put his on and just kept his sweatpants on. But everyone else did, even Dev. We sat at the table and popped our crackers and put on our paper crowns and all the kids doused my au gratin in ketchup and ate all the peanut butter kiss cookies so I only got one, after all that. Even then someone had eaten the chocolate kiss off the top so then it was just a smushed peanut butter cookie with no chocolate, and who wants that?

The morning was delightful, though. Alex and Ellen fought and the weather was too warm to have a fire but I lit it anyways because tradition and we were all sweating under our flannel. But everyone seemed happy with their gifts and Jennifer's casserole was heaven. Ellen and Col went to bed somewhat early after tracking Santa on NORAD and Alex agreed to play videogames in his room with his headphones on and the lights off so the kids wouldn't see. Dev and I lit candles downstairs so we could navigate around the furniture, and I watered the tree while he brought presents in from our closet. We pulled the couches back to make space for the gifts, dispersed them the best we could around the room.

Dev took bites of the cutout cookies on the plate marked Cookies for Santa, just the right size for Santa's mouth, poured half the milk down the sink and dunked a cookie in what was left so there would be crumbs on the surface. Like I said, I don't think the kids really believe that much anymore but best to keep the illusion anyways, always keep the illusion as long as you can, 'til it breaks and you can't anymore.

At gift time, Ellen was my helper, distributing presents, trying on new jackets and shoes with her flannel pajamas still on. I checked my phone midday while the kids were playing with their new stuff and Alex was setting up his new laptop and Dev watched football. Isa had sent me a picture of her on the sand, all bundled up in a sweater and scarf and flanked by two spaniels. She was smiling widely, and I wished I'd been the one to take the photo.

—

I forgot to take off my Obama keychain today and I think Dev saw it.

—

Alex is going to his friend's house in the Bahamas for New Year's (Green Turtle Key, not *kway*, Mom, he says), and Ellen is off to her aunt's in Santa Barbara with two girlfriends until the 3rd. Thank goodness Col is here because if he wasn't, it would be just Dev and I. So I throw myself into Col, taking him to the park, to the movies, to the bookstore. We go to Hillsborough and eat fried pickles and ranch and drink two Sprites each. I sit at his soccer practice where I normally just drop him off. I schedule haircuts and doctors' appointments and anything with a waiting room. He thinks he is getting spoiled but I can't be home, can't trust what I'll say, can't trust I won't burn it down.

I test how long I can go without seeing Dev when he gets home, and discover I'm very good at it. I can make it through most of the day without speaking to him once.

—

I am not telling Isa what I intend to do. Today she was in the mirror trying on various sparkly items for New Years' Eve. A bandeau. A spaghetti-strapped dress. A pair of leggings with sequin racing stripes down the side. I asked her if before I left we could pretend it was midnight and I could kiss her and she said yes.

She came to lay next to me and told me, "move your pillow closer to mine" and when she said it, I had the thought that all of the world and all of our pain and every human experience and desire could be put through a sieve and boiled down and the only thing that would remain after that would be that tiny sentence, somebody telling us to move our pillow closer to theirs. I told her as much. That nothing else was of any importance but that sentence and our two pillows now closer together than they'd been just moments ago. She told me that I should write songs with that kind of imagination. I told her I was a horrible singer and she said some songwriters don't sing they just write. So I said, just accept the complement, and we laughed and I kissed her and felt some of her youth pass onto me.

I thought, *I wish I could tell that to Dev so he'd know why I've been so sad for twenty years, because he was supposed to tell me to move my pillow closer to his and he never did.*

I daydream about telling him all the time. I picture Isa like a landscape stretched out in front of me, a forest so massive I can stretch my arms out and look left and right past my fingertips and see nothing but trees. Then I imagine trying to tell Dev and I look away for just

one second to get his attention and when I look back what was a forest is just one bush and a trick of the light and he laughs and laughs. And then I get so scared of being laughed at I don't want to say it out loud.

—

Ellie asked me to help spread lotion on her back before she went to Nick's today. Just there, at the very center where her pretty fingers couldn't reach. She'd stopped wanting to be naked in front of me a few years ago but today she was in just those little lace cheeky undies I bought her last Christmas with the microscopic pink bow at the front. They were part of her Second Christmas. Every year I count the presents I put under the tree to make sure each kid gets the same number, because I am a good mother. But I always overbuy for her so she gets a second round of gifts every year, hidden in the shelves of her closet, and she has to go into her closet and close the door to open them so the boys don't see. I spend hours wrapping her Second Christmas presents, more time than I spend on all the others combined. I use my best wrapping paper and best bows and all the edges are clean.

I don't comment on the undies because I don't want her to get self-conscious around me. I am good at not commenting on things.

She pulled all of her hair past her right shoulder and patted it dry with her hand towel while I squeezed lotion into my palm and started to rub it on, her warm skin spread wide beneath my fingers. I traced the knobs along her spine, that little scar halfway down where the fireplace guard fell on her when she was six, along the top of her hips that were just beginning. She's still at the age when she can pull on any pair of jeans from the sales rack and they'd fit. I massaged around her shoulder blades and she cooed and stopped patting her hair for a moment.

When that round was rubbed in, I squeezed another glob into my hand. I wanted to stay there, in that steamy bathroom with the oaty smell of the lotion and the ceiling fan on full blast and Ellie swooshing Listerine around her gums. But then she said, "Thanks, that's good" and walked into her closet to try on various dreadful combinations of colored skinny jeans and unflattering sweaters.

I rubbed the rest of the lotion on my hands, investigating them. The knuckles swollen, the skin wrinkled and leathery, the wedding band just a little too tight, its teardrop diamond dwarfed

by my fattening fingers. I rubbed the band around with the lotion until it slid easily over my knuckle and off and I massaged the empty place where it was. Then I walked downstairs and made blueberry pancakes and popped a measuring cup of water in the microwave for my tea.

I think if there'd been seeds in my tea, I wouldn't have said what I said, might've chickened out or done it at different way, but there weren't any seeds and it just came out.

Every morning I make myself a tea with hot water and lemon and sometimes honey. It's supposed to warm up your gut and kickstart your metabolism, or so that carcass-looking mother of Ellie's friend says. But I get so frustrated because I always spend at least a minute scraping out the seeds out of the lemon wedge before I squeeze but unfailingly miss one or two, and I've got to go in and get them out of the tea with a spoon. Every time. No matter how meticulously I pick and scrape and pull out, there's always seeds.

But today Ellie was sitting at the island eating pancakes while I fought with the lemon, when it slipped out of my hand onto the floor and I cursed. In the way some children have pearls of wisdom that make you pause and says, *Wow, I made that brain right here in my body*, and feel some bit of pride in your stomach, Ellie forked the last bite of pancakes into her mouth and said, "If you miss one every time anyways, why don't you just squeeze it and *then* take the seeds out?"

I shook my head but I cut a second lemon wedge and threw my cares to the wind and squeezed without worry. Only then, armed with a teaspoon and newfound gumption and stinging cuticles from the acid, did I lean over the mug to assess the damage. And would you believe it? No seeds. Not a single one.

I shouted "No seeds!" up to Ellie, who was already legging it up the stairs two at a time. "Told you!" she yelled back.

I was giggling at the mug and wanted someone else to tell, but Col was next door. Dev walked into the kitchen a few minutes later so I told him, and he said, why don't you just use that lemon juicer I bought you? I've never once seen you use it. And then he started going on about all these things we buy and never use and I looked down at my tea and back up at him and I don't know why but I felt that this would be the only moment to say it so I said it.

"I'm sleeping with someone," I said. "And the lemon juicer doesn't fit right in the fridge."

"What?"

“It doesn’t fit.”

He started walking out of the room, but paused and came back in. He stared at me. “You’re what? Did you just say you’re—what?”

He looked like what I imagine a CD looks like when it’s skipping. He leaned back against the sink with his hands gripping the edge of it and his elbows tucked behind him like chicken wings and blew out a long, deep breath. All of the sudden I was tired so I sat down, right there on the dirty kitchen runner. The dog came up to me and straddled me.

“Yes,” I said to the dog.

“Are you joking?”

“Yes, I’m joking.” And then, “No, I’m not joking. Sorry. Very much not joking.” I felt nauseous in every cradle and cavity of my body. The dog must have smelled the bile through my pores because he hopped off and ran off to the living room.

Ellie came bundling down the stairs then, ready to go.

“Why are you on the floor?” she asked. “Here.” She was holding my wedding ring. I’d left it on her counter when I’d lotioned her back. I took it in my palm and looked up at Dev and then we both watched me put it back on my finger as if I was proposing to myself, and that’s what it felt like.

I grabbed the keys and took Ellie to Nick’s without saying another word to Dev. She smelled like my perfume and I noticed her ankles on the dash were perfectly hairless and lotioned. I wondered if she and Nick were having sex. She turned the radio on loud and texted most of the way until Ms. New Booty came on and we sang along together.

—

I take the long way home and run through the next steps in my head. I’m not sure how it works from here. Do I leave while the children are at school tomorrow? Do I stay to say goodbye? How many bags am I supposed to pack? I make mental lists like I do before the kids’ summer camps. Deodorant, underwear, sunscreen, Band-Aids, a raincoat, your stuffed animal—the small one so the other kids can’t see—Chapstick, cash. Did I have cash? Could Dev cancel my credit card account? Is it sunny in San Diego this time of year?

When I got back, I let the car idle a while in the garage, thinking of that scene from *The Virgin Suicides* where she closes the garage door and kills herself with car fumes. I was terrified to go inside, terrified to move at all, but mostly terrified to die in a Subaru in a five-bedroom house in a cul-de-sac in inland-fucking-North-Carolina. If I'm going out, I'm going out on a beach. I sipped a flat drive-through Diet Coke in the console and watched Col and the Jackson kid on the trampoline through my rear view. I saw the mulch pile beside them, and thought about Dev doing the mulch all by himself this year. It would take days.

After a long time, I went inside and stood in the kitchen in silence. The floor creaked above me; Dev was in the office. I made a large circle through all of the downstairs rooms, through the sunroom, the living room, the foyer, the dining room we only used on Thanksgiving and Christmas, the kitchen with the dog treats and a bouquet of tulips on the white countertop. As I went, I adjusted skew paintings and closed half-open drawers. Fixed the shoes so the left ones were to the left of the right ones. Poured a vodka tonic when I walked past the bar, finished it by the time I reached the sink, washed the glass out and put it on the tray to dry. In the guest bathroom I tried fake crying. But then the lady in the mirror was convincing enough that I felt sorry for her and cried there for a few minutes before getting a hold of myself.

The ceiling above me was still creaking. I crept up the stairs the best I could and saw Dev doing pushups through the open door. I hadn't seen Dev do a single pushup in years and my first thought was, inexplicably, he's going to charge me and push me down the stairs. I thought of Michael Peterson and his third wife and all the press, had a fleeting vision of Dev in a prison jumpsuit.

I didn't want to die yet so I ducked into Ellie's room. We redid her room last year a deep hunter green, a wonderful upgrade from the chocolate brown, lime green and pink stripes that used to give me vertigo. She's in a photography stage and has at least three dozen frames of her own photos along the walls: dead daisies and pigeons on phone wires and a pretty blue door in Argentina. The mirror behind her door is lined with ticket stubs and Polaroids. She's a keeper, a clepto of knickknacks and mementos.

I straightened a pillow on her bed and went through the Jack and Jill bathroom, pulled hair out of the drain, swept scattered litter back into the cat's box with my bare hands. The cat came and rubbed up against me. I picked him up and held him against me but he writhed out of

my grip and ran into Ellen's room, showing me his anus. I got down onto the bathroom floor to call him back to me, but he stayed there just out of reach.

The bathmats smelled like feet and mildew and litter but I didn't move my head and I was smiling because all the sudden they weren't my bathmats anymore but the bathmats of some middle-aged housewife with three kids and a husband. They were Beth Armbruster's bathmats. They were Lydia's bathmats. I was getting out. I imagined myself a Joan of Arc, working my way around the neighborhood with a great pair of pliers, wrenching each of the front doors from their hinges while women tossed bathmats from upstairs windows. I imagined all of us women kissing in the streets, a little Pride parade on Birnham Lane, while our husbands watched behind the windows and jerked off and cried.

Col still has a bunk bed, the wood stained dark, the kind where the bottom bed is a full size, big-boy bed. The top is full of plush basketballs and dragon stuffed animals and action figures of cartoon characters. I can name each of the characters faster than I can name my own neighbors. Once when I was with my sister, Dev had let Col stick those gooey stars along the side wall and the oil had stained the paint. Nothing else is on the walls except a wooden monogram we'd kept from his nursery. I turned off his bedside lamp and picked up a pair of underwear from the floor. The creaking had stopped and I heard the hiss and squeak for Dev settling into his desk chair.

"Now or never," I said to myself.

Alex's room is Dev's office now, on the days he stays home. The walls are relatively empty too, because Alex has taken most of it to his dorm room. Dev was at his desk when I came in and didn't look at me, just kept typing away at the desktop keyboard. I couldn't see what he was writing. Three stacks of my papers were on the bed, which was made but ruffled in one corner from the dog or me. I flicked through the piles. Mostly bills, receipts for clothes to be returned, Col's soccer team schedule and the catalog for the uniforms. I pushed stray papers in until it was three perfect stacks, right in a row.

When I turned around, Dev was very still and no longer typing. I came and sat down on the floor behind his chair and leaned back against Alex's bed. I was so tired, that was all I was thinking, so tired, why am I so tired. He swiveled to face me but didn't say anything, didn't make eye contact, just generally existed in my direction. I wanted him to speak first, so I knew where

he was and could respond accordingly. But he was silent. After a minute or so, I caved and opened my mouth to speak and as soon as I did, he interrupted me.

He had a lot of questions. Who. You don't know them. How long. Three months. Where we had sex, when, did I cum, how many times. I lied and said we'd been together a handful (it had been eleven), and not often (I came every time). He had a snarl on his face. The conversation dragged. I figured it would be hard to tell him but here I was giving him details like I was ordering a pizza.

Every time he started speaking my eyes drooped and I'd furrow my brow and I had to resist the urge just to fall asleep there, while he spoke at me about betrayal and trust and all of these big words that should have felt like the most important conversations in the world but really just bored me. Destroying someone's life shouldn't be so boring but it's a lot of sitting and being spoken at. It's a lot of admin and long conversations that you both know are a waste of time because this part of your life is going to be over soon and you'll never speak like this again, probably, hopefully. I was looking into his eyes and watching his mouth move but I couldn't seem to make out what he was saying, I was just so tired. *Just get it over with, Dev. Kick me out, I'm already gone.*

I broke eye contact and looked at his forearm. I think he thought I was feeling guilty and couldn't stand to look at him but really I was thinking about how dark his arm hair was, like he'd never been outside. I was disgusted by it. By the hair on his chin and the hair I knew was on his ass and his chest and his balls and his back and I just wanted soft Isa, soft even when the little bristles on her ankle came out to greet me. I longed for Isa, the way her cavern whispered to my cavern and I wanted to be far away from this pointy, angry, boring mountain who couldn't be a cavern even if he tried.

I imagined her crying and tried to force a look of sympathy onto my face. He kept saying, him, him. I cut him off mid-sentence.

"I lied," I said.

"About?"

"Well technically I didn't lie, you just assumed. But it's not a man. It's a woman."

He squinted at me. "A woman."

"Yes."

He visibly relaxed. He slouched back into the chair and took a deep breath, which ended in a laugh. “Well, that’s okay.”

“What?”

“You’re not going to run away with a woman.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t like women. You’ve never liked women. You hate women.”

I thought of Isa and her colored lights and her blackness. “I don’t hate women.”

“You’ve never gotten along with women. You’ve only ever liked men.”

“That’s not true,” I said. *Maybe I hate women because you seem to like all of them but me.*

“What’s her name?” he asked.

“Lydia,” I said.

“Lydia?”

“Isa.”

“Which is it?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

“Isa, then.”

“Are you lying?”

“Does it feel like it?”

He sighed. “No, I think you’re telling the truth.”

“Alright then.”

He nodded and paused, but had an amused look on his face.

You should be more afraid because it’s a woman.

“Do I know her?”

“Do you know an Isa?”

“Lacey.”

“No. I told you, you don’t know her.”

“Is she in your book club?”

I laughed. His face closed off the way it does when I laugh at him. He was angry, the angry that makes him bigger. “No, I wouldn’t sleep with any of them,” I said as somber as I could.

He nodded. “Are you a lesbian?”

“No.”

“Sure?”

I nodded.

“But you like pussy.” His lips switched into a small, sour smile.

I nodded again.

“Who knows about this?”

“Just the rhododendrons on Aisle 4. I tell them everything.”

“Who?”

“The rhododendrons.”

He was quiet.

“They’re flowers.”

“Lacey.”

“Sorry. No one then. Isa’s roommates, maybe.”

His hands went to his head. “Roommates! How old is she?”

“26.”

“Jesus, Lacey. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking about the paddleboards and Wendy with the geese.”

He put his hands to his head. I pictured him throwing me over the staircase railing. “What the fuck is going on? Are you drunk?”

“Apparently.”

“Jesus. I need to think about this. About what I’m going to do about this.”

I know what you’ll do about it. You’ll play the tragic hero and I’ll play Godzilla and you’ll kick me out and get a pretty, new, young me and her perky little tits will be your reward for saving the city. I thought of the mayor shaking hands with Dev in front of a big crowd and handing him a big trophy with shiny golden tits on top. I thought of Isa’s dark little nipples and thought, fine, fine, fair trade.

I noticed he was speaking again. "...In the meantime, you're going to stop. Your little cunt adventures, or whatever this is. You're going to stop and we'll figure it out. Okay?"

"Okay," I lied.

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"This Isa stuff"—he said her name wrong, with a little "i" rather than a big "E"—"just... tuck it away for now. Yeah?"

I mimed opening a suit jacket and shoving something into the inside pocket. "Tucked."

He pointed at me and smirked. "And nobody else, okay?"

I gave a thumbs up.

"And don't tell anybody."

It was a lot of rules and I thought maybe I should grab a pen. He gave a final nod and then smiled. "And no more talking to the poinsettias about your little escapades."

"The rhododendrons."

"Doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does," I said. "The poinsettias talk to everyone. Wholly unreliable. I'd never trust them with a secret."

He looked at me with his head cocked to the side, then turned to walk out of the room. As he did, he laughed but it was mean laugh. "My queer wife!"

—

My little cunt adventures. I've never said that word but now I'm repeating it to myself out loud here in the living room while everyone's asleep. I say it to the cat. It's a great word. Cunt. Cunt. To the cat, you're a cunt. To between my legs, you're a cunt. To the empty room, I'm a cunt.

—

Dev was busy walking the dog when I got up this morning, and by the time he got back the kids were up and we did the getting ready for school things and by the time I got back from

dropping them off his car was gone. I idled around the house for most of the morning, unsure of what to do. It didn't feel like my house. A few hours later, when I pulled the leftover coffee from the fridge, I noticed he'd shoved the lemon juicer into the door shelf, between the ketchup and a half-used package of sour cream. But it didn't quite fit and looked ready to pop out. I took it out and threw it in the trash.

I poured a cup of coffee, cold and thick as syrup, and put it in the microwave. I watched, getting close to the microwave and imagining the little waves swimming into my pores, the carcinogens steaming at my face. I let it beep and beep and beep when it finished, just stood there in front of it. It beeped every thirty seconds, like a cuckoo clock chirping. It's a new microwave and I miss the old one where the timer used to pop up with "Food" "Is" "Ready", one after the other, and the way Alex and Dev used to say it in robot noises and we'd robot around the kitchen, limbs perpendicular and wild. This one just says "End" "End" "End", three consecutive, dull flashes. I stood there and watch the End flash and wonder if it's the same End that pops up every time or if they have three different Ends that take turns in the spotlight, each one awaiting his turn in a single file line. Would I be the first End or the last End?

I tested myself to see how long I could take the beeping before I pressed the door open and I'd made it to seven rounds easily when I heard Dev at the front door. The dog came bounding inside, his nails and the pads of his paws sliding across the hardwood, and bumped into me. Hot coffee poured onto my hand and I kicked at the dog, missing.

Dev came into the kitchen and went straight to the fridge and pulled out the tub of pimento cheese and a jar of pickles. From the cupboard: bread and Lays.

"You want a sandwich?" he asked. He lathered the cheese onto one piece of bread, delicately laid two pickle slices on top, and then pushed on some barbecue Lays chips. He folded it in half and took a massive bite from the corner.

"No, thank you."

"Have a bite." He put the sandwich near my face.

"No, please. The pickles." I hated everything on that sandwich. He knew about the pickles.

"Oh, don't get your granny panties in a wad. Try it."

It was clear he wouldn't move it from my face. I took a good-sized bite out of the corner and forced it down. I felt a tiny fragment of chip going into my Moeller gum. Dev scoffed

crossly and complained about how I never wanted to try anything. *I tried it, cunt! I tried cunt!*
You're a cunt!

We sat at our little veranda table and ate and I simmered. But finally I couldn't take it anymore and bubbled over.

Can we talk about it, I asked.

Why?

Aren't you angry?

He laughed and then sobered. No. I'm not angry.

I slept with someone.

He looked ready to smirk. I wanted to slap him. And I forgive you, he said.

I started going through the list: I don't deserve it. It's too soon. I *slept* with someone. He waved a hand to push it all away. I grabbed his face. *Get angry, damnit.*

"Take your time, honey," I said. I was wearing my mother's tone, the one she used to usher my father up the stairs. "You don't have to be okay."

He put his pimento cheese mouth close to my face and breathed. "Are you going to let me fuck someone too?"

—

Now it's as if nothing has happened. I get the kids ready for school and then Dev goes to work and he comes home and I get the kids ready for bed. The house feels like a balloon I could just pop. I wait. Wait for him to do something, say anything. But nothing happens. Sometimes he doesn't speak to me for days. The longest stretch so far is two and a half days. He'll be right there, we'll be doing the same task, and he just won't speak. I'll ask him a question and he'll look me in the eye and just not respond. I'll ask him what's wrong and he won't say anything at all, just silence. Or he'll just leave the room when I walk in and we play magical chairs around the house. Magical rooms. It's punishment I know and every time it feels like he's punched me in the stomach as hard as he can. *You can't leave but this is what I'll make home for you.*

Telling Dev felt I was giving birth to myself, this little life and these little ideas I've been growing inside me and now was releasing into the world, cutting the umbilical cord and saying, Here, world, I grew this, it exists now on its own, I have named it and now it is my time to raise

it. I envision me and Dev back in that room, me on the floor and him in his chair, my legs spread wide and belly swollen, pushing and breathing and screaming and then it was there, we both saw it, bloody and jaundice on the carpet in our bedroom. But now it's like I've shoved it back inside of me. Can it breathe in there? How is it supposed to come back out? Or will it just grow inside of me, bigger and bigger until it tears me apart from the inside like Sigourney Weaver?

Last night I dreamed that we were taking pillows off of the bed, but I was on his side and he was on mine. We just kept taking them off and putting them on the ground, one by one, but it was never done, they just kept appearing. The whole time he's taking the pillows off and not speaking. And I just stood there screaming at him, crying, screaming, until I was pounding my fists against the bed, sobbing, screaming, please, say something. And then he started laughing. Maniacally. Then he was crawling over the bed towards me but the bed was so big and he just kept crawling towards me, laughing and laughing. So I turned and ran from the room into Ellie's room, and she was sitting up in bed holding a pillow to her face and screaming.

—

I finally saw Isa today. I told her what I did and everything that came after. She seemed nervous.

“Just don't get me involved. Your shit is your shit, okay?” she said. She made me swear it. I swore but thought to myself, that's the sun asking not be a part of the solar system. But it's a sun. I guess it can do what it wants.

She did a curt nod but then wanted me.

When I came home, Dev wanted me too. All the sudden he's rediscovered that I have a vagina. It's like when someone wants to borrow a book you haven't read in years and all the sudden it's your favorite book and you can't give it up. We went to our room and had sex with the kids just in the living room. He put his hand over my mouth although I wasn't even moaning, but he looked excited so I moaned into it like I couldn't control myself.

When I was in high school, in Life Studies class, Sister Cassandra (who we called Lady Cassan-drab) brought out a packet of cookies and we all sat in a circle. She handed a cookie to one of the boys and told him to spit on it. Then she told him to pass it to the next person and told them to spit on it too. One by one we all laughed and hocked loogies and dribbled long drops of

spit on the cookie until it made it all the way around the circle. Then she asked the first boy to take a bite of it. When he refused, she looked delighted. She asked the class if anyone wanted a bite. We all shook our heads.

Lady Cassan-drab sneered and said, “Don’t fool around. Nobody wants a spit cookie.”
But I’m a spit cookie and it seems like everyone wants me.

Now when we’re watching TV and there’s an attractive woman on the screen he’ll tease me. “Isn’t she just a fox,” he’ll say about Angelina Jolie or Erin Andrews or someone of the sort. Then he’ll look at me and give me a little wink, Our little secret, his face says, don’t forget it. During the perfume commercials, when the women rub glass bottles against their skin, he watches me, so I play on my phone or flip through a magazine and absolutely do not look. He’ll do it in front of the kids too, winking, putting his cold hands up my shirt while I’m cooking or down the back of my jeans, stretching the fabric, grabbing my butt cheeks. If I’m wet, he’ll ask me if I was thinking about Isa.

When we run errands together or late at night he says different women’s names—his coworkers, our friends, our kids’ friends—and makes me say whether or not I’d want them. He agrees or disagrees, whistles about the sexy ones like I’m one of the guys. He pulls up porn of two women together and watches me watch it. He found some erotic literature site and while he’s at work, he’ll send me ones about two women together. When we’re in bed, he asks me to walk him through step by step what she and I have done together, and he’s hard but I can tell he’s angry. He’ll say, Isa can’t do this, as he thrusts into me. As if what he’s doing is a marvel.

Everything’s got to be his. His idea, his game, his timing. Can’t even let me have this, my desire, that’s his, not even my leaving, that’s got to be his too. Sometimes I think he’ll cut me open and try to climb inside of me.

I tell all of this to Isa. She looks scared for the first time, asks me if I’m afraid. I say no but it’s yes yes yes.

Isa hasn't responded in a few days. I feel her quietly taking leave of me. In the beginning I tried to keep Dev's name out of my mouth as much as possible when we were together but now it drips from me like I've just come out from a swim and I struggle to talk about anything else and I'm just begging, screaming inside for her to bring it up so I can talk about him. I can tell that it makes her uncomfortable but I can't stop because who else will I tell? She's worried about me, two little creases between her eyebrows, and maybe that's all I want is for someone to just be worried about me for a change, so I talk and talk and make her scared and make me scared too, like I'm standing on a cliffside with half a mind to jump off. I'm tempting her to say, Leave him. *Say it. If Dev won't say it, you say it. Leave.* But she doesn't. She won't. And even if she did, all I'd have to say back is, I tried.

I drove past her house and her Jetta was in the driveway. The kids were with me but they didn't even notice the detour. *Mom knows where she's going*, their little brains say. *She's not going to take you somewhere you don't need to go.* It's a terrifying thought. I could take them anywhere, do anything, they'd trust me.

What am I going to do if she stops speaking to me?

—

I went to Sonic today all by myself and treated myself to a cheeseburger and Diet Cherry Limeade. From where my car was parked, I had a perfect view through the window into the kitchen, and I watched one of the cooks shovel chicken salad onto limp-looking bread. She flicked it so hard onto the center of the bread that the whole thing deflated like an old couch. She dug her hand into a plastic bucket of shredded lettuce and flicked a fistful in the direction of the sandwich.

She put the sandwich in the panini press and the salad oozed out of the sides. When it came out, she swiped at the edges with a finger and carried it to her mouth. More oozed out when she cut it in half, and I thought, *by the time it reaches the right car it'll just be bread.* Wet sad bread. And I couldn't think of a better way to describe myself at that very moment.

Don't be wet sad bread, waiter lady, I tell her through my windshield. *Stay angry. Be angry bread. Hot, toasty bread on fire. Be a whole goddamn loaf*, I said.

In the next lane, a girl and her two punk-looking boyfriends popped out of an idling sedan and went to sit to the middle of the outdoor seating area, to those picnic tables coated in that pudgy Alex used to pick at as a kid. I couldn't tell which of the boys she was dating, because she's holding hands with one and rubbing her fingers through the other's hair, then she's sitting on one's lap while making out with the other. Neither of them seemed to mind, though, just kept pawing at her breasts, her stomach, popping out from above her jeans. Her bellybutton ring was big and blue and dangly, and she knew she was commanding the attention of every car parked at the place.

She stood up and walked to the bathroom, and before I knew it, I was in there with her. She was standing at the mirror. I thought, *I'll be a toasty bread on fire*, and I walked up to her and kissed her on the mouth for a full five seconds. She grinned at me after, her teeth yellow, didn't say anything though, and I walked out like big, hot bread. I'll be fine, I'm sure.

—

Col turned twelve yesterday and I made a yellow birthday cake with chocolate frosting and we all sang and made him skip around the room. I took Isa a slice and we sat in my car across the dance studio and drank Barnes and Noble coffee, her Jetta parked next to mine. Her new hair was long and pulled to a side ponytail, so glossy it was reflective. She didn't kiss me when she got in and our seats felt far, far away.

The Callery pear trees are blooming now all over town, the ones that smell like rotting fish. Ellen complains about them on the soccer field behind her school, says makes all the rooms reek. They line the road by the dance studio. The dogwoods are pretty pink distractions between them, a reminder of spring's sweetness amongst the stench of bass carcass and wet dog and wet, soggy bread depression.

"I think he thinks I did it for him," I said, watching her sip her coffee.

"Did you?"

We both went quiet. An older lady shuffled out of the dance studio, climbed into her car, and pulled out of the lot. She looked disproportionately small inside the big SUV, as if she should be sitting on phone books to see the road.

Isa grabbed my hand. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked that."

I traced the lines on her palm. They were such pretty hands, terra-cotta on one side and warm chestnut on the other, the two sides so much more distinct from each other than my own, just two shades of beige. They were warm from holding the coffee. We both watched her hands.

I looked up at her. "Do you think I did?"

"Of course not."

"No, think about it. Be honest. Do you think he's right? Did I do this for him?"

She looked out the front window at the dance studio. "No. I don't think you were thinking of anyone other than yourself. I think you were thinking about you and only you and you feel bad about that but also not."

I tried to get eye contact. "I love you."

She shook her head. Kept shaking, started speaking in monotone like she was reading a list. "No. You don't love me. And that's okay. You love what the air feels like around me. I think you think you're supposed to love me for all of this to make sense. You need to stop trying to love people because you feel like you're supposed to."

Quiet again. She was taking shaky breaths, working her way up to it. I knew it was coming and hoped that if I just stayed still, it wouldn't. But it did.

"I'm out," she said.

I nodded. "That's fair."

"I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be."

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I'm always okay."

"Would he hurt you?"

"Never." I half believe it.

"Are you going to leave him?"

"Probably not."

She nodded. "That's fine, too."

"Am I letting you down?"

She grabbed both of my hands. "No. Not at all. I feel like I'm letting you down."

"Am I letting her down?"

"Who"

“Ellen.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t mother right but I can’t leave right either. She’s going to be screwed up nine ways out of ten.”

She squeezed my hands. “Nobody can mother right. That’s because men decided what it means to mother right.”

We sat there for a bit. I was crying and she held and held and held my hands and finally, kissed them.

I shook my head. “I thought that because I wasn’t good that I should go, but maybe because I’m not good I have to stay.”

“You’re not a bad person, Lacey.”

“I’m a coward.”

“You’re not a coward. You’re a mom. So stay. Be a mom. Just a little longer. Then when they’re gone off to school, reevaluate. Move out.”

“And go where?”

“Does it matter?”

“Would you visit me?” I smiled at her.

She smiled back. “If you go somewhere interesting.”

She handed me back the Tupperware, licked the fork clean and placed it on top. Her hand hovered over mine.

“You know who you are. Okay?”

“I have no idea who I am.”

“Well...” she paused. “I do, and I like you. So that counts for something.”

She popped out of the car quickly, into her Jetta and reversed.

She idled a bit before she pulled on the main road. But she finally did. As she drove away, she rolled down the window, leaned out and whistled with two fingers in her mouth. I couldn’t do it back, couldn’t breathe, just waved a hand and stared ahead and watched the women dancing.

—

I realized today he never once asked if I love her. Like it didn't even matter.

I've been moping. I'm a fantastic moper. I haven't shopped, haven't done laundry. The kids have peanut butter toast for breakfast until we run out of bread and then it's just plain pancakes from the just-add-water mix.

This morning, after breakfast was cleaned up, I crawled into bed and pulled the covers up over my head. It was 9am, maybe, and it's Saturday so the kids were home. I heard Dev come into the room and go into the closet, shuffled around a bit, slam the drawers closed. Angry. Good. He came back to the room and I heard him breathing in my direction. I tried to stay as still as I could.

"You have no right to throw yourself a pity party," I heard, muffled through the sheets. "You need to get it together. I don't know what you're so upset about. Nothing has changed for you."

He went into the bathroom and I heard him flick on the toilet fan and sit down on the seat. Soon the smell was bad enough so I took my pity party outside, to the backyard where Col was kicking balls into his little net. I laid down straight on the grass in the sunshine and watched the whirligig spin by the shed.

"Everything has changed for me," I said to the grass.

Col came over and laid down beside me. He let me put my arm beneath his head and I took a deep breath and tried to decide exactly what he smelled like. Like lemons and gasoline and—still, somehow—infant. We laid there for a while and both of us fell asleep. I got a spider bite and just outlined it with this pen. I hope it grows so I have an excuse to go visit a doctor. To sit in an empty waiting room away from this place and maybe have to lose an arm. Maybe that would be enough change for him.

It's Easter. We're supposed to be reborn today but when I woke up, I was the same.

I went to Hillsong with Ellen. It was more a rock concert than a church ceremony and I was horribly overdressed and overage in a sea of ripped jeans and pre-pubescence. Ellie was next to me, her hands raised to the music. There was a projector flashing lyrics onto a screen onstage and she tried to sing along but couldn't get the rhythm right, just kept stumbling through it. On her other side, her friend Rehema was singing loudly. She knew every word, kept squeezing Ellie and smiling at her. I was smiling at her too, trying, trying, willing, trying, smiling, as a mother should. I watched Rehema out of the corner of my eye, on her way to becoming a pretty, tall black girl.

Mother would've snorted into her glass at the picture of it, me and Ellie side by side at an Easter service. She believed all women had Eve in them, that try and try as we might we were just destined to screw it all up for everyone. When I was little and did something bad, Mother would turn to her friends or to my father or the store clerk and say, It's all thanks to that Eve. For years I thought I had a twin that maybe was dead. I even conjured up an invisible friend and named her Eve. Eve and I got into all sorts of trouble.

She would not be surprised by any of this, my mother. Me and Isa and Dev. She knew I was poised to make a mess of my life. She was the only person I couldn't convince of my goodness. She saw the slit between my legs when I came out and that was it. Heathen. So I try and will and try and do my best to keep the heathen in Ellie buried, keep it happy, feed it scripture, keep her good. Prove Mother wrong in her grave. A good daughter suggests a good mother.

The priest (or father, or brother, I don't know what they call them in those kinds of places but he was handsome in all the ordinary, boyish ways—sandy, long blonde hair under a baseball cap, khaki shorts, a camp t-shirt) was talking about souls, about Jesus' soul and coming here to save all of our souls, in that light, whimsical way priests talk about doom and destruction like it's a Sunday picnic. The soul and the flesh. Rebirth. Resurrection.

"I think about my soul like a credit card," Father Handsome says. "And I have to keep it in the front pocket of my shirt, right here—" he patted over his heart, "—to keep it safe so the devil can't pickpocket it and use it to buy a television. See, God knows how important our soul is and he wants to protect it for us. God's like the button on our pocket. If we use him, our soul will stay safe inside our pocket. He's on our hearts and keeps our soul safe."

It's a stretch, but people were nodding, holding their hands over their hearts. Father Handsome asked us each to envision our souls like a credit card. *But mine's not a credit card*, I said to him silently. She's a person. And then she's there in my mind in perfect vision.

My soul has the same complexion and hair as me, but she's thinner, more graceful, kind, comely. She is lissome, whereas I am cacophonous (what a word!), big, too loud, fat, lethargic, impulsive, conflicted. She looks a bit like Helen Hunt and hasn't aged in years. I'm a little bit jealous of her, in all honesty.

In my mind, Helen and I always chat at a kitchen table. It's where I go to have conversations with myself. It's not my kitchen table but some catalog one, in a pretty room with tan wood and periwinkle cupboards, and wide white windows. I've never had a kitchen like that. Sometimes when I'm lonely I close my eyes and go to that kitchen table and she's there, two mugs of coffee warm on the table and we laugh and gossip and she listens and I try to listen to her but I'm not a very good listener. We're like two leads in a sitcom and that kitchen table is our set, the only set, like a half-finished house cut open on one side. The problem for Helen is that, in there, we're two people with two minds and two bodies, but out here we're one, like Siamese twins. And I'm in the driver's seat. And God, if I haven't put that woman through hell. All she wants is peace and look what I've done to her.

I take everything to Helen. I have cried across the table from her, my head in my hands and her stroking my arms. She has slammed doors in my face, leaving me out in the rain when I deserved it. She has looked onto me with pity, disdain, awe, pride, disgust. But never hatred. Helen always understands. Always. We compromise a lot (mostly her). Sometimes I'm real bad and she shakes her head at me and sometimes she screams and cries and asks me why I am the way that I am and I feel horrible, I feel it in my body like she's yanking on my spine. *Why can I not just give her peace?* And I don't have an answer.

She knows me better than anyone, Helen does, surely better than Dev or my parents or sister. And when I die, they'll all be gone for various reasons but she'll be there with me and we'll lay side by side like lovers, holding hands, and all these memories and right decisions and wrong ones will be like blood between us. And we'll go like that. That's how I imagine it, dying. I've never told anyone this.

Father Handsome started talking about Knowing then. Capital K. Said we know what's good for us and what's not. *But sometimes it's so hard to know*, I thought. That first night after

Isa kissed me, I closed my eyes in bed next to Dev and went to that little kitchen table wretchedly guilty, like a dog waiting to be reprimanded because it knows it wet the carpet. I knew it was bad. I knew Helen was going to be pissed off. But I was wrong. She just reached across and touched my forearm and smiled and said, “Finally.” Quietly, just like that.

She smiled at me, wide like a flower, her face full of gratitude. And that’s what it felt like. Finally. Like finally I had done something for her, that everything made sense and was worth it. Season finale. And then suddenly Isa’s soul was there, walking in behind Helen, and sat down. And then Isa wandered up beside me, very confused about what the hell she was doing in this kitchen and who were these people, and the four of us sat at that table and the two of them, Isa’s soul and mine, nervous and giddy across the table like they were waiting for our permission to be wed.

I had shrugged at Isa and she had shrugged at me. And when we did, our souls whooped and hollered and my soul looped an arm around her soul’s waist and she put her arm around my soul’s shoulder and then they went off together. It was as simple as that and I had no choice in the matter and neither did Isa. It was the first and only time Helen had done that, taken that liberty, and I should have felt angry but there was Isa, the two of us alone at that table together, and I was happy with the choice Helen made. Isa smelled good and was beautiful and had wide, brown eyes. Then Isa pulled Helen’s cup of coffee across the table and pulled her feet up beneath her on the chair and sipped and suddenly I’m back in that car by the dance studio and she’s sipping coffee and saying goodbye.

I came to. Father Handsome was singing now and my hands were raised with everyone else’s. I was crying a little. Ellen looked over at me proudly, misunderstanding.

Handsome told me Jesus died for my sins. I knew he was talking about Isa but nothing about Isa felt sinful. It felt like doing good for me. Like going for long, cold run.

He gave his last spiel and we shuffled out of the auditorium, our eyes sore like we’d been in a film. The whole place was buzzing, teenagers crying and laughing and talking about God’s love. I thought to myself, half of you will be giving blowjobs later, or smoking joints, or getting drunk in the back of cars. The rest of you will cheat on a test this week. I wondered which one Ellie was.

They handed out pocket bibles on the way out. I took one from an attractive brunette girl and smiled at her. She was so young, younger even than Isa, and seemed so insistent that I take

the book so I took it. But then I was walking away holding this book I was never going to open so I unlocked the car for Ellen and Rehema and turned around and Helen and I walked back to the girl and handed the book to her. The girl's bangles were loose around her wrist and they jingled a little bit as she hesitantly took the Bible from my hand and clutched it to her chest. She looked deeply concerned.

"I'm not going to love this God just because I'm supposed to," I said. Helen whooped inside my head.

—

I've begun to play a game with myself. I call it inventory. While he's inside of me, I stare at the bedside lamp and list off all the pretty things we have in each room of the house. My bedside lamp matches Dev's bedside lamp. They're on matching bedside tables, bookending the deep mahogany bed, the 1,000-thread sheets Dev brought back from China. Then I think about Isa's bedside lamp, the one that's broken and has salsa stains along the rim, and her bouncy metal frame bed, and her Target bedside table with the legs that screw in, and I remind myself to be grateful that I stayed. Pretty bedside lamp still mine. Pretty kids still mine. Pretty Dev still mine. Pretty life still mine.

When Dev finishes, he rolls off and I shower and lean my head against the cold tile, still counting. Pretty white tile. Shower with a long bench seat. Top-line shampoo, the big bottles because we live here. A bathtub I don't use but I could if I wanted to, with jets along the base like windows of a ship. Pretty bathtub, white ivory. Maybe I can do this. Stay and die someday in that pretty white ivory bathtub.

Tonight I cried in Dev's arms and he held me and pet my head, thinking it came from repentance and gratitude and surrender when really it was, oh God, what have I done, there was my window and now I've closed it, all for the sake of a pretty lamp.

PART 2: SOW

...You were her secret little compatriot, though you probably didn't know to what extent at the time. You were born a girl, which helped, and when you were little she'd come into your room and tell you all of her womanly things. I'm doing this because I want you to remember her like that, as your ally. Or maybe I just don't want you to assume that you'd be like that with your own kid someday. I'm feeling it too, this feeling that maybe she's rubbed off on me, maybe I'm not fit to mother, not after what we did to you, what I allowed her to do.

I was never enough to replace you, though to be honest, I tried like hell. I could touch spaces of her skin that you couldn't but never the corners of her brain where memories of her old life were kept. It filled her head like fluid, her guilt towards you and your brothers, towards me for bringing me into it, even if she tried to ignore it, and finally she was too top heavy and needed more sleep, more food, more drink, more drugs, more me but not me, to empty her head out, and that's just too much for another person to take on no matter how much love you have for that head. And at that point that head was the center of my universe. Still is in some ways.

Look, I know I've been the ghost in your family for over a decade. The extra seat at your dinner table, the weight against which you measured your wrongs. I've imagined you in the thralls of regret over cheating on some test or some boy and telling yourself, "That was bad, but it wasn't Isa bad." I'd remind myself that you didn't know the whole story and that was why.

I lived fine like that for a while but I realize now that your mother has been the ghost in my family too, the extra seat at our table, my husband and mother and father and I's. The palette against which I've measured the color of my days. And it's not fair to the people who love me. We've all got to lay to rest one section of our lives before we can properly start another. It's not just me at my end of the story anymore. And I can't put this to rest until you know. All of it.

I'm done taking the blame for everything that happened to her. I'm done being the boogieman. There is so much you don't know about your mother and me and your father and even your brothers. About yourself, too. Things you probably don't remember you said or did over the years but that your mother carried with her and clung to like religion. I need to cut ties with all of you or it's going to consume me and take all the ones I love with it. I've got to correct

whatever lies your father put in your head about her. About me. I bet he called your mom a cheating whore but didn't tell you he's a lying bastard...

Isa

2018

No, you're not listening.

Lacey was completely alone in that house. One kid was practically still a child, the other was an asshole, and Ellen—well, she was like, sixteen. You can't blame her. She was so absorbed in her own little life she wouldn't have noticed if Lacey had slit her wrists right there in the kitchen. Lacey lived in that house but it's not like anyone cared she did. So when it happened, when Dev brought that woman home and everything went to shit and Lacey was covered in blood and bruises and climbing into her car at 2am naked except for a fucking raincoat... of course she left. Of course she went onto autopilot and got the hell out of dodge. She wasn't a mom then. She was a child, running for her life. We'd have all done the same.

And you have to understand that this was before Me Too and all that, keep that in mind. Fuck, it was before Chris Brown beat up Rihanna, which was, like, the first time any of us even thought about this kind of stuff. She couldn't do the things then that she could've now. Who would've listened? She couldn't go to the cops. She'd have been arrested alongside him, and then what? Lacey, trying to be thirty in a near-fifty body... to have taken those years from her? She'd rather leave it all. She'd probably rather die. What else was she supposed to do? Where else was she supposed to go?

Remember when you were about to leave for Colorado the first time and I saw that pelican with a broken wing out by the jetty and I was convinced—*convinced*—that your plane was going to go down? And I spent all that week trying to persuade you to cancel? Or when

everything in the garden died except for the fennel and I thought the universe was telling me to reach back out to Nikki because she was allergic and we'd had that fight the year before?

I do that shit, all the time. I know that about myself. Growing up, I could see three random pieces of trash on a park bench and see God's word in it. So when Lacey showed up that night, and it was me answering the door, when I was supposed to be out and I came home early, I saw meaning in it. Like, of course I had to be there, it was always going to be me, like all of this chaos and pain was inevitable and—for reasons yet to be revealed—important on some colossal level. I believed then, standing in that doorway, it would be a moment I'd look back on and say: *aaand, there*, that's when I got grown, that was the severing of one life and the next. But I can look at it now and identify it as chance. We just got dealt bad cards. Hers were worse, sure, but we both just got stuck there. It was a coincidence, not some rite of passage in the course of some omnipotent plan. It's not a rite of passage if you don't ever pass through it. If it just puts your life on hold. That's the only way I know how to explain it: I feel like I'm on pause.

I used to fantasize about what would've happened if I wasn't there. Or if I'd been sleeping when she came. If she'd come and knocked and no one answered or one of the guys had answered and turned her away or if she'd tuck tail and ran. I hated myself for it, the way I could so easily wish her back to that house, wish that whole portion of my life away. But I couldn't help it. I'd lay next to her in bed with her night sweats and snoring and play out different lives in my head: would I have been happier, less screwed up, would I finish my degree, would I have left North Carolina, would I have a house and a dog and happy family, would I hate myself so goddamn much. Maybe it would've been easier for you at the beginning, too. Imagine what I'd be like if all those years hadn't happened, if I'd been just Isa when you met me and not Isa-who-lost-Lacey. I'd have been a better wife.

I'm doing this to pass through it. The girl has to know what happened, babe. Has to. I don't see how life can continue if she doesn't. I'm on pause until she does. She has to know about him. About all of this. Lacey handicapped herself with her trauma, I handicapped myself with mine. I've got to get it out.

I know I was coming down from something that night but don't remember what. Ecstasy probably. Back then we were doing everything. I still can't believe we survived those years. So I was flaring when she knocked. It was more like a slap, like she'd tried to high five the door. But I heard it and shuffled into the foyer and I remember thinking about how my *veins* were cold, like someone was flushing cold water through them. And then there she was, wearing a raincoat and flip flops, shaking at the door like a wet kitten. Or more like, vibrating. And it was humid that night, those thick kinds of early summer nights when the sky feels heavy, like a tarp covered in water, and you know that feeling of being hot in a raincoat. It made me claustrophobic just looking at her.

Her car was in the driveway, headlights on, passenger door wide open and beeping. It must have been 2 in the morning and the streetlights were buzzing and to me the buzzing was loud, the buzzing and cicadas and the car door beeping and everything felt purified and high up and cold.

She groaned like she was late for a coffee date, and walked right past me through the door, kicking off her flip flops. "So sorry, darling," she said, "I couldn't remember where the spare was."

I asked her what fuck was going on. She told me she missed me. She walked through the hall and paused in the living room and was just smiling and smiling. The raincoat barely covered her ass and it didn't look like she was wearing anything underneath. I considered that I was tripping but Ecstasy's not like that. This was happening.

"What the fuck is going on," I repeated, and she responded, "I'm out. I got out."

I asked, "Out of where?" And then I noticed there was blood on her neck.

I forgot to mention but that was the day of the Virginia Tech shooting, do you remember that? The first really bad one. We'd been watching the footage on the TV all afternoon. So when I saw the blood, my first instinct was, she's been shot. You know how after a mass shooting you just think everyone is getting shot. We weren't even in Virginia.

But she just snapped her fingers once and moved away from me. "Just like that," she said, "Dev, the kids, all of it."

Her voice was a little high and she wouldn't make eye contact with me. She was making me dizzy. I grabbed her by the shoulders and she wiggled around inside my grip, clearly uncomfortable. I couldn't get her to look straight at me. I begged her to tell me what happened

but it was like she wasn't there. She walked past me to the couch, and by the time I got there, her smile was completely gone, her face empty. She still wouldn't look at me.

I touched her chin and she waved my hand away lazily, kept mumbling, "No."

"Okay then," I said, "talk to me."

But she was so tired. She poured into me, her forehead against my neck. She smelled rancid.

"Okay, Lacey," I said, "I know you're tired but you're freaking me out a little, okay? A lot. Do you need a hospital?" I held her back to arm's length and looked at the blood on her neck. It was dry. Her pupils looked fine but the whites of her eyes were streaked with red. They drooped close. She shook her head.

I half-carried her to my room, sat her down on the bed and looked at the blood again, but it didn't seem like she was still bleeding. I made sure she was upright and ran to the front of the house and turned off her headlights, slipped the key out of the ignition, slammed the door behind me. But when I got back, she'd slunk down to the floor.

That's when I panicked. I jiggled her awake and she grumbled. I started begging her to tell me what was wrong, asking her about the blood, but she kept passing back out. I sat her against the bedpost and pulled a pair of sweatpants from the cupboard and slipped them on her. I noticed she wasn't wearing any underwear and there was blood, dots speckled on the inside of her thigh, and these God-awful thick finger mark bruises setting in on her left leg. I pulled them onto her hips and she held on to me

"Can we turn on the pretty lights?" she asked, balancing on one ass cheek as I slid the sweatpants onto the other. I had these old colored lights along my ceiling that shifted colors.

"What? Lace, no," I told her. "I'm getting you into bed."

I started unzipping her raincoat and she yelped. I held her wrist and she twisted out of them weakly. I tried to reassure her.

"Lace, it's me. I need you to open your eyes, okay?"

I was full on crying by now, scared absolutely shitless. I asked her who the marks from but she wasn't registering my words anymore. I touched my fingers to her legs and she winced. I tried the raincoat again. She grabbed my wrist and yanked my hand from the zipper, then collapsed at the foot of the bed and started throwing up. Fuck, it was everywhere. I grabbed one of my t-shirts within arm's reach and held it under her chin, trying to catch the bulk of the vomit.

“Oh, Lace. Can you tell me what happened?” I asked.

Between hurls she raised a finger, like making a point. Whether it was pointed at me or at God, I didn’t know.

She was sobbing and I was sobbing. Her bile became straight liquid after a while. After a few final dry heaves, she spit into my hands and leaned back against the base of the bed. I scooped the t-shirt closed, carried it into the bathroom and tossed it in the shower.

I knelt in front of her and tried to sweep the hair from her forehead, but she jerked away from me.

“My skin hurts,” she said. “Please. Don’t touch me.”

We sat for a moment. The rims of her lashes were an angry red and I realized her jaw was swollen and mustard yellow. She was swaying again.

I told her we needed to get the jacket off. It was covered in vomit and she was sweating profusely in it. “Do you hear me? Okay? It’s Isa,” I said.

She responded, “Ibiza!”, giggling feebly.

But she opened her eyes wide then, seemed to recognize me and quieted. She held onto my shoulders limply while I unzipped the raincoat. On top she was naked, her nipples swollen with dark purple hickies. There were tiny bruises like freckles down her side, and blood behind her ears, stuck in the hair at the nape of her neck. I pulled a long sleeve shirt over her head and she grimaced.

I helped pull her up and into bed. Once she was settled I pushed my fingers into her neck to check her pulse. She hissed and rolled over. Then I tried the other side and she didn’t fight it. Her pulse was slow but thick like paint, her skin slick with sweat but her body shivering. I went to the hall closet and got two towels, tucked one under her head and another along the bed in front of her body. I shoved a pillow behind her back but she was so still. *So still.*

Honestly, I don’t think I’ve ever felt that level of just... dread. Sitting there, kneeling by the bed, watching her sleep. I scrolled through my phone, checked local news in case something came up. Nothing. Typed her name into Google, stupidly. Nothing. No calls on my phone. I thought maybe he was dead, maybe she’d killed him. A message from my mom came through, “Sleep well, sweets.” A picture from my best friend, drunk at Cosmic Cantina.

—

I hate talking about it. But you've gotta know, so.

When Lacey woke up the next morning, I got her to take a shower, made the strongest Bloody Marys I could with Texas Pete and a can of crushed tomatoes, and she told me what happened, clumsily, quietly, while we sipped. It took ages to get through. She'd stop every once in a while, trail off, go quiet, throw up, cry. We both cried a lot. You couldn't help it, looking at her. She looked like I'd literally stuck a vacuum to her face and sucked everything out. She was feeling everything, all at once. You wanted to feel some of it with her, maybe make her have to feel a little less. The throw up was just red tomato juice red, but she kept sipping. My roommates kept coming into the kitchen to grab stuff, but they'd see her and hurry out. She didn't want to be in the room. Didn't want to be on a bed. Didn't want to be touched.

You know some of this already. Col was asleep, Ellie was at a girlfriend's house for a party or something. Dev came home fucked up and had a woman with him, around her thirties, Lacey thought. I remember Lacey said a few times, "And she walked straight up to our bar and poured herself a glass of my wine", like it was a worse offense than arriving home *with her husband*. The woman was high on something or drunk off her tits. Lacey couldn't tell if she was a hooker or not but she kept insisting to me, "What kind of woman pours her own drink in someone else's home?"

Lacey and Dev start fighting, obviously, but you know how hard it is to fight someone who's piss drunk when you're not. They don't follow logic. He just erupted, was all up in her face, kept saying, "If you don't do this, I'm leaving." *He* was leaving, she said to me. Leaving her there with the kids and the house and she just panicked, seeing herself trapped in it all. She's the one having the affair so she gets the leave. That's the rule. Not him. He doesn't get to leave. He doesn't get to change the rules. The one who does the affair does the leaving, that's how she saw it.

So Lacey toughs it out and they all go into the master bedroom and Lacey does her best to play along, kissing the woman—she kept calling her Carmen but didn't actually remember—but Lacey's tearing up. Dev eggs the woman on—Carmen—telling her, you know, "Lacey likes it that way", "She likes to feel kinda forced into it", and all that shit, and Carmen laps it up, high and drunk and horny and feeling scandalous. Dev puts them on the bed together and Lacey undresses the woman. She said the woman couldn't focus at all, her eyes were glossy and all

over the place, and the woman started moaning before Lacey had even touched her. Acting like a goddamn porn star, she said.

Anyways, Dev makes them blow him together. The woman's spitting all over the place and Lacey is crying. He keeps fucking Lacey's face, then finally pushes her off and starts doing the woman from behind.

Lacey's crying by then, fully. Dev keeps saying, "Is this what you wanted?" And then he tells Carmen to eat her out and while she does, he starts fucking Lacey's face again, too hard, saying shit like, "Is this what Isa does?" And that's when the woman caught on, lifted her head from Lacey, wiping her mouth, starts saying, "I don't know, I don't know".

Then Dev shoves the woman out of the way, gets on top of Lacey, holding her face still while he screws her, starts spitting on her, slapping her around a bit. Keeps asking, "is this what Isa does to you?" The woman sobers up real quick then, starts to realize what's happening, pulling at Dev's arm, asking him to stop. And when he doesn't, she starts crying too, pulling at his back with both arms, screaming, beating fists down on his back, pulling on his legs. He turns around and hits her in the face.

Then he's crying. Everyone's crying. He turns on Carmen and that's when the worst starts. He hits her, all over. Stomach, face, chest, crotch. He keeps saying to Lacey, "This is what you wanted, you did this, this is on you, this is what you did."

He makes Lacey get off the bed and watch. So she's just standing there... Sorry, damn, I just... Okay. Anyways, she's standing there, next to the bed, while Dev just obliterates this poor woman. Beats her head against the headboard, strangles her. That blood that was on Lacey, it wasn't hers, it was Carmen's. Dev didn't hit Lacey, not like that, because Lacey's his wife and he's not a wife beater, you know. Lacey doesn't scream, doesn't say anything at all, just watches Dev beat this woman.

He only stops when Carmen starts bleeding properly from the mouth. Gets off her and she starts crawling away from him towards Lacey. Lacey used to have nightmares about that all the time, once she came to me, just this woman crawling towards her on the bed all bloodied and trying to get her. But that night the woman just collapses and starts vomiting blood on the sheets. And in her mind, all Lacey could think of in that moment was how to fix the sheets, so she went to get a towel and the woman throws up into it, but the throwing up doesn't stop and Dev turns to Lacey and says, point blank, "You need to take care of this". Like she'd done it. Lacey shook her

head but Dev got off the bed and came to her and hugged her and pet her head and tucked her hair behind her ears.

She told me: “He touched my face and said, Now we’re going to take care of this, okay?” and I nodded. Just nodded.”

So Lacey goes to the bathroom to get more towels but by the time she comes out, the girl is dead. One of the pillows is bloody and smeared with mascara, so that’s how she thinks he did it. Lacey just totally shuts off at this point, doesn’t yell or scream or freak out, just goes straight automaton. Anyone would’ve. Dev pours out the dirty laundry hamper and puts the girl in it and carries it out into the yard. Lacey strips the bed and puts the sheets in the washer with a capful of bleach. Ellie’s soccer stuff is in the dryer so she takes it out, folds it, matches the socks. She takes it to the stairs and puts the pile down, walks over to the mudroom bench, zips on a raincoat and Ellen’s flip flops and drives away.

—

I could’ve said something, Sam. Right there at the table sipping those Bloody Marys. She just couldn’t understand it, why he came home so plastered and angry that night, but I did. I wanted to say, *me, me, me*. It was me. But I didn’t.

I didn’t tell her he’d come to my actual house and hit on me. I still don’t know how he found me but it’s not like we were careful, not like anyone was watching what Lacey did. Lord, all the things I said to him. He said it was Lacey’s idea but I knew she wouldn’t do that. He didn’t believe me when I said we were done. Kept saying, “But come on, it’ll be fun,” like he was trying to get me to ride a rollercoaster. I said no thanks. Not quite as kindly as that. I think I said “fuck you” a couple of times. I definitely said some bad stuff, threw some things in there that she’d told me about him. Bad things. I’d fueled that fire. I’d pissed him off.

So yeah, maybe I should’ve told her then. Maybe she wouldn’t have put so much of it on herself. But I was scared and pissed off. Telling her it was me felt like making an excuse for him and I didn’t want to make excuses for a man acting like that, take any of the blame. He didn’t deserve that. That should all be on him. Her thinking it was unprompted, maybe it was for the best.

And maybe I was selfish. Maybe I was scared that there'd be some sort of reconciliation, like in high school when I tried to get Amanda to forgive Megan after Megan slept with Danny, and they ended up reconnecting by turning on me. I panicked because I wanted to keep her, maybe. And I couldn't stop thinking about Carmen. What would've happened if I'd said yes to him that day, before he went off and picked her up? Would she still be alive? Would I be dead? Would all of this still have happened?

Yes. I firmly believe that it was going to happen with or without me. It wasn't my fault and what I did or didn't do wouldn't have made a difference. What I said or didn't say. Dev was going to hurt someone no matter what. Lacey wanted out of that family before me. Before she even started the family, really. Someone else would still be dead. I believe that. Someone else was going to die, no matter what I did. Maybe it would have been Lacey. So good riddance it was Carmen. I know that's horrible.

So I couldn't tell her, not then. And once I didn't tell her, I could never tell her. But I knew we needed out. Needed to go, now. Because he knew where she'd be.

—

I was the one who recommended we go to Kill Devil.

By noon the next day the yellow of her jaw was developing into a fierce bruise and I added whiskey to our coffees. We were still across each other in the little kitchen nook, eating scrambled eggs on tortillas like we'd had a sleepover.

"To your parents place?" she asked. Her wet hair was tucked behind her ears, still wearing those gold studs she'd had in yesterday. I kept thinking, *what those earrings must have seen*. She looked young.

I explained that it was pretty much our only choice. Unless we wanted to blow money on a hotel—and she had no card, left everything at home, and I was doing the starving student bit—it was all we had. I said I'd tell them she was a friend and she snorted.

She wanted to stay here. She didn't understand why we had to go. I told her we just need to get out of town, just for a little while, while we figured this all out. How to get him charged and keep her out of it.

“There is no keeping me out of it, Isa. This *is* it,” she said, waving her arms around my kitchen. “This is the next step in the program. I leave and don’t go back.”

“Of course you’re going back, Lace.” I wasn’t listening to what she was saying. She didn’t want to go back. I told her we’d sort it out.

“Your life is there,” I said.

She laughed again, but looked hurt. “My life,” she said. “You want me to go back to that?”

I shook my head and wrapped my hands around hers, on her mug. No, I reassured her. Not back to that. “You know that’s not what I mean,” I told her. “But I know you want to go back to the kids. To your house.”

She looked me dead in the eye. “You have no idea what I want,” she said. “No idea.”

—

We took my car. I talked Matt into letting us park Lacey’s in his garage spot, said it would only be a few days.

Lacey was quiet for the drive and kept pretending to nod off, but I could see her feet fidgeting when her eyes were closed. She was undecided about the air conditioner, too: on, of, low, high, warmer, feet, head, ice cold, off. I forced myself to drive slow, right at the speed limit. We were both waiting for blue lights in the mirror, though if we’d been rational, Dev never would get the police involved. From the sounds of it, the marks he’d made on the woman were far beyond what he could pin on Lacey, and there were quite a few on Lacey we could pin on him. We’d have won that fight, but we were both too scared to fight it then. But maybe it wasn’t blue lights were waiting for, maybe it was his—like he’d try to find her first. Lacey didn’t know about the pocketknife in the console but I knew I’d use it if the time came, bury it in his chest, good riddance.

Or maybe he wouldn’t come after us at all, maybe he’d just let her go, good riddance.

But it was enough of a possibility that it danced in my head: yes, no, maybe, definitely, not a chance, echoing the air conditioner.

We pulled in at half past 3 and Ma answered the door, wrapping me into a hug. Dad had clearly talked to her and made it clear that they weren’t to ask too many questions, per my

request in my text this morning. I was helping a friend get out of a situation, that was all. I'd pulled the friend card a few times in the past only to get caught making out on the front porch or holding hands in the backseat; I can't imagine that excuse held up much anymore with my Dad. But Lacey was older. I thought maybe we'd swing it. And it wasn't untrue. I might have been the only friend she fucking had.

After the relative silence of the car, Lacey came alive when she stepped through that front door. She was in a new top of mine, one my parents hadn't seen, and an old camp zip-up. We'd covered up most of the bruises with my roommate's stage makeup. It was still too dark on her so we'd had to do her whole face and neck, but it had smeared a bit on her sleeve and neckline in the car and looked like a sad fake tan. Her grin was a bit lopsided, and her left eye squinted a bit in pain when she smiled too broadly.

She was overly kind with Ma and Dad, hugging, so lovely to meet you, what a beautiful home. No meekness, no thank you for letting me stay. Like she was merely over for dinner. Or like I was bringing her home to meet them, which hurt worse to think about.

She would stay in the front bedroom, not much I could do about that, though I was worried about her being closest to the door, closest to anyone coming in. Closest to leaving, if she wanted. Unlike my house in Chapel Hill which beeped when you opened the door, theirs was quiet. She could come and go as she pleased, and that didn't sit right with me, not with the state she was in.

My room was upstairs, still chock-full of my things and old sports trophies and photos from prom, football games, sandcastles, skydiving, my high school boyfriend. My mom had updated a few over the years but hadn't bothered to remove the glass, just printed out Facebook photos on printer paper and taped them with little scotch tape loops over the front of the frames, the moisture from the coastal air curving the edges so that my college graduation photo gave way to an old volleyball tournament in Morrisville.

Being back in that room, I felt juvenile, embarrassed. Not just for my teenage self but for the me right then, so much younger than the woman in the front bedroom, who'd seen so much more of the world than I had and didn't like what she saw. Made it kind of hard to be optimistic about what was coming.

—

We stayed for two weeks there, eating pancakes with my parents like the world hadn't just changed irrevocably. I asked for medical leave from school, had my cousin fake me a note.

We looked in the news for the girl but she wasn't there. I don't know how no one was looking for her. Probably she was some C-list hooker from Roxboro or something. She had these tattoos all the way here, weaving like a vine, Lacey said. After a few weeks, we stopped looking in the news. It'd take a few years though until we stopped jumping at every Toyota Sequoia we saw, every delivery man that knocked on the door too loudly.

We forgot to bring my roommate's makeup with us, so I drove to the pharmacy down the street and bought one that I thought would suit her, but it was too pale, almost porcelain, and in the sun, you could see the yellow and purple tie-dye across her chin, neck and eyebrow.

Lacey eased up after about a week and started eating properly again. But sometimes I'd come into the room and she'd be standing in the bathroom crying into her palm. Or sitting on the bed just staring off. She'd go off for walks on the beach really early in the morning and I'd wonder if she'd waded out into the water and convinced a shark to eat her.

Most nights I snuck into the guest bedroom and held her, soothed her. But she was a different person every night. One night so tired she couldn't undress herself, one night so furious that I took her to the beach to scream at the waves, one night so distant she didn't even see me, wouldn't response to my touches, the next night so deeply wretched about it all that I prayed for anything else then: exhaustion, fury, distance. Anything but that grief.

But there were nights there, when she'd come out of it. When she'd desperately need me, when that desperation was so visceral I thought she would hurt me, when she'd beg me to touch her and I would and she'd moan like an animal into the pillow and rub herself against me until we were sore. I knew our sex was indiscreet but I didn't really care, so unlike me, so absorbed in it, so in need of it, too, so fearful for her and of her and of this and so desperate to get her out of it, and me out of it, too.

I spent hours just wondering what was happening in her head. We weren't really doing much or going anywhere so it gave me a lot of time to wonder. *Was she thinking about the kids, was she remembering that night, was she regretting even meeting me, was she thinking about going back, was she thinking about killing herself?* I just wanted to know what she wanted, so

maybe I could try to give it to her. One day I remember thinking that if she asked me to help her kill herself, I might. I'd understand. If after everything... but she didn't. And looking back now, I know I wouldn't have. I hope I wouldn't have. But you know Lacey. Or, you know enough about her, I guess. Maybe she would've convinced me. I was so young, didn't know that killing yourself meant you actually died.

I have no idea if she ever thought about killing herself. I didn't want to put the idea in her head, was afraid she'd see it as a suggestion.

We didn't go to the police.

She was scared, and I didn't blame her. Or she saw it as freedom, a way to finally be rid of him. But also, if she took him to court, the kids would probably have to come live with us and that was just unthinkable. And I think she knew he was writhing in guilt and thought, *rather he fume in silence than they go to court and he find some way out of it*. She knew he was guilty and he knew he was guilty and I think that brought her solace and maybe even pleasure. And I think in some fucked-up way she saw it as repentance, what he did. For what she did.

I didn't push her to report it. Probably I should have. But I was 26, you know? It wasn't my responsibility to tell a grown woman what to do with her life. And the more I played out the reporting scenario in my head, the worse it seemed. Court cases, newspapers, therapists, paperwork. Meeting her kids, maybe the kids of the woman he killed if she'd had them. Losing Lacey, probably. Staring down that hole of what ifs, it did seem easiest. For both of us, and all of this, just to slip away.

She wasn't worried about the boys. Alex was 18 when she left, Col 14, I think. They were boys, she said, they'd be fine. As for Ellen, Lacey said that maybe it was for the best. She'd always say, "If my mother wasn't there at that age, maybe I wouldn't be so damn screwed up."

I should've fought her on that. But at that point in my life, it felt like the truth.

Ma and Dad did well. Better, honestly, than I thought they would, given the circumstances. Lacey talked openly about the kids with them, didn't have her phone on her to show them photos—she'd left it along with her credit card and everything else at her house that night—but would describe them in meticulous detail. Ellen's lanky legs, Col's cowlick, Alex's back acne and ginger skin. Ma eyed me during those conversations, her hand on Dad's thigh, the tendons in her forearm taut. Dad kept his eyes on Lacey, didn't flinch though I knew that squeeze, the way Ma's nails dug in beneath the muscle. But bless his heart, nothing, until about ten days or so in, when I was up early at the kitchen table doing some studying—some good that did me, huh—and Dad came into the room.

“Morning, poot.” His voice was soft and he kissed me, then pulled the jumbo tub of Folgers from the freezer drawer. God, I loved those moments when it was just us. He asked if I wanted any coffee.

I thanked him. I told him I didn't remember how much to add in, that we just had instant at home. Four spoonfuls for Ma, he said. “But she's the Dwayne Johnson of coffee drinkers. For the rest of us, two.”

He flipped the on-button and the machine hissed to life. He nodded towards the balcony and I followed. We sat on the swing in silence for a few minutes.

After a while he spoke. He assumed it has something to do with a husband or an ex-husband. Didn't look at me, just kept watching the sea. You know the way he does that, won't look at you when it's something like that, so you don't have to contort your face into a shape it doesn't want to go. I love that about him. Knows when to look, when to not.

I nodded.

“Dangerous?” he asked.

I told him: for her, yes.

“For you?” he asked. I paused and he grabbed my hand. After a moment, he pulled his hand back and I tucked my feet up beneath me.

“Are you with her?” Still sea watching, more intently now, like he was trying to keep the waves from crashing. I was trying to keep my breath solid, trying to be grown up. I thought about saying no, but I knew he knew. I didn't want him to think I didn't trust him.

“That's not why she left.”

He shook his head. “I don’t need to know,” he said. He just wanted to know if I was okay. That this man wasn’t a danger to me. That Lacey wasn’t a danger to me.

I kicked the swing so we were swaying, and we sat for a few more minutes of silence. I needed to ask the question, but I felt like I’d throw up and my hands were sweating beneath my thighs. I remember counting the planks of the porch, telling myself when I got to ten I’d ask it. Twenty came and went, and then I said thirty. At 28, I asked it.

“Ma know?”

He shrugged. “Every night in bed she talks my ear off about the whole thing,” he said. “She landed on it once but it was gone again so quick. She’s spun so many ideas I doubt she has any semblance of knowing what’s true.”

It was very on brand. For them both. I smiled and he went in to pour the coffee. When he got back, I was standing by the porch railing. I turned to him, leaned back against the post.

“I know we’ve got to sort it out,” I told him. “We won’t stay here, I promise.”

“You can though” he said. “Long as you need.” I didn’t know if he meant both of us. Don’t think he knew either. He came up to me and put his hand on mine, and we sea-watched together.

—

Dad busied himself for the rest of that day, making up errands and yard work. He got Ma to go play tennis and took her out to lunch, leaving the two of us alone in the house. Lacey was insouciant, talking about cooking them dinner, talking about movies, talking about anything, didn’t matter, just not about the big *thing*. But around 3ish I finally got her to sit still for a moment. We were on opposite sides of the couch, touching knees, eating cold cornbread and eggs.

I told her we couldn’t stay there. That it wasn’t fair to my parents. “So it’s either home,” I said, and then quickly added, “*my* home. But I don’t think you want to go there. Maybe to your sister’s?” and she laughed at that.

No response, so I kept going. I said we could find a place somewhere there in Kill Devil, just for a little, while we got this all sorted out. While we decided what happens next.

“I don’t want to go back to them.”

I grabbed our bowls and put them on the floor and pulled her towards me. She inhaled into my neck, then she put her forehead against mine.

“Is,” she said.

“I know,” I told her. I rubbed my finger across her knuckles.

“What if me leaving them—what if this whole thing disappearing—is the easiest thing?”

“Easiest for them or for you?” I asked.

“Does it matter?”

I heard my parents’ golf cart in the driveway. Their feet on the wooden stairs. She gripped my hands tight and whispered intently. She said, “Is, we could do this. They don’t need me. *This* needs me.”

I shook my head over and over. No. No, I told her. “I told you from the beginning,” I reminded her, “don’t you leave them. I’m twenty-six, Lacey. No, I love you. But no. Don’t ask me to do that.”

It’s the first time I’d said I loved her. I wasn’t sure I meant it. The door opened. Quickly, quietly, she whispered, “Please.”

—

So we found a place. A temporary rental, not far from my parents. A little round house in a cul-de-sac across the main road from the beach. Lacey took to decorating it, though I tried to discourage that. And that’s where we stayed for almost a year, until we moved to that two-bedroom condo in the high-rise by the pier.

We went back for her car pretty soon after we left. Sold it, bought an old Honda and used the rest to buy her a phone, one of those Razor phones, and some clothes, but she still wore mine a lot.

A month or so in we broke into Lacey’s email—she couldn’t remember any of the passwords—and there were a few frantic emails from family members, random cousins and friends, wondering where she was. Some spam from United Airlines, new hot deals on bikinis from Delia’s, a bunch of emails from Col’s school, updates from various distant cousins and friends overseas but nothing of substance.

There were three emails from her sister. They'd never had much of a relationship—Lacey was born much later, Jackie was already eleven by the time Lacey arrived—but now that her parents were gone, they both made slightly more of an effort. Not that Jackie ever asked how Lacey was, of course, or really cared at all, just talked about herself. Lacey could spend a whole phone call in the other room from the phone, and Jackie wouldn't notice.

Per usual, Jackie's emails were self-centered and condescending, talking about how she'd heard from the kids and they were wrecked. Things along the lines of "I know that sometimes you don't think things through but" and "I had to go all the way to the East Coast in the middle of our renovations" and "couldn't you be bothered to at least respond once so I know you're still breathing". To which Lacey responded—before I could stop her—with simply, "You were always rude to me. I kissed Jake once when you were at Camp Don Lee and he said I was the better kisser," so that was the last of her sister's emails and certainly did nothing to help Lacey's case.

The kids all sent a few emails early on. God only knows what he told them. What he said she'd done. She typed up a lot of responses but they never left Drafts. The boys stopped emailing after a year or so, Alex didn't even take that long, and there were a few stragglers from Ellen. Not saying much at first, just talking about her day, about some award she won or how the hostas were blooming in the yard. But towards the end they got worse, saying all sort of blamey, horrible things, *how could you, what kind of mom are you*. Those sent Lacey into such a tailspin that I started getting desperate and would log on before her, erasing them, just trying to protect what fragile peace we'd found that day.

No one came after her, Sam. I thought her sister would, I think *she* thought her sister would. If for nothing else than to complain about the long way she had to drive to find her and how inconvenient the whole thing was. But nothing. We programmed in the cell numbers of her kids, Dev, her sister, all the numbers she remembered by heart, into her new phone. But no one had her number, and no one called.

What does that say about the kind of world she was living in, that no one tried to find her? Her fucking sister, Sam.

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We stopped talking about her going back. The conversation of just sort of slipped away. A month passed and then another and we figured Dev wouldn't come looking at all. But then there was this massive, not-talking-about-it thing in the room that never went away. Especially right before we moved into that second place, when we were packing boxes and buying furniture from the Habitat Restore. Because all the sudden it wasn't temporary. All the sudden we were hanging pictures. But even then, not-talking-about-it.

She'd been a homemaker for twenty years, so finding something for her to do wasn't easy. Nothing on her résumé in this millennia besides watering those flowers at Home Depot and some substitute pre-school teaching. Zero computer skills. She could barely figure out how to update apps on her phone. We'd mulled over ideas for a résumé for over a week, sipping ciders and sweating behind our knees. She was always damp with sweat in the summers, her skin moist, the back of her neck, beneath her hair—and that one was particularly brutal, I remember. She hated it, the heat and the sticky, the little pockets of moisture in her crow's feet. She just wanted to be breezy, white-capri California, but she was North Carolina through and through, Nike shorts and Birks.

By the end of the week of brainstorming, her résumé was still so sparse that we added the debate team she'd been on in high school under "Communications Skills" and raising three teenagers under "Administrative Experience". She couldn't figure out the bullet formatting, so I did it for her. Her first résumé was written on a typewriter. I tried not to hear that.

She started helping at the reception of the golf course up in Kitty Hawk. Sea Scape Links. She was still pretty and fit the aesthetic so she didn't need a lot of experience. She drove up without a license every day and got pulled over in town a couple of times, no seatbelt or no lights or calling me on her phone or driving too fast or whatever it was. The cop who usually got her was a friend of my folks—it's a small town—but even he couldn't stretch it after the third time, so she applied for a new one and dressed up pretty for the photo.

She was jittery for a long time, even when we'd be in bed together or having coffee in the morning or all those times when you're supposed to feel the most settled. Like she was waiting for the scales to realign. For someone to notice she was missing from the roster, to send her back. Made us both feel like we were living in a sandcastle, tide rising.

But all in all, we were pretty happy for a while. Deliriously, even, on occasion. It sounds nuts, given the circumstances, but we were. I told myself I knew I'd come back to Kill Devil at some point anyways, Ma and Dad being as they were, so, might as well be now. We got a little cat and Lacey collected sea glass and made pretty candles which we kept lit all night. We hiked the dunes though her knees bugged her a lot. She kicked my ass at gin rummy frequently and was a gracious loser on the off chance that I beat her. We didn't go out much—she just wanted to be *home home home*—but I didn't mind it, didn't have money for it anyways. I massaged her feet and she liked rubbing lotion on my back, and we could chat for hours on long beach walks.

One of her favorite things to do was to go to the town center and watch the guy with the parrot who dressed like Captain Jack Sparrow. We didn't talk to him, just went and sat on a bench across the way and watched him pass the parrot off to tourist kids, feed it raw ramen noodles when the streets were quiet. He loved that fucking bird, they were like a married couple, and it made Lacey laugh like nothing I've ever seen. Once he came over to us and put it on her shoulder and she was so happy that I gave him \$5. From then on, he always came to say hello, and so did the parrot.

When one day he left and never came back to that spot again, we'd gone searching in town for him to no avail. She was in the dumps all day about it, worried about him, trying to figure out where he'd gone, and I hoped to God she wasn't drawing the same comparisons in her head as I was, thinking about her kids, her friends, her dogs, her leaving.

We spent most of that year drunk, I think.

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My parents mostly stayed away. Reckoned it was some sort of phase, something that they didn't understand. You could tell it was hard for Ma not to say anything but Dad graciously kept her in line. I think they thought if they didn't look right at it—if they didn't come over to visit, didn't ask me about it—it wasn't real. That they didn't have to think about what it meant. Didn't

have to acknowledge that their daughter was with a woman. And not just a woman. With a white woman with a family, somewhere, waiting.

We tried dinners at first. Not often, but every once in a while. Ma would make chicken surprise or get ribs from Harris Teeter and we'd sit around and play family. But they were stifled and awkward and soon they just kind of tapered off. I went to go check up on them often after that, but I'd go alone and the visits were short. Lacey started with excuses—a headache, an appointment—but she didn't do much, so she ran out quickly, and stopped trying soon thereafter.

She didn't want to join them for Thanksgiving dinner so I went by myself. She spent the day walking along the beach, visiting the free museum in town that was always open, busying herself. I took her back a Tupperware of pumpkin pie and stuffing and cranberry sauce, but she left it in the fridge for so many days without touching it that I decided to eat it myself. I think she was determined not to celebrate anything at all, to just pretend those days weren't happening at all so that she wouldn't have to think about what she was doing last year this time. Wouldn't have to wonder if she'd ever be back in that kitchen with those kids.

Birthdays, though—those were her shit. She poured three kids and a husband's worth of love and energy into my birthday every year. We had themed days where we had to wear wigs and scavenger hunts and one year she made an entire New Orleans-style dinner, with chargrilled oysters and beignets and jambalaya and French 75s, because I'd said I wanted to go to New Orleans but we couldn't afford it.

That first Christmas, we did a road trip. She wanted something warm and far away, something so different from home that she could forget it was Christmas entirely. So we drove all the way down to the Florida Keys. And even there it wasn't enough so we took a lot of boat rides to get as south as we could. I think, given the choice, she would have just kept going until she touched the very bottom and saw the emperor penguins, just to get away from North Carolina.

She banned Christmas movies that year and kept the radio off. We listened to fantasy books instead, the dusty Arrakis and luscious Narnia so foreign against the cold grey of the world outside. She loved the Narnia books, laughed all the time. The kids were ruder to each other than I remembered. We chatted a lot, but not about anything hard.

Christmas morning, we said almost nothing at all. We didn't do any presents, didn't pop champagne or play carols or drive around town looking at the lights. We spent the day on the

beach, and it was freezing and overcast but Lacey was determined to be in a swimsuit. She went for a swim and I could tell how cold she was, but she came out and dried herself and said it was fantastic. She sipped several Miami Vices. The beach was filled with trash and sharp shells but she just kept saying, “How perfect, how perfect,” like we were the white sands of Bora Bora.

That night we went out for Chinese, “like the Jews do,” Lacey said, and she joked that maybe we should get a menorah. She sang me old Hannukah songs she remembered from school, *dreidel, dreidel*.

For the next week we listened to reggae and watched Will Ferrell movies with soggy calamari and vinegar fries. Lacey went to the beach every day even when it rained, and although she didn’t wear any sunscreen, she didn’t get an ounce of color, because it was cloudy for most of the week. The one sunny afternoon we did have, she made us this big picnic and a pitcher of margaritas and we made a proper day out of it, and I could see her actively trying to find peace, like she’d packed it in the cooler box.

On New Year’s Day, we drove the long way back up the coast and, out of habit, she took the road back towards Raleigh rather than to the Outer Banks. When we realized a half hour later, she pulled onto the shoulder and cried about how she hadn’t even called her children on Christmas, and how could a mother be so cruel?

I bought us milkshakes at Dairy Queen, and she went back to smiling.

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Early spring, she ran into an old Debutante friend at the gas station in Kitty Hawk. Susan the Debutante. Lacey’d have driven away as fast she could but the nozzle was already in the slot, set on auto-fill.

Susan came up to her and touched her forearm. She had the prettiest nails, Susan, Lacey told me later, but her fingers were getting fat, which made Lacey happy and more inclined to speak with her. So they chatted, but Lacey offered up as little as possible. Susan said she didn’t know what to believe, what with Dev going off everywhere talking about her being a slut and sleeping around for years and leaving the family for an African American woman, for heaven’s sake. Surely it was a joke.

If I'd have been Lacey, in that situation, I would have grabbed that woman's wrist and demand she tell me everything, then spend the next three hours crying in her arms in the front of her sedan as I recounted every detail of the abuse my husband inflicted on me, the hell I'd be through.

But Lacey was careful in her own way. She was fantastic at putting on a show, and I imagine she smiled and laughed softly as she shook her head and said something along the lines of, "It's incredible what people will come up with when one simply decides to pay hooky for a while"; or, "It's as if I'm a famous tabloid star!" Which would have made her feel seen, which would have made her feel good. Somebody wanted to know her secrets—that was all Lacey ever wanted.

They set up a coffee date for the next morning. Lacey got dressed to go, real pretty, like the best she'd looked in weeks. She'd gone to the salon and got her nails painted in a red. Marilyn was the name of it, and she walked around that evening singing *Happy birthday, Mr. President*. But the next day, she came back home 25 minutes after she left to go meet Susan. Said she got all the way there to the café, realized she had no idea what to say besides the truth, couldn't say that, got in the car and came home.

It got too sacred for her, that secret. I think that's what happened. She didn't want to share it with some manicured debutante. She just wanted to share it with me. It was what held us together, in a way. I think part of her was scared that if one more person learned it, that would be the end of the last thing we had together. If someone learned about it, she'd actually have to go do something about it, and at this point that just seemed like too much effort.

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We couldn't figure out how everyone found out about me. We doubted Dev would've been offering any unsolicited information, and we knew he'd gotten rid of her phone—I called it the next morning after she arrived and it went straight to voicemail. He'd want to keep those kids as far away from Lacey and me as possible, I reckoned, so probably tried to make it look like she'd planned her leaving. Packed a bag, grabbed the essentials. He probably dumped her address book, phone, driver's, credit cards. She hadn't needed to be careful about our affair,

because no one who have assumed she had anything to hide. She was a good mother, good wife. So my name would've been written all over everything.

I guessed it was probably Ellen. She might have been a teenager but women know women. And I was right, but not in the way I thought. Lacey only admitted it a year or so later but she'd sent Ellen a package in the mail for her birthday, no note or anything, just a jewelry set from Francesca's. She told me she'd just wanted to send her the earrings she knew Ellen had been wanting. They were these dainty feather earrings that matched a feather pendant necklace. Ellen was in a bit of a "hobo" phase, Lacey told me, which I quickly corrected to "boho". All gladiator sandals and sheer kimonos and wearing necklaces in her hair.

She'd bought the jewelry with my money, and my bet is Ellen traced it back to my card somehow, and that's how she knew. This was back in the early days of Facebook, before people wised up about privacy settings.

Lacey was thrilled when we saw a picture of Ellen online wearing that necklace. For a while there, it looked like she wore it every day. And the first time we saw a picture of her without that necklace on, around the same time Ellen stopped emailing, Lacey made me a bracelet out of colored twine, made me swear never to take it off, and drank a full bottle of wine.

It started like that. Slow. Quiet.

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An email came from Dev, exactly 12 months and 3 days after the night she left, asking for a mailing address for divorce papers. The first anniversary of her arrival had come and went. I'd noticed. She hadn't, or just didn't say anything. There were no pleasantries in the email, but no threats, either. It felt like a peace offering, or some sort of bribe.

I think, honestly, we both took a deep breath at that one. I did, at least. North Carolina's a no-fault divorce state, so he didn't *need* to claim abandonment, and to both of our surprises—since Lacey's leaving technically qualified under law as abandonment, having no apparent justification, no consent from the other spouse to separate, and no intent to move back in, and there wasn't much we could do about that first one unless she was willing to come forward with what happened—he didn't. It was a no-fault divorce. If he wanted to, he could've filed for abandonment and gotten custody of the kids, maybe money though she didn't have much. But he

didn't. I'm still shocked he didn't. I don't know why. Guilt, maybe. A way to keep her quiet. Let the whole thing slip away. Don't know.

That's around the time when she got the ORS. *Other room sadness*, that's what we called it. She'd go off for a bit, even though she was sitting right there in the driver's seat, or right there at the kitchen table or on the couch or in bed. Right there but she was gone. Any evening where the ORS showed up would be irreparably lost. She'd be laying on the pillow facing me while I played with her hair and then one second later, she's just not in the room anymore, not really. I tried to keep her with me. *Are you there*, I'd lay in bed for hours wondering. Beg her in my mind, *Stay with me*.

She started scrolling through the kids' social media more often, from my account. She'd tell me when Ellen had a boyfriend, when she picked up riding or chopped her hair. We threw a little party when she graduated high school and Alex from college. She'd sift through the American Eagle website, or Urban Outfitters, adding things to cart but never buying them, asking me, *do you think Col would like this*, and I would remind her I'd never met Col and she'd look at me like she'd never met me either, like I was foreign. Like I'd stabbed her.

Then there were the pictures of the family at sports games, weddings, vacations. Those hurt. Then the ones with Shelley, next to Dev, all coiffed and banged and Lilly Pulitzered. Lacey laughed at those but she was off for a few days.

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It's hard to explain but the ORS literally flipped like a switch. Like, I wouldn't have to say anything or do anything, she was just gone. Sometimes it manifested as sadness, sometimes she got real pissed off, but it was the same. Completely detached from reality.

One day in particular I remember, I came out of the bathroom and she was standing in the foyer, barefoot in a sundress with keys in one hand and a cider in the other.

"Come on, Isabelladonna," she said, "we're going for a drive."

And I shook my head and laughed and said no, that she was drunk, that I had to work—because by then I was working—nothing real just little design jobs, but I was already sliding on flip flops, because she had that energy when she said something that make you want to say yes, like it was clear she was popular in high school. We were both laughing as I locked up behind us.

But by the time I got to the car she was sitting dead-still in the driver's seat, staring at the keys in the lap like she'd forgotten how to drive. When I popped in, she wordlessly put the keys into the ignition and reversed out of the spot and for a few minutes we said nothing at all. You couldn't, because it felt like if you did, she'd just shut down, close her eyes, crash the car. She was tired when she got sad.

I mentioned our dinner with Gaille and John that night and she turned off the A/C and said she didn't want them to come over anymore.

Why not, I asked her, but she kept her eyes on the road.

"They're excruciating," Lacey said.

"They're wonderful," I said. "Your words. The last time they came over we had an amazing time."

Then her voice got high pitched like little pin pricks. She said, "The last time they came over they spoke of nothing else but their kid for sixty-seven minutes."

"They're new parents," I reminded her. "Of course, it's their whole world right now."

"Exactly," she said, as she pulled into the parking spot. She turned off the car and then turned to face me and said, "That's why I'm suggesting we wait to invite them over until they have a least three kids, one of whom is doing drugs and the other is having sex and the third has night terrors and then we can have normal conversations about something other than our perfect offspring." And then she opened the door and stepped out of the car without another word.

I texted Gaille that we might have to cancel. Not that she would have been disappointed or even surprised. I'd practically coerced her into it.

But then ten minutes later, in the veggie section, Lacey asked me how many eggplants I thought we'd need for four people, and made a dick joke, so I gave Gaille the green light.

It seemed like Lacey had a good time throughout dinner, telling stories, filling up everyone's drinks, smoking weed, miming in the foyer mirror to me throwing Gaille's flan down the garbage dispenser until I choked on my gin and tonic. When Gaille and John left, stumbling into their golf cart and laughing as they tried in vain to turn the lights on, Lacey and I fucked right there on that shitty, scratchy foyer rug, drunk and desperate for each other. Then she pulled me up, and said, "Come darling, another gin," although neither of us needed any more and what was the point, but she poured them anyways. And she took one sip and looked at me with dead eyes and walked into the bedroom and closed the door behind her.

It was whiplash, constantly. I was flailing.

I lost touch with pretty much everyone. There were no real blow-ups or big endings—they were all slow, discreet. But I knew and they knew what was happening and neither of us did much to stop it. When I didn't get invited to Kiera Olsen's wedding, that was a low point. Not that we were that close or anything, but the whole group was going to be there and it was a massive fucking wedding. Like, it wouldn't have been hard to add two extra seats.

I didn't understand it at first. You know how it is when you're with someone and you just assume everywhere sees what you see, that everyone wants to be around that person same as you. They'd just stare at her in disbelief and I thought they were feeling the same disbelief that I was, the how-are-you-real disbelief, like she was something shiny and otherworldly and amazing and I was proud. But I recognize it now as the sort of thing when people would go to the circus to see a lizard-man or a woman with two heads. They'd heard about her and wanted to see what would happen. Everybody gets on the roller coaster because they know it's going to drop.

And then of course there's the fact that she forced people to think about their age. Here's this forty-something woman, going on fifty, with this whole other section of her life, here with a bunch of twenty-somethings railing coke and barely making rent and smoking weed until our fingers were numb. Looking at it like that, it was tragic. Like, don't you just kind of assume by then you're going to be straightened out? All this stuff we're uncertain about in our twenties, all these habits we've got that we know are shit for us but we do them anyways, don't you just sort of assume we'll have it all sorted out by our forties? That you'll one day swap coke for family dinners and once a year girls' trips? She was like this constant reminder to all of us how tragic life was. How quick. It dragged on people.

A few people stuck around, bless them, including Gaille and John. They've told me since that it was just some attempt at reaching me, at showing solidarity. So that there would be someone there to catch me when she inevitably lost her shit.

We hopped around friend groups. We made friends quickly with strangers—I think the scandal of it intrigued people, but I didn't care, I just wanted someone in the house—but they

were hard to keep when the ORS kicked in. Nobody lasted long, once they spent a few evenings with us.

I had some high school acquaintances in town, mostly burnouts and trashy Hispanic chicks and drug dealers, so we started hanging with them. Not heavy drug dealers, mind you, more like guys who doubled as construction workers or sales or whatever, and most of them were cool. Guys who said things like “college just wasn’t for them.” But those friends tended to be fleeting because they followed the money, and we didn’t have any.

So we really had no one after a while. Lacey didn’t seem to mind.

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It was the Sea Scape kids that started the worst of it. The golf club where she was working. A bunch of people my age working there, and a bunch of gross old guys playing golf there while their wives divorced them or went to Junior League meetings. She was older than the manager. We should’ve taken her out, looking back, but what else would she have done? I was already paying for everything.

She’d stay late after shifts to drink and talk with the next shift. Watching them, pretending. Like the kids were coming home from school. She’d ask them about college, who they’d been sleeping with, what classes they were taking. I know a lot of the golf guys hit on her, too, and I can’t imagine it was graceful. This was back when men could still do that, you know, say things like that. They thought they’d have a better chance with her, with her sad, uncolored blonde hair and thickening body than any of the perky 18-year-olds that worked there. Although they tried with them, too.

Lacey started coming home drunk and high out of her mind. It was fine at first, kind of endearing. She’d come home all giggly, or wanting me. Her other room sadness happened less but mostly because she was typically on another planet. The other planet suited her for a bit, gave her a little space to let loose. But the letting loose got more reckless, more frequent, less endearing, more childish.

Our age gap was so noticeable when we first got together. She’d play Nora Jones and would reference Lisa Minelli and I just nodded, smiling, trying not to think too hard about it. But the more time she spent with the Sea Scape kids, the younger she seemed to get. She started

listening to T-Pain. Katy Perry. Ne-Yo. We stopped watching *24* and *Amazing Race* and started watching *Teen Wolf* and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* because she didn't want to watch "old people shows". She'd gossip about the people at work, and about our friends, and became inconsolable if someone didn't like her. She slept in late on the weekends then went to smoke weed all day. She got into these crazy phases—various diets, hobbies, movie genres—that she'd throw herself behind and then abandon them within a few weeks. She started eating like a teenager, throwing everything from the fridge onto a piece of bread and eating it cold. She drank beer like water. Every day it's like I woke up with a new person beside me, who just wanted to experience everything all at once. She was trying to crush decades of inhibited desire into every single day.

She started dressing like them, too, borrowing fringe tops and sparkly sandals and squeezing herself into too-short denim shorts. I helped her dye her hair with highlights in the sink. You know when you see those forty- and fifty-year-old women dressing like their daughters? It's a special shade of pathetic, and that was Lacey. She was Benjamin Button-ing and soon I was the one mothering, trying to hold her together and avoid her tantrums. I wouldn't have been surprised if she was watering down the liquor bottles and sneaking out at night.

Meanwhile I'm paying for groceries and rent and pretty much everything else we need, and not a word of thanks from her for it. If she even noticed at all. Lacey lived up here, unencumbered by things like bills and responsibilities. Things just materialized for her. Money to pay for groceries. Children to attend to. A partner that she just happened to wake up to one day and decided to roll with it. It made you feel unsettled in your own home, the way sometime she'd pretend as if she didn't know who you were and what you were doing there.

I got paid fuck-all at work, though I put in the hours. I didn't ask around a lot but I knew from what I saw on their social media and their clothes that my white male colleagues made a whole lot more than me. Lacey complained about the discrimination against women, said I should ask for a raise, but never once mentioned their whiteness.

She could get real pissed off about women's issues, Lacey, but my blackness just sort of fell away. It became secondary to my womanhood. She didn't want to speak about it, didn't want to hear when someone had done something at the store or I'd heard something on the television that made me acutely aware of my skin, that created an environment in which I felt less-than. So I whitened in response. I wore my hair straighter, never tried another style. She never

commented on my time at the salon. She called my skin dry, not ashy. We didn't watch movies about slavery. We didn't talk about race, or profiling, or police violence. I stopped bringing it up because every time I did, it just bounced off her like everything else.

She voted for Obama and in her mind that was enough. She had declared herself an ally, and now we never needed to speak about it again. It didn't matter if I was black, white, purple, an alien, whatever. I was just the only person who stayed.

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I don't blame her for going a bit wild, honest to God. I was so angry for a while, after it ended, but I realized that she was just freaking lost. The world for women was changing so quickly. But it wasn't talked about yet, not the way it is now. She was experiencing this big change in herself at a time when the world was experiencing it too. The same way that something was activated in Dev that night, a violence that had been latent, something was activated in her, too. A refusal. It was twenty or so years late, and all jumbled up and confused, but there it was. All of the sudden. And everything was new, all of her rage was new, and it started simmering beneath the surface for her and she just didn't know how to let that fire burn inside of her without burning everything else to the ground. How to differentiate between what could stay and what no longer served her, or never did serve her. For the first time in her life, Lacey had the freedom to be who she actually was, get what she actually desired, and then she realized: she had no fucking idea who she was and what she wanted. So she just kept burning and burning everything in her life trying to find something that was fireproof until finally she just threw herself in the flame. Some people don't survive that reckoning.

Hindsight's twenty-twenty but I swear even then I knew in my bones that it wasn't going to end well. That I should've gotten out. But I was so in it that I couldn't see how bad it really was, how quickly that ending was accelerating towards us. We never had any distance, and I had no other reality against which to compare. Everything was just too *close*.

And she was so alone, I don't think I could have left her. Once we were standing in the marshes and it was the middle of winter and fucking freezing, and we were standing with our little toes over the edge in our swimsuits trying to convince ourselves to jump in—and she said,

“on the count of three” and counted to three. We jumped in together, and in the water she turned and said to me, “No one’s ever jumped with me when I said that.”

And right? Isn’t that all we want? Someone to jump when you say three? I wanted to be that for her. Not because I wanted it to be me but because I just wanted her to have *someone*, for the love of God, to jump with.

Neither of us had a woman in our lives before each other, someone we could talk to about these sorts of things. I had friends, yeah, but in your twenties, how do you actually know who those are? How do you know they’re still going to be there when you graduate, when you move out, when you stop having Friendsgivings and start having family ones? I had Ma, but Ma’s not a woman you can talk to, you know that. And she had... no one. A daughter who was too young. A sister, but what kind of a sister wouldn’t come looking?

So we were that to each other. We were a sister, a mother, a wife, and a daughter to each other. I don’t know. It’s hard to explain. It’s a powerful thing, sisterhood.

And on top of that, to stand naked in front of someone who actually looks like you, it changes everything. Someone who knows you have nipple hair because they have it too, who hates their cellulite as much as you hate yours, who understands what you mean when you say you feel foreign in your body because they feel foreign in theirs, too, every goddamn day.

She didn’t have to pretend with me. I think she cared about me because I didn’t have any false pretenses about who she was. And she didn’t have to be afraid of me. I think that’s a big reason why she wanted me. My angry and my sad and my happy and my need were so much *tighter*, less scary, less extreme. She could see them all and handle them all even when I was at my most angry or my most sad. I’d never hit her, never kill myself, never do anything drastic. I was easier.

There are certain things a man won’t understand, I’m sorry. Being with me, for her, it was like being in a club. No boys allowed.

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I thought about it on the bad days though. Leaving. I’d relish in the fantasies of what else my life could be if I’d never met her, if Lauren hadn’t needed that exact plant on that exact day from that exact shop. I worked backwards. What if Lauren hadn’t been dumped? What if her and

Billy had never gotten together? What if Billy's parents hadn't met, and he'd never been born? What if I'd gone to UVA, rather than Chapel Hill? Would we have collided? Back then I would have said yes, like there was some stroke of destiny in it. But now I know for sure: I would not have met Lacey. What felt like inevitability had been a chance encounter, and it cascaded down my life and changed everything. I kept waiting for another one of those moments to change it back. A watershed moment, like maybe Dev would find us. Or maybe she would die.

I was just a kid, Sam. I hadn't even sorted out what I was yet. Was I a lesbian? I thought I might be. But I was hooking up with guys too, then, when I met Lacey, one of my roommates even. It wasn't a thing to be bisexual then, at least not where I came from. I just figured someday I'd stop swinging, come to a stop on one of the sides. But I did love her, I knew that.

I'd talk myself into leaving, lying in bed those nights when she was passed out drunk. Just because I'd met her, I told myself, just because this had all happened, did that mean I was obligated to stay? No. Why couldn't I go back? Why do I have to stay? What's this got to do with me? But then I'd remember what I said to Dev that day. What I'd told him. *Find someone else.* And I'd stay.

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Dad brought Lacey home one night from the club. That was a bad one. He hated golf and hardly ever went to the club but that day he'd been a friend's plus-one at the annual Member Guest and spent the whole Saturday there.

I heard the key in the lock around the time she was meant to be home, but it was my Dad's voice. It'd been a long time since I'd seen him. I was in the kitchen cooking popcorn in my pajamas. I remember I was watching *My Cousin Vinny*.

Lacey stumbled through the front door. My dad was behind her, spotting her but not touching.

"Hi baby," Lacey said lazily. She was always tired when she was ruining other people's lives. She came up and kissed me sloppily, sliding her hands into my back pockets. My Dad averted his eyes, lingering in the foyer.

I pushed her off me as gently as I could but she swayed. She gripped onto the counter with both hands and tried to stand very straight, but one of her ankles buckled.

“Okay, okay,” I said, reaching forward and holding her steady. “You’re good.”

Then she got very serious and looked me dead in the eyes and said, “I’m not good. Decidedly not good. Not from the very start.” And then she started crying and slid to the floor, her skirt pulled up on one side and her underwear exposed.

I caught Dad’s eyes and he nodded at me, closed the door and left. He hadn’t spoken a word.

I got her into the bedroom and within seconds, she had stopped crying and started kissing me. She smelled like cigarette and moaned loudly as we kissed, her nose wet from crying. I pushed her away, too pissed off to touch her, but she held onto my arms and pulled me into her. She hadn’t wanted to be touched in a while and was wild and desperate and I just couldn’t help it, I just melted into her. But I hated her in that moment. It’s the first time I remember hearing that in my own head. That I was disgusted by her and I hated her. I pitied her, yeah, and was embarrassed for her, but that night was something else. That was when the possibility of being well and truly done with her etched itself into my mind.

She was on top of me, and I watched her moving her jaw back and forth, chewing, tensing, stroking her own face with her fingertips. I could tell it was MDMA so I ran my fingers along her forearms, the outside of her shins, the moles aligned like braille on her back, tried to stay in it, tried to keep her there, poured my anger into loving her.

But she could never let us have a moment of peace, and she asked me, “Does it make you angry that I can’t cum inside of you?”

I didn’t respond. She asked again. “Would you like it if I could cum inside of you? Like a man would, when I finished.”

I stopped stroking her. “Don’t ask that Lacey. I don’t want you to ask that.”

She leaned into me and kissed me, trying to be sexy, running her tongue across my lips. “Do you miss it? Having a man?”

I sat up and she fell to the side. “Do you?” I asked.

“It’s just everything is so *outside* with us baby. I want to cum inside of you, just in case you miss it.”

I told her not to talk like that and she said, “Right, right. I know. *Know when to stop, Lacey Ann.*” She stuck her hand between my legs. “But don’t you miss it?”

I pulled her hand away. “I don’t let men cum inside of me, Lacey.”

“Never? I have,” she said, her fingers absentmindedly pulling at my nipple instead.

I pushed her off me fully then. She laid back lazily onto the pillows, knees spread, rubbing herself.

“Lacey, you’re high as a kite. Can we not do this now?”

She laughed impishly. “I *am* high as a kite. Drunk as a skunk.” She choked on her laugh and stopped touching herself. She rolled over onto her side and took a deep breath, then another, stabilizing herself. I’m sure the walls were moving for her.

I said goodnight. She flung her arm backwards and patted me on the chest. “Goodnight, skunk,” she said.

—

She swore off alcohol for a year that morning. Throughout the day her courage wavered, so it became a month, then forever, then we’ll try a week and by the end of the day she settled back on a year. She drew it on the calendar for next August, with a little champagne bottle and a thumbs up. She was great at doodles. But she kept saying things like, “Maybe I won’t ever go back to drinking.” Walked around all day, chirping things like, “I’m so glad this will be my last hangover!” Like her decision not to drink anymore cancelled out what she did last night. Like it didn’t happen at all. But that was her way. Looked just sideways enough to put everything important in her blind spot.

We went for a walk on the beach that afternoon and at the very end, just before we turned around, she pulled me on top of a big rock and kissed me. She picked up a white shell right there, a little Scotch Bonnet, and carried it home with us. The next day I found it on the liquor shelf, right in front of the bottles. A stop sign.

—

I asked Dad for a cup of coffee a few days later. We sat out at Colington Harbor, cold this time of year, the lingering marine layer hanging heavy on everything, bird shit on the railing in front of us. Dad was bundled up in a corduroy jacket, a newsboy cap and gloves. We caught up on all the regulars—my website gig, Phineas, the cousins, Ma, his new boss he hated. We

avoided talking about it but it was there the whole time, hanging on the conversation like wet clothes. Finally, I asked him how bad it was. Was she awful?

He didn't nod, didn't shake his head though either. "It wasn't great," he said after a pause. "She was running the beer cart all day with some younger woman. The guys—you know how they get at these tournaments, some of them—kept calling her things, Mommy, you know. I lost sight of her for a while, as we went around the back nine, but during the dinner she seemed a bit drunk. She was—"

He cut off. God, it makes me nauseous just to think about it, how kind he was. How careful.

"It's fine, Dad," I told him. "I need to know."

"Flirting with them, seemed like. Teasing the men."

Dad says he and Will stayed until just past sundown, but that when he got home, he couldn't shake the feeling that she shouldn't be there alone, so he went back and read his book in the parking lot of the club for hours until it closed. He saw them all stumble out, the staff and a few stragglers from the tournament, around 1 in the morning. Lacey was with them. They started passing out pills and she took one and he *tried tried tried* to stay in the car but then she started walking behind the building with a few of the men and that's when he went to get her. I can't imagine how much she resisted, but bless him my dad never complained.

Once he'd gotten her to the car, she was all polite getting in, thanking him for the ride, seeing as she was *sooo tired*, but the second they started driving, she was head against the window, awake but just unseeing. When they got home, Lacey had apparently turned to my dad and said, "Marcus,"—she never called him Marcus—"Marcus," she said, "don't tell her." Then she threw up in the bushes and walked upstairs to our house.

—

Phineas came to visit a few weeks later. I'm sure Mom and Dad sent him for re-con, or an intervention, or whatever. I hadn't seen him in about a year, since he left for Pensacola, and he looked like much more than two years my senior in that uniform. It suited him. Suited his righteousness, too.

You know my brother, he's not easy, and he certainly didn't take it easy on Lacey. She put on a show for him like she normally does, the perfect hostess, took damp paper towels to our houseplants to wipe off the dust and put tiny little toiletries in the spare bathroom for him. Made her lasagna for dinner, with Texas Toast and iceberg salad. You could see the trying on her face.

I held it off for as long as I could, what I knew was coming. If Lacey left the room, I left with her. If he wanted to go for a walk, I invited her along or made up an excuse for why I couldn't join. But the last night, while Lacey was in the other room slicing cake and he was meant to be showering, he cornered me in my room.

I cut him off before he started. "Phin, don't."

"No, listen, I'm going to," he said. "Someone's got to."

He'd closed the door behind him, but we kept our voices low. "Not right now you don't," I begged him. "Leave it please."

He got close to me and grabbed my forearms. "You're with this woman," he said. "And you're so afraid of admitting that to Mom and Dad that you don't see that they know and they don't care. It's not that she's a chick, Is, who fucking cares, get over yourself. It's because of who she is and what's she dragged you into. They haven't said anything because they don't want to push you further into it."

Something about the way he said it, I deflated. I crumpled onto the bed and started crying. "How do I get further into it than this?" I asked, gesturing around me to the tiny room in the tiny house in that tiny life we were living.

He softened, kneeling next to the bed. "You're in it, sis. That's okay. That happens. Now it's time to get you out of it."

We heard Lacey in the other room, grabbing forks from the drawer. He stood to leave, and I followed a minute later. I'm sure I looked a mess when I came out but Lacey's smile never once faltered. But that evening, when he was passed out on the air mattress and we retreated to our room, she held me as I cried. I still have no idea if she knew why I was crying. If she heard.

—

He left the next morning. Lacey made him a sandwich for the drive to Charlotte, wrapped it in tinfoil and left it on his bag in the foyer. His hug goodbye was long but he didn't make much

eye contact, and he kissed Lace on the cheek before he left, thanked her for everything. That's the first and last time they saw each other, now that I think of it.

—

She'd have days that I could convince myself were turning points. Like the one night we were on the couch, watching some movie, I don't remember which but it wasn't one you would cry to, and she started crying really softly. I paused the movie and asked her what was wrong. She buried her head into my neck.

"I'm so sorry I've been gone," she said, "I miss you. I've missed you."

I asked her what she meant, and she said, "I've been here but I've been gone. I'm back now, okay?"

We sat on the couch in silence for a long time. I held her face in my hands, kissing her cheeks and eyebrows, pouring gratitude into her. She pulled away, and through snot and tears said, "It feels good to be home." And I had this feeling then, prodding at me, that she wasn't talking to me, that she was back there with her kids in that house. But I pushed the thought away. No, I wanted her to be talking to me. I needed her to be talking to me. I had earned this.

She started falling asleep. She was so tired these days, would throw all of her energy behind something—a trip into town, a story, a meal—and be all smiles and laughs and limbs, and then in a split second she'd collapse in exhaustion, like it was taking her more energy just to exist than normal, like her tap had run dry.

I turned the movie off and we went to the bed, laying here in the near-dark just staring at each other. I stroked her hair until she fell asleep and I loved her again.

"I know you better than anyone and I still don't know you at all," I said to the darkness. She was pretending to sleep but I could tell she didn't like that.

—

But they never were turning points, were they? It didn't last long, as you know, that "sobriety year". That date in October stayed on the calendar—she never scratched it out—but a month later she was back to ciders, "just ciders", and then "not after my shift", and then "just

while we're out, not in the house", and then "just weekends", and then nothing. Just whenever. She started buying weed from one of our neighbors and then MDMA and then Oxy and Valium. Sometimes she would take and I wouldn't. Sometimes we took together. But she always took. She kept trying to get me to take more, drink more, smoke more. I think it made her feel a little less guilty; at least we were both doing it. If she was pouring wine, she'd pour more into my glass than into her own. Maybe she just hoped that if I got drunk, I wouldn't notice that she was too. Or maybe I couldn't be angry with her, because she could throw it right back in my face.

Fights got worse then, because half the time we didn't know what we were saying. God, did Lacey know how to fight. Like she was fighting for her freaking life. I think she fought harder with me than she did with Dev because she knew I wouldn't hurt her.

Towards the end she blamed me for all of it. The affair, the disillusion of her marriage—which trust me, was disillusioned for a long time before me, if it was ever illusioned at all—for the beating that night, for all of it. It was bullshit, but she convinced me sometimes. She could do that, convince you of things you knew in your bones to be false.

Soon she was bored with me and started inviting the Sea Scape kids over to our house to stay on the couch, and then people who weren't even from Sea Scape at all. People I didn't recognize. They were all mostly my age, but I felt decades older. My earrings started going missing. Scarves, kitchen pans, coins from the bowl. I'd confront Lacey about it and she'd wave a hand, say I hadn't worn or used whatever it was in years. Time moved like that for the Lacey: days could be years, years could be days.

She wanted to play house, but the only people who would play with her were fucked-up, burnout twenty-somethings who were just too bored to go home or whose parents had finally kicked them out. It became a house for misfit toys. If they paid her anything at all, they paid her in weed and pills rather than cash, and she'd make them coffee and breakfast and the whole thing reeked of trauma.

A few times I got jealous. I'd come home and she'd be on the couch with them, a young guy, young girl, didn't matter. Not doing anything particularly wrong, but I just didn't like the look of it. I kicked one guy out of the house for the way he kept touching her knee, and threw his bag down the stairs behind him. I thought she'd be furious at me but she just floated, laid back on the couch and smiled. She wore airs all night, like it was some sort of victory that I'd been jealous, and I wondered if she'd kissed him.

What a worthless, common, petty thing to feel unequally loved. I knew that. But some feelings you can't help. And I couldn't help but feeling like I'd given so much and she hadn't even tried to give me herself. Like I'd jump off a roof for her and here she is making this fucking child a cup of coffee and letting him touch her knees.

She would stop talking to me for full days, would just go silent even if I yelled and cried. I hadn't seen her sober in weeks. Once, in bed, she asked me to hurt her.

You have no idea, Sam. How hard I tried to fix her, to make everything easier on her. I was tired of loving a fucking phantom. I had to protect myself.

So I kept thinking about what Phin said. It simmered.

—

The only way to end anything is to say such unforgiveable things that you both acknowledge there's no going back. So I don't regret what I said.

She was wiggled out on something, off to go meet people. I just had this feeling that she shouldn't go. I don't even remember what I said, something about *couldn't she just stay home*, and she threw her hands out and shouted, "I didn't ask for a wife!"

I lost it. I started shouting at her. I told her I was done feeling sorry for her, that nothing gave her the right to behave like this. Nothing.

"I lost everything," she screamed at me.

I fired back. "Lost it? You *left* it! If anyone lost anything here, it's me. Look at where we are, Lace. Look at what *I* lost."

"Oh, you martyr! You deserve a monument!" She started flailing her arms in the air, prancing around the room. "We should all celebrate your great tragic sacrifice!"

I started walking away. "You are a child," I said.

She came up behind me and wrapped her arms around me, snuggled up into me. She stank. "And don't pretend you didn't know that," she whispered into my ear. Her voice didn't sound like hers. "You knew it. You *lived* for it, baby. Made you feel all grown and useful. You *love* being a mother."

I pried off her arms and turned to face her. "More than you did, apparently," I spat.

"Don't," she started, so of course I did. I pointed a finger into her chest.

“No, don’t you to come at me with that righteous motherhood, don’t-talk-about-my-babies bullshit,” I said. I gestured around the room. “Where are they, Lacey? Where are your babies? How *old* are your babies, Lacey? What are they doing this weekend?”

She paused and looked down, biting her bottom lip. When she looked back up, she was crying. “Whew, baby, nice one,” she said quietly. “10 points, baby.”

She walked past me into the kitchen. I tried to catch her arm, tried to apologize, but she shrugged it off. When she came back in, she had a handful of Harris Teeter plastic bags. She started shoving sweaters and jeans into them.

“Lace, where are you going to go?” I asked her. I didn’t think she was serious. “Lace. Stop, where you gonna go?”

I started pulling the bags down out of her arms and she swung them at me. I backed away, watched her pack a bunch of things she wouldn’t need and nothing she actually would. And then I watched her walk out, grocery bags heavy on her arms like she was coming home from a shop.

But what are you going to do? Stop her? She was so good at leaving. That’s what she did when she burned something down: she ran. She’d find a way tomorrow if it wasn’t today. Or worst of all, what if she changed her mind and never left at all? I had to let her go before it killed one of us. I was confused and hurt and between the two of those things I just disengaged. I just let her go. And I still don’t think I was wrong to do so.

—

I expected her to come back after a few days, but she didn’t. I heard she crashed on some Sea Scape friends’ couches for a while, calling in favors from all the times we’d let them stay. I’m sure they got her hooked on some worse stuff, then, trying to fill all those holes in herself. Probably did other things, too. One of them told me she hitched a ride to Wilmington.

I went two weeks or so later to find her, to bring her back. I asked a friend of mine who stayed in Wilmington what he’d heard, and it took a while, but I did find her, staying on the futon in some moldy three-bedroom with a few young chicks I didn’t recognize, but God did one of them look like Ellen.

Lacey looked at me like she'd never met me, and her eyes were so bloodshot and wide. Her skin was dry and scratched up. Her skin was always something I'd loved about her—it was warm and moist and smelled like bread—and now it was just dead, dry and sad. She stayed absolutely quiet even I stomped and screamed and cried, and when I was done, she was still just staring at me, right past me. Then she turned to her friend and asked her for a cigarette. I got a hold of myself, turned and made myself walk out of the house.

I walked all the way to the pavilion and watched people eat ice cream. I walked around one of those touristy Shark shops and bought a little plastic pale and went to the beach. I walked until the pale was full of sea glass and the sun was gone.

I drove all the way back to Kill Devil that night. When I got into our apartment, I covered every countertop in sea glass, laid down on that scratchy foyer rug, and fell asleep to the sound of the cicadas.

—

I got into her old email the next day and sent a message to her whole family. I CC'ed everyone I knew, including the kids, who weren't kids anymore. I said that Lacey was gone and I was worried about her. I told them where she was. They didn't *respond*, Sam. Not a single response. Family like that... I hope for her sake she's dead.

PART 3: REAP

...In some ways, your dad and I were similar, I guess. Your mom changed and neither of us could handle it. Your mom changed like that, overnight, threw herself behind whatever she decided to that morning: yoga twice a day, eating only purple foods, painting stark naked, religion, atheism, fasting, binge-eating. She was searching so hard for something to define her. To distract herself. To control something, anything. Her identity was changing faster than other people's understanding of it and faster than her habits could keep up. She was always getting so into things and then abandoning them weeks later. It was who she was.

But where me and your dad both screwed up is this: when Lacey started throwing punches, he got closer, tried to hold her arms down. When she swung at me, I backed away, left the ring, said no fucking thanks. But Lacey needed someone who would stand there while she tired herself out and threw everything she had and then, when she was exhausted, to catch her and forgive her and take care of her. Neither one of us could be that for her. Your dad was too proud and I was too scared.

So when she found that group of kids in Kill Devil—when they made her feel things I couldn't and he couldn't and you couldn't, when they were all so screwed up that they made her screwed-upness seem a little bit easier to manage, when she could throw punches as hard as she wanted and not hurt any of them because they didn't actually care about her, she threw herself into it. I think she would've abandoned them too, like everything else she'd ever started, if they hadn't fueled her addictions in so many ways, made it impossible for her to leave something for the first time in her life.

*I'm sorry I'm telling you this but it all needs to be said. I'm in Kill Devil with my parents.
11 Windsong Drive. Will you meet me?*

x

Isa

—

Ellen

2018

God damnit, the cream curtains.

I shut my eyes tight again before I can think too much about it, before the hangover can swallow me whole. I hear him breathing behind me, the click at the end of his inhale, that distinct I-shacked-with-Kelan smell I'd been inadvertently familiarizing myself with for the last six months or so: his Tom's deodorant, cooped-up air, my own vagina. Whether he washes his sheets in tequila, or the reek is a result of the fact that I always end up in them after a night out, remains to be seen. I've never been in them sober.

I take a mental inventory of the day before. The Frying Pan, the cheese fries, a bucket of rosé bottles and ice. There was a bike—I remember being on a bike. I remember India being on a bike. I should definitely not have been on a bike. I have vague memories of Dave and India's apartment and a game of *Codenames*. I pluck up the courage to look down at my wrists, and yep, there's the irrefutable evidence: a stamp from The Black Flamingo. Why do I never pick a classy joint when I'm blackout?

I wiggle my way to the bottom of the bed and make a naked beeline for the bathroom, shutting the door as gingerly as possible. I hold onto the sink and make my reflection take deep breaths with me as I do a body scan. My left ass cheek is curiously sore, as is my left elbow. There's a scrape on my elbow that looks like rug burn. My nostrils are screaming and crusty and when I blow my nose quietly it's bloody, a sure sign of a few coke lines last night. My scalp is greasy and my hair is knotted. I am acutely aware that I more closely resemble the Hunchback of Notre Dame than a human woman.

I pull trigger in the toilet, and as I'm throwing up, a rush of cum comes out from between my legs.

"Oh, Jesus Christ, El," I groan into the toilet rim. I hope my brother didn't see us leave together again but I know the chances of that are slim to none. I'll text India later and find out the degree of shit I'm in again.

I pat myself clean with Kelan's hand towel and explore his cabinet. Trust finance guys to have not one but two pairs of tweezers. I pluck a nipple hair and a few eyebrow hairs, gargle Listerine, and return whimpering to the beast's lair.

He's facing away from me when I come back. I have a rapid debate with myself about leaving before he wakes up but decide against it, because I'm a good person. His back is massive and pale, with scar tissue from old spider bites and big, brown moles. He looks like a wall and converses like one too. But God, if he isn't sensitive.

I try to make as little movement as possible crawling back into bed, but it appears at present that I have little control over the movement of my limbs, and I knock his teeth with my elbow upon landing. He stirs and pulls me towards him and I resist the urge to swat his arm away. I, rather ungracefully, maneuver myself away from his breath and stare at the wall, trying to quell the vertigo.

"Bagels?" he mumbles into my ear before kissing it wetly. I wince. That voice is too high and whiny for the width of his shoulders and it's a shock every time I hear it, though I've known it for like, eight years.

We order the regular. \$11 lox for him, \$14.50 sausage egg and cheese on sesame with sriracha for me. I've never paid.

After half an hour of internal dialogue with my demons, the bagels come and we venture to the couch. I pull on my underwear and one of his Duke t-shirts. Almost a year in the city and the couch and the bed are the only furniture he's got; getting furniture delivered in New York takes about as long as human gestation. But it's a step up. For the first three months of living in this flat, all Kelan had was a yoga mat, a fold-out chair and a flat-screen TV. I've never seen him do yoga nor does his body look like he could muster a downward dog. I can imagine what the neighbors thought, through the windows at night from the apartment block across the way. Giant albino man, sitting alone on a folding chair, staring at his television. The walls are bare.

I talk Kelan into splitting a White Claw for breakfast, which helps slightly. He inhales his bagel in three bites and folds the tin foil. He *folds* it.

While I eat, we watch Game of Thrones and he sucks on my ear with his salmon breath and rubs my crotch insistently. I remember he's sensitive and likes me so we screw right there on the couch and I angle myself on top of him so that I can still get a good view of Lord Baelish

over his shoulder. What would Little Finger be like in bed, I wonder. Probably would know how to please a woman. I want to eat my bagel while I ride him but decide to be a lady.

Before I leave, I douse myself in his body spray and use his toothbrush to brush my teeth.

“I can’t find my earrings,” I call to him from the bathroom. “Are you coming to Al’s on Tuesday?”

He hums a yes.

“Cool, I’ll grab them then.” I poked my head around the corner and spy him calling me an Uber. “Sorry, can you actually order that to Park Slope? I’ve got a dog to walk.”

He never makes me take the subway home. Like a true gentleman, he orders an Uber Pool for me instead. He hands me my wool coat and I don’t kiss him goodbye, on account of the salmon breath and the reek of domesticity. As I close the door, he clicks on another episode of *Game of Thrones*, still sprawled out naked on the couch.

In the corridor, I pull on my wool coat and curse when I find a hole in the elbow to match my scrape. Walking down the rickety, carpeted stairs from the third floor, I remember falling down—or rather, up—them the night before. Ah, hence the rug burn.

I shove my hands into my pockets before braving the cold and discover a half empty packet of ground up mushrooms.

“Sweet Mary Mother of Joseph!” I cry. I pour the contents into my hand and lick my palm clean, then pull my heels on and step out onto the streets of the concrete jungle. My Uber is waiting for me, the driver’s head bowed in irritation. He waves me in, and I ignore the glares from the line of honking cars behind him.

I’m sharing my chariot with a medical student and a finance douche. The disgust is flagrant on their faces as I climb in, and new-money boy flares his nostrils at me like I’m eating a deviled egg sandwich. *Please, like none of you’ve ever put a girl into an Uber on a Sunday morning before.* Wall Street brat for sure has. I’ve run in his circles longer than he has.

I could tell you everything about him. His name is Chris or Jake or something generic and he works at Deutsche or Bank of America. He owns at least three suits from Jos. A. Bank’s navy-blue collection, which his mom bought for him on sale before he moved to Manhattan from Potomac. He has two pairs of Airpods, just in case, and a Canada Goose jacket, and right now he’s off to brunch in Tribeca with all of his white friends, one token black guy from the office, and that chick he sometimes fucks when she’s feeling vulnerable. He lives in a sausage-fest

apartment in Alphabet City with his fraternity bros and spends his weekends railing coke, drinking at Radegast Biergarten and watching nature documentaries because he *cares*. I've slept with half his kind and none of them knew a goddamn thing about trees.

The medical student—he looks a lot like Jamie's ex Kaushik so I name him Kaushik—raises his eyebrows and looks out of the passenger window. He's in nondescript scrubs but he's handsome as hell and I'm a little disappointed that he won't make eye contact with me.

“Beautiful morning,” I say. *Fuck you all*, I don't say. It's sleeting. Uber driver gives a snort but nothing from my compatriots. I'm grateful that no one is chatty. New-money douche types on his phone angrily, screen angled away from me. I have done so much worse than this so I don't know what his problem is.

I pull my phone out of my jacket pocket to type angrily at it, too, but it's dead. I fake text a few people then shove it back into my pocket next to my balled-up bra and rest my head against the window. The car is immaculate; the floor mats are cleaner than me. When I finally get out, I'm the last one in the car and there are oil marks from my hair on the window.

—

I pick up Tina from her penthouse apartment in Park Slope. I am way too hungover for this but Tina is a catch and I'm broke as hell. Wag pays better than my actual job, because apparently in this city it's kosher for advertising agencies to give free massages on Tuesdays and manicures every other Friday but still pay their staff minimum wage.

Besides, Tina's tiny legs mean an easy walk and her owners tip handsomely. The security guard at her building eyes my outfit and my hair and furrows his eyebrows, but I flash him my Wag app and he ushers me through.

Tina the Shih Tzu lives in a nicer apartment than any hotel I've ever stayed in. I've never met her parents in person but there's always blueprints spread across all the glass tables and heavy coffee table books with obscure artist names on the cover, so I assume they're architects or some sort of interior design. It's single-story penthouse, but decorated like a high-end porno, with white couches that look hard as rock, white rugs, white countertops. Above Tina's plush bed, there's a neon sign that says in cursive, “Fortune Favors the Kind.”

“But you’re a little rat bitch, Tina,” I say to her in my sweetest voice. “And look how well Fortune’s favored you.”

She smiles up at me with her underbite and wags her disgusting tail. I bend down and struggle to put on her collar. It’s the Tesla of collars, with all these trap doors and straps and buckles and the whole thing is bringing my bagel back up. I curse myself for skimming the Collars section of the walker registration test, but finally wrestle it on, though Tina certainly doesn’t look comfortable.

On our way out, I notice a pair of Jimmy Choo sandals by the door. I eye my own stiletto heels and sigh down at Tina.

“What do you think, you little psychopath? Should I take Mommy’s cute shoes for a spin?”

Tina flashes me her teeth again and that seals the deal. I give the Fortune Favors the Kind sign the finger and slip on the sandals, which fit me marvelously. Tina and I take pictures of our toes and I lock the door behind me, clicking the Start button on the app.

The mushies have hit full force and Tina and I have a grand old time. We play with butterflies, sniff a dead pigeon, nibble on some old chicken wings and poop on every stoop in town. Tina is the most prolific shitter of any of my clients. I click the little Poop button on the app every time she drops a few rabbit turds and by the end of the walk, half the map of Park Slope is covered in poop emojis. I give her an appreciative tap on the head as we board the elevator up to her castle. Some dogs I have to walk around the block for over an hour and often I just give up and lie, dropping a poo emoji on the app when I know and the dog knows that no bowel was moved throughout the duration of our stroll. But not my Tina, my little Queen of Shih Tzulot.

When I drop her back at home, I prop the sandals up just as I saw them, take a shit in their guest bathroom, and spray half a bottle of aerosol around the room to cover the smell. I try to kiss Tina goodbye but she nips at me, which hurts me emotionally more than physically. I post a photo of Tina to our walk profile with the caption, “What a sweet girl! We had a blast on our walk and she was very affectionate. Til next time! xx”, then take my sweet ass home.

—

“Why does a Shih Tzu get an elevator and I get THIS?” I cry on level three of our fourth-floor walk-up. I had dreams of getting fit and having an ass like JLo when I moved in, but so far it has been nothing but regret and bruises on my forearms from carrying eighteen grocery bags at once.

When I finally make it upstairs, I scan the foyer of our apartment for angry Jew energy but Jackie must be out for the day. A tiny victory. I hear Stephanie in her room and I can just make out her Texas drawl crying into the phone. New York has not been kind to Stephanie. She’s complaining about her coworkers in between “gosh” and “darnit”. I still can’t believe actual people speak this way.

I plug in my phone and collapse on the bed in agony.

—

I wake up my phone blaring and answer it with my eyes closed. It’s Col asking me if I want to split an Uber to brunch from LES. *Fuck, I’m late.* I take a quick sponge bath at the sink, cupping water from the faucet to my crotch and scrubbing with Jackie’s towel. I pull on a fresh pair of underwear, deodorize, run wet fingers through my hair, brush my teeth, and wash my hands and face.

“Looking good, Maverick,” I say to the goblin in my reflection. I pour a cider into a plastic water bottle, slide on my Chucks, and call bye to Stephanie on my way out. She manages a “love you” in between sobs.

I jog reluctantly to Marcy Avenue, jump over the entry rail—God knows where my metro card is—and barely catch the L-train doors before they close.

—

More jogging to brunch from the subway but I arrive only 15 minutes late, which is by no means my worst on record. My cider is finished but I feel only marginally better. I see the guys inside and Col waves me in. My poor sibling charity fund ran out within two months, so I picked some joint in Chinatown for brunch, and it’s clear within minutes that I’ve made a horrible

decision. We all order Chinese beer and only half a bottle in do I manage to mentally open my eyes and make attempts at conversation.

Col tells us about the new job and I pick at the edamame we ordered for starters, sucking the empty pods to get to the salt. Alex talks about a new girl named Lana he's seeing.

"What happened to Kelly?" I eye Alex as the waitress places a few pots of dim sum between us. He scowls at me, then grins.

"What happened to Peter?" he jibes back.

Col opens a pot of dim sum between Alex and I as a temporary truce. "You guys blow through significant others like New York is a Golden Corral."

Alex gestures to the table in front of him, plates and pots now scattered between us. "Life's a buffet, baby."

"You're a fucking dick," I tell him, tossing an edamame into his beer. He pulls it out, flicks it dry, and holds it in front of his face.

"Two peas in a pod, my sister. At least I'm not still hooking up with fetuses." He tosses it back at me and puts a dumpling on his plate.

"I'm twenty-nine, that guy lied about his age, and that's hilarious you say that, because isn't Kelan like, thirty-two?" Col stifles a laugh and I take the dumpling from Alex's plate and pop it in my mouth, blowing out to cool it. "Fuck, that's hot."

We finish up lunch and two more rounds of beer and Alex foots the bill. I send a silent thanks Visa headquarters for giving him a bonus. We stand outside under the fire escape and Alex hugs me goodbye.

"Take a shower," he grimaces, pushing me away.

"Roger," I nod.

He climbs into a cab and I walk with Col to the subway.

—

On Monday I'm in the office at 8am, an hour before everyone arrives. I blast through the Monday morning checklist in twenty minutes flat. Candles lit in all the offices, Chet Baker on the speakers, perfectly arranged soda cans (by color and size) in the conference room, ice cubes on the orchids, branded paper in the printer, puffed pillows in Rachel's office. I call in the pastry

order to the absurdly priced French bakery on the corner and pick it up downstairs, then arrange them on the island according to dietary restrictions. I eat one over the kitchen sink and flush down the evidence of crumbs. I fill up my work bag with snacks from the pantry and zip it closed.

By the time everyone arrives, I'm sitting at my desk doing my daily news clippings and contemplating whether I should just turn my Master's degree into a paper airplane to make it more useful than it currently is. At 9:30 on the dot, I enter the conference room, where everyone is under 25 and colorful and chirpy and ignoring me. I listen quietly to the gossip of the day.

I discover that Mercury is in retrograde and that Pisces are having a really good month. Maddie complains about the patriarchy then tells us about a new campaign she's working on where Karlie Kloss will be naked except for the handbag she's holding. Aria talks about a new all-bodies campaign she's starting up with her underwear client. Aria, who weighs approximately 65 pounds and eats the edges off of every pastry on the table but will never, ever eat a full one herself. Callie tells us about her weekend, which she spent at the Royal Pagoda in a hot tub with two men, one of whom she allowed to stick his toe in her asshole. David complains about his boyfriend's dependency on his therapist.

"He'd called his *therapist* to ask if we could take *mushrooms*," he says. *David* likes to *emphasize his words*.

Then Rachel comes in and everyone gets quiet immediately, sitting like eager beavers, waiting for her to compliment them on their coat or their new haircut or the heels they're wearing that are unbearable but very on trend.

—

On my lunch shift I walk Gracie. Gracie lives in a pretty pink house in East Village, tucked back away from the road, one of those rare New York properties with a real-life lawn. It's an absolute mission from my office but I will never, ever say no to a walk with Gracie and a visit to her little oasis. Gracie the Spaniel is my favorite creature, dog or human, on this island. I've got her lockbox memorized and we walk the same route every time, because I know her favorite park. I've seen her once on a walk with her owner Hilda and it felt like seeing the man you're

sleeping with on a date with his wife. Hilda is prettier than me and I felt a pang of jealousy seeing the two of them together.

Gracie is howling on the stairs when I come in, the howl of the half-blind, just kind of throwing it out there just in case there's an intruder who needs scaring. When she hears my voice her tail starts wagging and my heart melts. I give her some love then look down at the table where Hilda has left a note in pretty purple lettering and some treats for us both. "Enjoy, you two!"

I pocket the candies though I never eat them, and pop open the lid of the Le Croix she left out for me. The Le Croix is wet and still ice cold—she must have just left. Probably she didn't even need a walker today and just took pity on me. I am totally okay with that. The way the house is decorated—haphazard book stacks, bright red rainboots by the door—I know I would love Hilda and have wondering many a time whether I should message her on the app and ask to stay for a glass of wine.

Unlike Tina's, Gracie's collar is easy, a macrame lead with a single clip, the way God intended. I pop the Wag bandana around her neck and pull the Wag t-shirt over my head. It's an extra buck each if we've got them on in the selfie, and it makes me feel a bit like we're on a team, two crime-fighting best friends in our superhero costumes.

I take my sweet time on our walk. Everyone in the office takes long lunch breaks and our intern's in today, so she can handle the phones. Gracie and I smile and trot together, I give her a big squeeze farewell, and trudge my way back to millennial hell.

—

Back in the office, Rachel asks me to wash her hair in the kitchen sink. While I do, she tells me about her weekend, when Travis Scott showed up to her hotel room with a full bottle of ecstasy and a fanny pack of joints. Rachel is exactly six years older than me but she owns this company, so I scrub well, massaging the last of my dignity into her scalp.

—

Of all the things I hate about this city, the subway ride to my office is one that I very much don't. A bridge topper, this train stays above ground all the way until the Lower East Side, with banger views of Manhattan as it makes the slow trek across Williamsburg Bridge. It also means cell service for at least fifteen minutes.

On Tuesday morning, I'm swiping right on Wag looking for my favorite dogs. Next to me, a mid-forties woman swipes on Tinder, and I make a joke to her that we're both just out here looking for dogs, which is not well received.

I've just matched with a Labrador in Green Point when an email notification pops up on my phone from yates.isabel@gmail.com.

I drop my phone in a panic and it slides through a puddle of an indiscriminate liquid and comes to a halt under the seat of the kid sitting across from me. Either he doesn't notice or just enjoys being an obnoxious twerp, but he keeps his head down. I call to him a few times to no avail, and finally lean across the aisle and squat down in front of him, retrieving it from between his legs. He's watching Vine.

He takes out a headphone and stares at me. "Are you fucking kidding me?" he spits. His accent is foreign.

"Are *you* fucking kidding me?" I mimic.

He shakes his head and scoffs at me, replacing his headphones. I hear his volume turn up.

By the time I'm sitting, the train plunges into darkness and we're underground. I pull my email up but my service is gone. I wait, hands sweating, to arrive at the next station. *Come on*, I nudge the little service bars on my phone. *Come on*. We arrive at Essex Street Station and the doors open. I refresh. Nothing. I refresh again. Nothing. The doors start closing and finally the bars start rising. One bar. Refresh. Two bars. My email opens and an unread message loads.

From Yates.Isabel@gmail.com. Isabel Yates. Isa Yates is in my inbox.

I read it three times through before we reach my stop. I crawl out of the train and head up and out of the tunnel in a daze. I call Col but hang up after the first ring. I call Alex and do the same. *Stop. Think*. A small woman in a royal blue dress knocks me from behind and mumbles something under her breath.

I try to picture Isa and it makes a minute for her face to form in my head. The photos I'd been able to find online years ago were all from college, grainy photos of her sprawled out on a lawn, swimming in the ocean, playing field hockey. I have to give Mom some creds—Isabel was hot. I wonder what she looks like now, hovering behind a laptop, pressing send. She'd be late thirties or so now, but I can't picture it. She still looks twenty in my mind. The email runs through my head like a ticker.

Your dad's a lying bastard. Will you meet me?

I fuck up eighteen times at work that day. I forget the light the candles. I screw up the bagel order. I lag on emails and my boss responds before I can. I get all our clients mixed up, call everyone by the wrong name. I feign sick and leave by 2, and the intern gives me eyes of terror which I avoid. *Don't leave me*, they say. I leave.

I waste the afternoon in the apartment. I sit naked, cross-legged on the bed. I use a safety pin and Stephanie's tweezers to pull out a few ingrown hairs. I push my stomach out, poke at the rolls, roll them around between my fingertips. I make popcorn and burn kernels in the bottom of the pan. I steal weed from Jackie's room—she keeps it in her underwear drawer between her menorah and her butt plugs—and smoke on the fire escape. The heat from the Mexican restaurant at the base of our building radiates upwards and I sweat like a North Carolina summer, but I smoke a whole bowl and almost forget about the email, just for a second.

At 7:30, Col and I walk together to Al's, dodging rain in restaurant porticos. He spends a few blocks or so talking about a colleague at work. I don't hear a word he says, and finally I interrupt him and tell him about Isa.

He stops in his tracks. "Are you fucking serious?"

I take out my phone and hand it to him. We start walking again. He's so immersed in reading the email while we walk that I have to throw my arm out in front of him to keep him from getting hit by a taxi. When he finishes, he does a long exhale and hands the phone back to me.

"Jesus."

"Yeah."

“Elle, you’re not going.”

“Obviously not. But do you think it’s really her?”

He shakes his head. “Yes, I mean, it has to be. Everything she says about Mom is dead on. But it’s a bad idea.”

“Aren’t you curious?” I ask him. “I’m going home for Dad’s birthday this weekend anyways. I *could* make a pit stop.”

“Elle.” His voice is careful. He turns to me and forces eye contact. “Ellen. Promise me. You won’t go.”

I promise him.

Six hours later, I board the Megabus to North Carolina.

—

My bus arrives to Durham just before sunrise, and I call an Uber to the house. When I get there, the interior is dark but the front porch lights are on. Dad and Shelley aren’t home, gone on some getaway with their pickleball friends.

The familiarity of the house—the wraparound driveway with oak roots bursting through it, the old basketball hoop, the woodpile next to the garage, the dog’s teeth marks around the base of the porch columns, the uneven brick stairs—hits me in my stomach. The only thing that’s changed in ten years is the color. Shelley had repainted when she moved in. I don’t blame her. The grey and blues suited the house better than the old white siding and green shutters. It looked like a Joanna Gaines catalog now, a fake, tasteful wreath on the front door.

Dad has graciously kept my old CR-V, which the boys and I drive when we’re in town. We switch off for birthdays and holidays. It’s rare that the three of us are home all at once, but we try for Christmases, for Dad’s sake. Dad’s 62nd is on Tuesday, so I agreed to take this shift.

I walk around the side of the house, where my baby is parked on the grass under a plastic tarp. I find the spare under the same log in the woodpile and send a silent hurrah to the lightening sky. I text Shelley that I’m home early to visit a friend so I’m taking the car and would see them on Sunday.

I get into the car and give the dashboard a loving rub. My old CDs are still in the glovebox and I flip through the binder while the car warms up until I find my old Avril Lavigne

mix tape and pop it into the CD player. As I back out of the drive, I turn it up loud and give a middle finger to Shelley's paint job.

I stop to see my friend Summa in Rocky Mount. I make a quick pit stop at the ABC store for cheap champagne, which I end up drinking alone, because Summa's still breast feeding. We sit at her marble island while she pumps her breast milk and Conrad runs circles around the living room. I tell her about Isa and she reads the email with one hand while burping Aiden on her shoulder.

Summa puts the phone down when she's done reading and reaches out to pat my hand.

"I think it might be really good for you to meet her, El," she says in soothing tones. "I mean, you're understandably really pissed off at your mom, but maybe this will help heal that a bit. Get some perspective."

"I don't know if I want to be healed from it," I say. "I like being pissed off."

"I know," she says, putting the baby into the bouncing cradle beside us. He watches us with wide eyes. "And I used to be pissed off with you. But since having these little shits," she nods her head towards a screaming Connie, "I don't know... I just don't blame your mom as much as I used to."

I stay silent. She continues. "I mean, look at this." I take in the room. Conrad is busy throwing a tantrum on the kitchen floor, red-faced with snot bubbles dribbling out of his nose. Aiden is in his bouncing chair, looking at us expectantly. There are dishes everywhere, half sliced apples gathering flies, and there's dried vomit on Summa's jeans. Summa's husband is nowhere to be seen.

She sighs. "I'm just saying that I think I could leave this. If the opportunity came, and it hit me at just the right time, on just the right day, and it looked like Isa... yeah. I could leave all of this."

I stay for another hour or so to give the bubbly some time to wear off. Connie and I play with Aiden and build tacos out of play-do while Summa showers. When I hug her goodbye, she smells like vanilla and her long, dark hair drips water down my back.

I linger in her doorway, suddenly aware that the next doorway I walk through will be Isa's. "What if I find out my mom's dead?"

Summa gives me an empathetic face, but shakes her head. "Isn't she kind of already?"

"Yeah, but like, I don't know for sure. Isa might. Right now, she's dead with a lowercase d. I don't know if I could handle it if I find out it's a capital D."

Summa gives me a second squeeze and then Aiden starts screaming, so she lovingly closes the door in my face.

—

It's just past 3 in the afternoon when I turn off the engine in Kill Devil, the hot air blowing out full force to keep the engine from overheating. Old girl did not like that last 100 miles, having been a puddle jumper since I graduated. I'm exhausted.

The address from Isa's email takes me to one of those two-for beach houses, egg yolk yellow on one side and baby blue on the other, two big balconies and a little round window right at the top of both sides. A large 11 made of sea shells is next to the front door of the egg yolk side, with two Adirondack chairs on the balcony.

I don't know if she's home so I park across the street and sit there for a while. Soon I have to pee, and I stare myself down in the rear view until I get the courage to climb the stairs and knock on the door. There's no bell, so I knock the screen door. Two dogs bark and an older Black man opens up.

"Hi there, dearie. Are you here for Isa?"

He opens the screen door without a response and one of the dogs makes a beeline to sniff my crotch. The man yanks him back by the collar and holds him. He grabs the other's collar too, hunched over holding them both. He is colossally tall.

"Damn it, Coop, cool it. Relax." He wiggles the dog's collar and it quietens. I mumble apologies.

"Are you here to see Isa?" he repeats.

“Yes, yes,” I blurt out. “Sorry. I’m looking for Isa.”

“Well, she’s on the beach with her Ma, takin’ a walk. They don’t stay out long, how ‘bout you sit and I’ll make us some coffee ‘til she gets back.”

I must have been shaking his head. He cocks his head to the side. “Well, come on in and sit on the porch, at least. I won’t bother ya, though F.M. here might come sit with ya.” He smiles down at the dog to his right. I realize he’s Isa’s father.

I nod and he stands to the side, letting me pass. The door’s air hinge hisses behind me as it closes. I walk through the hallway, unsure of where I’m going, and arrive at the end to an open plan kitchen and living room with patterned couches. Everything is sea themed: the clock above the mantle, the seashell chimes at the balcony door, the vases of sea glass on the living room table, the kitchen runner covered in cartoon fishes, the mermaid wine holder on the counter, the conch on top of the fridge.

He offers coffee and I ask to use the toilet. It was a long drive from Raleigh, I say.

“I thought you were just from town! ‘Course you may. Back where ya came, second door on the right.”

The bathroom is painted a horrific peach. The soap is in a shell, the ink is made of sea glass. The lid has one of those rug covers on it, also peach. I pee and stay a while, popping blackheads in the mirror, killing time, trying to calm the fuck down. When I come out, the man is in one of four Adirondacks on the back porch, a little glass table next to him with two coffee mugs. They’re pale, pale, pale, filled to the brim with the Hazelnut creamer I saw on the counter. I sit down beside him and put my feet up like his, but one of the dogs puts his head on my ankle and peers longingly at my stool.

“Monty, no,” her father says, but I tell him it’s fine and move my feet away from the stool. The dog pops up and makes himself comfortable, and I give him a pet.

“F.M. Full Monty?” I ask.

He smiles and nods. “Full Monty. F.M. Noelle’s favorite. That’s Isa’s mom.”

“My name is Ellen.” I have no idea why I’m introducing myself to this man.

He looks at me, longer this time. Or maybe I’m imagining it. I’m probably imagining it. He seems to come to an understanding in his own mind, because after a pause, he nods and a smile appears on his face. “I’m Marcus.”

We sit there quietly for an excruciating five minutes. My phone is tucked beneath my sweating thighs. There's a decent ocean view on the left between two houses, and I watch like a hawk for signs of Isa.

Soon, two women appear, arm in arm. I can't see her well enough yet and I turn my eyes away. I suddenly don't want to know what she looks like. Can't know. Absolutely *must not know*. I stand quickly and the dog spazzes, jumping off the stool and letting out a single bark.

"I'm so sorry. I need to go," I stutter. "I'm sorry. I forgot... I need to go."

Marcus is standing now too, his hands out in front of him, confused and frantic.

"Hey now, are ya sure? I see them now. She'll be here in a minute."

"I'm—yes, no, I'm sorry, I have to go." I'm already back in the kitchen now, scrambling for my keys. When I look back out at the balcony, he's holding my phone.

"Shit, shit," I mumble and run back through the balcony door. He hands it to me and at the same time, I look to my left towards the sea.

Her hair is long, plaited at the top and pulled into a curly ponytail in the back. She's barefoot, in leggings and a cowl neck sweater. I'm overwhelmed with nausea, with... everything. I break eye contact, shove the phone into my ass pocket and book it through the balcony door and out through the front of the house. The key is in the ignition before the door is closed and I floor it out of there, through one stop sign and the next, as if she could chase me down on her own two feet.

—

In the middle of Kill Devil Hills there's a monument to the first airplane flight, a phallic white marble thing on top of small grass hill. We went once, in seventh grade, during our history unit on the Wright Brothers. All of us piled up in that short, leaky van for a four-hour drive, sticky juice pouring down our forearms from a Ziplock of orange slices. Mikey Lawson fingered me under a blanket for the first time on that bus ride, with his too-long fingernails. I remember holding hands with him as we walked around the base of the obelisk. The horse girls and pimple-faced boys lined up to climb it. The rest of us stayed behind and made out on the steps.

I see it in the distance and follow it like a beacon. In the parking lot, I take deep, shaky breaths. I pull out some toilet paper from the console and stick two wads beneath my damp pits.

This time of year, Kill Devil is empty. I'm the only car. A lone dog walker and a few older couples are out for morning strolls and the grass lawn is patchy and late-winter-dead. So I see her when she pulls into the parking lot across the way, driving the old Buick that had been parked out front of the house. She opens the door and stands on the side step of the car, shielding her eyes. I slide down into the seat so she doesn't spot me. I watch her jump down onto the gravel, lean into the passenger seat and pull out a baseball hat. She fixes it on her head and starts walking towards the monument.

She's walked a few steps before I notice she's pregnant.

She heads around the back side of the monument and I pull down the visor to check my teeth and hair. I'm a fucking mess. I wad up the pit-paper, pull my hair back into a quick braid and pull out little wisps by the ears. I bite my lips and swish watered-down Sprite from the passenger seat around my mouth. The crease between my eyebrows is deep and angry red.

When I put up the visor, I see her. Jogging. Towards me.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I blurt out, scrambling, starting the engine and throwing the car in reverse. Avril Lavigne starts blasting from the CD player and I try to turn it down but click the air conditioner on instead. She's fast and I can see the Lakers logo on her hat before my foot is off the brake. My car jostles over the gravel as I reverse out of the spot. But as I put the car in drive, a school bus pulls into the lot, taking a wide berth at the entrance and looking poised for a twelve-point turn.

"Fuck," I repeat, and then she's there, standing at my passenger door. I smile out of instinct and wave my fingers from the steering wheel, then grimace. She keeps a straight face, takes a step back and motions for me to park. I'm Kevin Costner in *No Way Out*.

I pull back into the same spot, a little crooked, and turn off the engine. I stare at my hands, bending and straightening my thumbs. In my peripheral, she's walking away towards the monument. I watch her go.

I make a thumbs up with my left hand and a thumbs down with my right hand. "Fuck it," I say, and give myself two thumbs up. At least if I speak to her I won't have wasted the tank and a half of gas it took to get here. I open the door and follow her as she walks towards the hill and then veers down it instead, where a full-size model plane sits, surrounded by life-size metal statues of the Wright Brothers and a small crowd of onlookers.

Students are piling out the bus, jumping on each other's backs and running towards the obelisk. A pale boy in a tank top makes a scene of falling to the ground, kissing it, blessing it, but the other kids just step around him. A few try to be discreet about checking their phones, hidden in their jeans and hoodie pockets.

Isa slows, waiting for me to catch up. We walk next to each other, as far apart as the stone path allowed.

"Hi, Ellen," she says without looking over at me. A hand latches onto my intestines, twisting.

"Hi," I manage.

"You didn't finish your coffee."

"It was shit coffee."

She laughs through her nostrils. "Yeah, it is."

Above us, seagulls caw and swerve and float. We circle a statue of a photographer, dressed in a newsboy hat and suit and crouched down over his field camera and tripod. I run my hand along the photographer's shoulders. His facial features are rough, a little too close together.

Isa blows out a deep breath, cheeks puffed out. "I really didn't think you'd come."

I shrug. I'm nauseous and the sun is too bright. My heart is racing.

"I feel like I know you," she says. I look over at her and she's standing next to a statue of a small girl. She traces her fingers over the girl's long braid. It's so intimate and careful and I remember my mother and remember who this is and remember how much I hate her, all at once.

"Well, you don't," I spit at her, "and if you don't mind, I'm fucking exhausted, my ass hurts from driving, and I spent half my savings to get here, so can we get this over with?"

She pulls her hand off the braid and turns to face me, face blank like she hadn't even heard me.

"Can you stay a while?"

"What? No. I can't. So spit it out."

"It's not something you can just *spit out*, Ellen."

"Yeah, well. Try."

She opens her mouth and closes it. She shakes her head and starts walking away towards the plane. I throw my arms up in the air and groan.

“I should have fuckin’ known! I’m going home.” I turn back to my car. “Thank you for wasting my time.”

That gets her attention. “No! Wait,” she calls. “Ellen. Please. Wait.” She runs up to me and grabs my shoulder, jerking me back. I spin on my heels.

“Do *not* touch me.”

This close, I’m looking up at her. She’s tall like her father. She grabs my forearms and holds them tight.

“Stay. Give me just one night. I just... this is harder for me than you realize. Please. Stay.”

I wrestle my arms from her grip and start walking away. But as I do, I spot a mother on the lawn nearby. She’s pushing a stroller up the hill with one hand, holding a baby on her shoulder with the other. Two toddlers run circles around her, screaming. One little boy and one little girl. We make eye contact and she gives me an exhausted smile. I stop in my tracks, thinking of Summa’s words. *I could leave this.*

“Ellen, stay. Please,” Isa calls from behind me. “Give me a chance to explain everything.”

I shake my head again, but God, I’m ferociously tired. I don’t want to do the drive home tonight and sleeping in a car sucks ass. Besides, the CR-V doesn’t have house keys on it, so odds are I’d be homeless for three nights until Dad and Shelley got home. I could stay with Summa, but images of breast milk and tantrums and baby barf flash in my head and I find myself nodding. I turn around.

“Fine. One night.”

Her face floods with relief. She walks up to me but doesn’t touch me, just nods, and we walk side by side to my car in silence.

“You know the way,” she says flatly, closing the car door behind me.

—

I’m staying in the guest bedroom on the first floor. She leaves me alone for the first hour or so, and I peruse the room. It’s got a bathtub lined with sea shells and clean towels that smell like lavender. It’s three in the afternoon but I take a bath. She took my mom—the least I can do

is rack up the water bill a bit. By the time I finish, I'm way more relaxed, and I notice a clean navy blue sweater and joggers on the bed when I come out of the bathroom. I put on my dirty jeans and t-shirt and leave the pile untouched. If there's one thing ninth grade social studies taught me, it's that the first step in brainwashing at POW camps is to make them think you're taking care of them.

We survive the first meal together, me, Isa, and her parents, small lies about Isa and I's work together and plans to rendezvous for a little girls' weekend after a few years apart. Her parents are... well, lovely, honestly. They pause for each other when they're speaking. I notice Marcus pour Noelle a glass of water and Noelle dishes Marcus the nicest piece of fish, with no mushrooms, she teases, because he still hasn't learned to like them. I can't help but think of Mom, if whether Isa knew those things about her. Like how she hated capers but loved olives, liked her bread buttered when she was having soup, liked her chicken without skin. I avoid looking up at her as much as I can. Marcus fills up a second glass of wine for me and I sip it between bites. The fish is tasty as fuck.

After dinner, Marcus and Noelle make decaf coffees and go to the couch to play a game of *Yamslam*. I shake my head at the invite, blaming exhaustion.

Isa tilts her head towards the porch. "Want to take a walk?"

—

She pulls a cardboard box out from the closet. She gets out two flashlights and wraps them both in red cellophane, tied with flimsy rubber bands. She hands one to me.

'For the turtles,' she says. I flick mine on and off, the red light weak against the mudroom wall. "Not really an issue this time of year, but just in case. If there's a light on the beach at night, it confuses the mama and she'll nest in the wrong place. Or the babies will head the wrong way." I start pulling on my boots and she shakes her head. "You can go barefoot. There's a pathway."

We follow the elevated path all the way to the beach. My toes curve to the planks, the familiar sound of bare feet on wood. We're silent until we step onto the sand. The dunes stretch out on either side of us, a long, narrow beach at nearly high tide. The dune grass is swaying

loudly and the beach is deserted apart from a few hunkered down gulls. The waves claw their way up the slanted beach. Isa turns towards the pier far off to the left and starts walking.

“You’re married,” I say to her back before catching up to her.

“Yes.” After a pause, she adds, “It’s a man. Not... not that you asked.”

“I figured as much.” I point to her stomach. She put a hand to it instinctively.

“How far along?”

“Twenty-five weeks.”

“Cool, cool.” Red circles from our flashlights bob side by side along the sand. She walks fast. I step on a sharp seashell and curse.

“Why are you doing this now?”

She turns to look at me. “The baby, or contacting you?”

I don’t respond.

“Sam, to be honest. My husband. He sort of, encouraged me into it. Contacting you, I mean. He’s been slowly helping me figure out how fucked up I am because of everything that happened. And with this—” she points to her stomach with both hands, “—happening, all this stuff with your mom started coming up again. And in all honesty,” she shrugs, “I thought you wouldn’t come. But at least I could tell him I tried.” She pauses and looks at me. “But you came. Why?”

I shrug. “Curiosity, I guess.”

She smiles awkwardly. “Well, I hope I live up to your expectations.”

I shake my head. “In all honesty, you should hope you don’t.”

We walk for a few minutes without speaking. I see her shake her head and open and close her mouth a few times.

“I don’t even know where to start,” she says.

“At the beginning?”

“That’s the hardest part.”

“Okay, then. At the end.”

She gives a curt nod and takes a deep breath. I prompt her.

“When did you last see her?”

She tells me about her visit to Wilmington after Mom walked out, almost seven years ago.

“You just left her there?” I ask.

Isa looks over at me, her mouth open. I pick up a shell and fidget with it to avoid her eyes. “She left me first,” she says defensively. “She left me long before I left her.”

Isa delves into a few stories about Mom’s addiction. About the people who came to stay at the house, the fights towards the end. The night Marcus dragged her home high and wasted, and the time Mom threatened to jump from the window. The days she would just stop talking to her completely.

Eventually, we turn around, the pier much closer but still unreachable. The walk home is slow, the wind in front of us, and we talk less. She gives me long spaces to let everything sink in, or maybe to calm herself down.

When we reach the house, she moves to open the door but then stops and looks at me. Her voice is a whisper. “Why’d you really come, Ellen?”

I nod, and look back towards the ocean. When I meet her eyes again, they’re pleading. I think about Gracie, weirdly, for a moment. I let out a deep exhale.

“Because when you emailed us, all those years ago, when Mom left you and you were worried—I saw it. I saw it and I erased it.”

—

When I wake up in the morning, for the first minute I’m absolutely sure that I’m still dreaming. The walls around me are a periwinkle blue. I would rather have woken up to Kelan’s cream curtains, something I can’t believe I’m actually saying.

Marcus makes us breakfast and milky coffee but leaves us to eat alone while he and Noelle read the papers on the porch. When we’re done, Isa and I take the golf cart out for a drive. She lets me drive, directing me along narrow roads, and I have more fun than I care to admit. We go to the market, where we buy digestive yogurt, avocados, and two loaves of fresh bread. She stops at the ice cream parlor on the way out of the shop, where she buys us two chocolate ice cream cones. She hands one to me as I sit sprawled out in the cart.

“This is fucking weird,” I say, though I accept it.

“I know.”

“If Mom could see this.”

“She’d kill us both,” Isa says seriously. “Cheers.” She tips her cone against mine.

We drive our cones to the marina and park overlooking the boats. The water laps lazily onto the docks and two couples sit on a boat having lunch. One couple is two gay men and we both watch them, one’s arm slung comfortably over the other’s leg.

We talk more about Mom. I ask her how they met, and the story makes me smile in spite of myself. I ask Isa how much her parents knew about it, what her friends thought. She starts to tell me about their sex, and I stop her. But we circle back to it eventually and I let her tell me this time. She tells me how unhappy Mom was at home with Dad. How lonely she was.

Isa has to work for a few hours and Noelle insists I play tennis with her. She’s old and it’s a slow game but she still kicks my ass. I manage to forget who she is for a few minutes and find myself falling madly in love with her. She introduces me to her tennis friends as “Isabel’s friend” and I nod along, willing it to be true. Isa and Marcus meet us for dinner at the club, sandwiches and fries. I try to keep frowning but it’s hard.

When we get home from dinner, Isa takes a long call upstairs. It’s clear by the way she answers the phone that it’s Sam. I go to bed early, eager to be alone, and I hear her hushed, angry tones through the wall. I wonder if what she said is true—that Sam is the one who talked her into contacting me. It sure as hell doesn’t sound like it.

—

I wake up to Marcus banging on my door.

“Ellie, dear, wake up! Grab a sweater, quickly!”

I’m up instantly, pulling on my big sweatpants. Is the house on fire? Is Noelle okay? But when I burst from the room, Isa and her father are at the kitchen counter, giggling and hurriedly wrapping flashlights in cellophane.

“Is everything alright?”

They look up at me with excited smiles. Isa’s falters a bit when she remembers who I am. I look down at myself, barefoot, sweatpants, an old sorority t-shirt, retainer.

Marcus returns to his work, staring intently at the flashlight in his hands, and I hear a rubber band snap. “A nesting! This early in the year! I can’t believe it. Will be mostly males by the time they hatch, reckon, this cold out there.”

Isa tosses me a flashlight with a straight face. I rush back to my room for flip flops and quickly take my retainer out, hiding it in the bedside table.

“Noelle, we gotta go!” Marcus yells up the stairs, golf cart keys in his hands, ushering us to the front door. “Come on everybody, load up!” The dogs are wiggling excitedly at his feet. He apologizes to them that they can’t come with, giving their heads a pat. The old school radio attached to his belt buckle gives off some static, and he pulls it up to his ear, adjusting the dial. I hear someone say something about a turtle.

Isa pulls on a pair of Ugg boots at the door and a puffy coat that goes down to her knees. Noelle hurries down the stairs, pulling on a shawl and calling to me.

“Elle, darling, do you have a coat? Do you want one? I’ve got that big fluffy one with a hood. No, don’t give her that one, Marcus. Let me go grab mine.” She heads back upstairs. Isa groans.

“Ma, come on!”

“I’m coming, I’m coming!” she calls from upstairs. A jacket comes flying down the stairs, and a second later, she follows suit, but dodges the door. “I have to pee!”

Marcus gives an exaggerated head roll. “Noelle Walker, I swear it, you have never left this house in your entire life without using the toilet first!”

She points at Marcus and wiggles her finger before closing the bathroom door behind her. “Don’t swear.”

Isa smiles at me and ducks through the front door into the dark.

—

I’m learning that Marcus never drives the golf cart above a crawl. No matter what. It’s the middle of the night and he’s driving approximately three miles an hour towards Beach Exit 39. Neither Isa nor Noelle complains, so I keep my mouth shut. Noelle is telling me about the process of an egg laying.

“...and she’ll trudge her way up the shore and find herself a cozy spot up by the dunes and she’ll dig and dig with her flippers until there’s enough space there for all the babies. When she starts pushing them out, she goes into a trance—you’ll see it, dear—and can’t nothing make her stop. And they always nest on the same beach where they were born.”

We arrive to the beach, climb over the dunes and follow the hazy red dots in the distance. When we get close, there's a small crowd of people, maybe a dozen or so, and a few teenagers—from the looks of it—crouched down in a small circle, wearing red headlamps and looking busy. I maneuver around the group until I see her.

She is huge. Much bigger than I expected her to be. Easily three and a half feet long and as wide as Marcus. She's completely still except for the movement of her back fins.

The group vibrates from the slight cold and anticipation. Even the children are hyper focused, asking questions and trying to move closer.

I watch in silence as the mama finishes digging, closes her eyes, and starts dropping eggs into the hole. One of the teenagers tells us that the eggs, which look like ping pong balls, are soft and malleable, so that they don't break on impact with the hole or each other. She lays one after the other; I lose count at 41.

People start to ask questions. An older woman asks about the turtle's age. A little kid asks if you can eat turtle eggs. The man standing next to me asks something about the tides. His wife asks about the gestation period.

“When she's finished laying tonight,” one teenager responds, “she'll drag herself back into the ocean and leave the eggs to fend for themselves until they hatch in about two months.”

“Will she ever see them again?” I ask quietly.

The teenager tells me that it's unlikely. “Well, if they make it to the water—and there's a whole lot of hungry predators and obstacles to cross between here and the shore—then they've still got to face the whole ocean and everything scary in it until they'd have a chance to see her again, and even then, the ocean's a pretty big place. And only about 1 in 1,000 hatchlings survive to adulthood. So odds are, our mama here won't ever get to meet any of these little guys.”

Noelle puts her hand on my back. The teenagers get to work on tagging the mother. I watch them pierce her fin and pull a plastic clip through the hole. She doesn't flinch. They measure her like they're measuring space for a couch. But she can't hear them, doesn't see them, doesn't feel them. She is here for a purpose, to give life, and she is giving all of herself to do it. And when she's done, she'll cover them up and leave them and never see them again. I think of Summa. I think of Mom.

All this effort, and she will never meet them. Never see what she had created. What they create. Never see them grown. My eyes are hot with tears. I want to shout at them to leave her

be. *Stop touching her. Leave her alone*, I scream to my skull. I'm angry for her. I'm angry for her babies. Who wins? No one. No mother for them, no children for her. The tears are starting to come down my cheeks.

Isa is watching me carefully. Suddenly I can't be there, can't see it, can't bear it, can't deal with Noelle's hand on my back, Isa's pregnant belly, can't watch the tagging and measuring and birthing and abandoning. I turn and run towards the ocean, dropping my coat at the water line and wading in. I don't stop until I'm thigh deep and the water has soaked my jeans and Isa is calling my name.

Isa is calling my name.

The water is warm and I drop down into it, watching her. She's left the circle and is watching me from the water line. I see tears coming down her cheeks. She's begging me to come back in. I sink lower, immersing myself to my ears. I lean back and float, facing up at the stars.

"Ellen, please. Please don't do this." I hear Isa's muffled crying through the water. She's wading into the water. *She'll come in for me*, I think. And suddenly I can't allow it. I move towards her and past her and sit down on the sand, soaked to the bone. She comes and sits next to me wordlessly, elbows on her knees, running her hands over her face. We sit for a few moments.

"Do you think that's she's dead?" I whisper.

She pauses. "Yeah, I do."

"Okay."

We watch a few waves come in, sitting there side by side. I stand up, pick up a shell, and chuck it into the ocean. Then I turn around and put out an arm. She takes it and pulls herself up. We walk back to the golf cart and she pulls a towel out from under the seat, handing it to me. I strip off all of my wet clothes: my jeans, my sweater, my underwear. She watches me silently as I undress and I let her.

I pull Noelle's jacket over my naked body. We sit in the front seat of the golf cart and wait for Marcus and Noelle, who walk slowly back from the nesting.

"You have her skin," Isa says, staring out the front windshield.

"Were you happy?"

"With your mom?" She pauses, and I see her grin out of the corner of my eye. "For a while, we were. Yes. Stupidly. Euphoric, sometimes. Like we'd just discovered we were witches."

I smile. We're silent until Noelle and Marcus get into the cart, and all the way home.

—

In the morning, the air is warmer and my clothes are hanging out to dry over the balcony railing. I walk out to the beach to call Col. I watch a few kids build a sandcastle, no parents in sight. I sit in the sand and dig one hand in deep. A few beach flies swarm my ankles. Col picks up on the fourth ring.

"Dad told me you took the car." His voice is irritated.

"Yep."

"You went."

"I went."

"You lied."

"I lied."

"I told you not to go."

"Yep."

He pauses.

"So... how is the wicked witch of the east? Are you on the beach? I can hear the seagulls."

I catch him up.

"You're staying at her *house*? What's it like?!"

"Nice. Cringey. They've got these little hand-knitted chickens that they put over their hardboiled eggs to keep them warm for breakfast."

"Cringe."

"Right?"

"That's disgusting. Were we ever like that?"

I laugh. "Not a fucking chance. Have you met Mom?"

I pause. We're both quiet on either side of the phone.

"Col, do you remember when Dad would go to China when we were kids and Mom would throw a little holiday? We'd skip school and eat only Stouffer's mac and cheese for dinners and she'd drink a bottle of wine a night?"

Col laughs. “She used to hide upstairs because she thought the dogs were judging her.”

“Do you think that she was unhappy? Do you think we could have missed that?”

“I don’t think so,” he says. “We were with her every day.”

I remember that I’m talking to a man. I bury my feet in sand and pat the top smooth with both hands, phone tucked between my shoulder and ear.

“So how is she?” he pries.

“Not as horrible as I thought, honestly.” I don’t tell him that she’s pregnant. I don’t tell him that she’s beautiful, or kind. “She’s got some interesting stuff to say about Mom.”

Col’s voice breaks a little. “Oh yeah? Like what?”

I tell him what I’d learned. When I finish, he says, “That it?”

“Yeah, Col, that’s it.”

He takes a deep breath that makes static on the phone. “Well, I mean, shit. Yeah, all of that sucks.”

I look back at the house. I see Isa’s bedroom light is on. I say goodbye to Col and promise to catch him up later. He stops me before I hang up.

“Sis, just be careful, okay? We have no idea if this woman is telling the truth about anything.”

“I just don’t see why she’d lie, after all this time.”

“People have their reasons,” Col says.

—

A tempest from Hades hits that afternoon. The four of us sit on the back porch and watch the lightning show over the ocean. The thunder cracks over our head for at least an hour, the rain comes down in slants and wets the porch wood. The air smells damp, and Isa offers me sips of her Diet Coke.

When Marcus and Noelle go to bed, Isa and I go inside to the study. She shows me pictures of her and Mom, the few she does have. She tells me about their road trip to Key West. The party they threw for me when I graduated. The handmade paper angel ornaments Mom made for their Christmas tree one year, each with one of our names on it.

If she’s alive, Mom’s spent the last six Christmases alone.

Isa runs me a hot bath. I cry myself through it, and straight to sleep.

—

I walk into the kitchen in the morning and find fresh coffee in the pot. There are four mugs out next to it, creamer already poured in the base of each. I fill mine to the brim with coffee and take a healthy sip.

“Happy Sunday,” Marcus says, coming in from their bedroom. He squeezes my shoulder.

“It’s Sunday,” I say.

“It is. Isa just left on a bike ride. Want some toast?”

A few minutes later, we’re standing side by side in the kitchen, buttering toast. I add a bit of raspberry jam. He adds pimento cheese. We both lean back against the counters and take our first bites, smiling at each other.

“You’re her daughter, aren’t you?” I look over to see Noelle standing in the doorway, staring at me.

“Noelle,” Marcus says in a warning tone. He shakes his head.

“It’s okay,” I say quickly. I set my toast down on the counter and wipe my hands on my sweatpants. “Yeah, I am.”

She comes over to me. My first inclination is that she’s going to hit me. But what she does hits harder than that: she hugs me. Long and hard. I hug her back. Afterwards, she holds my face in her hands.

“I see her anger in you,” Noelle says. “That scares me for you. And makes me so very, very sorry. You must be careful, my dear.”

I’m annihilated. I’m crying before I take a breath. She leads me to the kitchen table, and the three of us sit down together. Noelle wraps her arms around me. I feel Marcus’ warm hand on my forearm.

When Isa gets home, the three of us are still huddled there, speaking softly. Talking about plans, about my brothers. Old memories of Mom. Isa is sweaty and panting when she comes into the room.

“It’s Sunday,” she says.

I nod. “It’s Sunday.”

“You’re leaving today.”

“I’m leaving today.”

She looks at the table, where her mother is holding my hand. I can’t convince myself to pull it away. Isa looks at Marcus, who nods softly.

“She’s... Lacey’s child,” Isa says slowly, almost like a question.

“We know, honey,” Noelle says. She gives my hand a pat. We all stare at each other.

Isa looks to me. Her face goes blank. I can tell she’s pissed. Noelle squeezes my hand and starts to stand. “Well, we’re off to church and will be back in two hours. Will we see you when we get home?”

“I’ll stay to say goodbye, I promise.”

“I’m so sorry, Ellen,” she responds, teary eyed. I don’t know what part she’s apologizing for. Marcus rests his palm on the top of my head for a moment. I look up at him, and he nods reassuringly.

Isa takes her father’s chair across from me. Noelle and Marcus head upstairs, and I can hear Noelle sniffing as she goes. Isa whispers crossly to me.

“Did you tell them who you are?”

“No. Your mom asked me.”

“Well, you could have lied.”

“Isa, she already knew. Look at me. It’s not hard to figure out. Does it look like we’ve been having a fun girls’ holiday?”

Isa rubs her fingers against her temples.

“Look, I don’t understand the big deal,” I say. “They don’t care.”

“Because you don’t understand anything, Ellen. You don’t know how bad the situation was. How screwed up the whole thing is.”

We hear Noelle coming back downstairs and both go silent. Marcus finishes brushing his teeth eventually follows Noelle down the stairs. We don’t speak until the front door closes and we hear the golf cart reverse out of the drive.

“Then fucking tell me, Isa,” I start. “If it’s so bad, tell me why. Why else am I here? What are you holding back? Because from where I see it, Mom got sick and sad and bored and she left you. Big whoop. She left us too.”

Isa grabs my arm and pulls me roughly out of the chair, through the hall and into the study. “You want to know, Ellen? You want to see what actually happened?” She shoves me onto one of the chairs and shuffles through a filing cabinet in the corner.

“I’d decided I wasn’t going to tell you this,” she continues. “I told Sam, ‘She doesn’t need to know. I’ve met her and she doesn’t need to know.’ So I said, I’ll leave it out. Haven’t said a damn thing about it. But if you’re so intent on knowing, it’s time you know. Just don’t blame me for it, because you asked for it.”

She pulls out old Ziplock, opens it up and dumps the contents out on the counter.

It’s photos. Of Mom. Covered in bruises. Isa arranges them on the table, flips them all facing up in front of me.

“Do you know who did this, Ellen? Do you know what happened the night she left?”

I shake my head profusely, pushing the images away. *No. No. Nope. Not this. Don’t want this.*

“Your dad, Ellen. Your dad did this.”

“No,” I repeat, this time out loud.

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes, Ellen.” Isa pours out the story in one go. How Dad found about the affair. How he went to Isa. How she refused. How Dad came home with Carmen. The body in the laundry basket. Lacey arriving at her house, covering in blood.

When she finishes, my breath is coming in short bursts. She looks relieved and almost sympathetic. I only manage one sentence.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I’m so sorry, Ellen,” she says, softer now. She pulls the photos into a pile and takes them away. “I have to. You have to know.”

I’m shaking my head. “No. It’s not true. You’re lying.”

“El—” she reaches out and tries to grab my arm. I scream at her.

“No! Why are you lying? Why are you doing this? Why are you saying these things?”

She looks like I’ve slapped her. Her mouth open and closes multiple times before she finds the words.

“I’m not lying,” she says feebly.

“You are.”

Isa starts laughing, then shouts at me, speaking in rapid fire. “Why are you here, Ellen? Why did you come? Because I don’t think you would have come if you didn’t believe, even just a tiny bit of you, that this was a possibility.”

I open my mouth but she cuts me off.

“No. You wouldn’t have come. You knew. You felt it. At some point, you witnessed something between your parents that didn’t fit. Something about your Dad that didn’t feel right. About how it ended. You’re smart, Ellen. Look at me. Do you really think I could break up a happy marriage? Do you really give me that much credit? That I could make a mother walk out on her kids? No. Do you have even a fraction of an idea how much your mom cared about you? No. You don’t. I’m doing this for her, Ellen. You have to know this. For her.”

Isa starts to arrange the photos again. I push them back at her. I’m shaking furiously.

“No, no,” I shout back at her, shaking my head. I push the photos back again, standing up. “No, Isa. You don’t get to make this about my mom. This is about you. This, all this bullshit”—I gesture between us—“this isn’t feminism, sisterhood, or social justice, or any of that bullshit. You’re not doing this for my mom. You’re doing this for you.”

I jump out of the chair and storm out of the room into the guest bedroom. I grab my backpack and start shoving clothes into it. She stands in the doorway. I yell at her while I pack.

“You know, I did give you that credit, to answer your question. I did think, yeah, I get why Mom left. Look at her. Look at this house. Look at this family. I get it. But now I see why Mom left you. You’re selfish. You’re the most selfish person I’ve ever met and this is the most selfish thing you could have done, coming to me after all this time, passing this over to me like a fucking trauma baton. Ha! Well congratulations, you’re officially released. Congrats on the baby glow and the perfect husband and the perfect little family. It worked. Your plan worked. Now your conscience is clear and my life is fucking over.”

I move to the doorway, my backpack over my shoulder and car keys in my hand. She blocks my way.

“Move,” I say.

“No.” She shakes her head. She’s crying. I realize I am too.

“Move,” I repeat.

“You know,” she starts, her voice shaking. “You talk a big game, but when it really comes down to it, you’re a child. You’re a fucking child.”

I grab her by the arms and kiss her hard. She stands stock still but I don’t let go. I keep my lips pressed against hers and I grab at her growing stomach, her face, anything I can. I try to find what my mom felt. All I find is hollow and bone. I push her away from me in disgust.

She stumbles backwards out of my way, her hand to her mouth. I swing the door open and storm to the car. The music blares when I turn it on, and as I pull out, branches scrape the car door. I look back at the house once before I pull away, and she’s standing in the doorway, hand on her belly, watching me go.

—

I call Col once I hit I-40. There’s no Bluetooth in this old piece of shit so I hold my phone on speaker in my right hand and drive with my left. I’m calm when he picks up, holding everything at bay, but he says hello and it comes out of me all at once. I’m immediately crying.

“What if we were wrong about Isa? About everything? We always assumed Mom had all of these affairs but what if Dad was the one who was lying? What if she didn’t leave because of Isa?”

“Sis, slow down. Where are you?”

“I’m driving.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can you pull over?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“Okay, I’ll pull over.” I keep driving.

“Are you stopped?”

I lie.

“Good, okay. Start over.”

I tell him everything Isa said. About the woman, about the night Mom left. I speak for five minutes uninterrupted, sobbing through my sentences. When I finish, Col is quiet for a long time before he speaks.

“How do we know she’s telling the truth?”

“Col, it makes total sense. Dad’s been lying to our faces. He fucked us all up, Col.”

“Okay, just calm down. Don’t do anything impulsive, okay? You’re overwhelmed, you’re exhausted, this is obviously a lot. Just—take a deep breath. I’m sure there’s an explanation.”

“The explanation is that Dad killed that woman, Col!”

“We don’t know anything for sure. She could be lying.”

“Lying? Are you serious, Col? She’s not lying. I saw her. I saw the photos. She’s telling the truth.”

“Ellen—just hold on a sec. This is *Dad* we’re talking about. Dad. The one who *stayed*.”

“Just because he stayed doesn’t make him better, Col. You always thought Dad was this sparkly thing but that’s because you don’t remember Mom. Mom was fucking great to us, Col.”

Col takes a shaky breath. “El, I remember.”

“Sorry, you know that’s not what I mean. I know you remember her, I just—”

“El, stop. I *remember*.”

“—I know.”

“Stop! El. You’re not listening. I’m trying to tell you something. I remember. The night Mom left. I remember it.”

I’m stunned into silence. Col continues.

“I didn’t know what to do—”

“What? What are you saying?”

“They didn’t know I was awake and I—”

“Col, what the fuck are you saying?”

“El—”

“You knew what happened to Mom? To that woman? All this time, you knew?”

His voice is in hushed tones now. I hear someone on the other end of the phone, then a door close.

“You... you never—” I shake my head furiously into the phone, stumbling over my words.

“I never told anyone, El. What was I supposed to say? Hey everybody, I saw Dad bury that sleepy lady in the backyard last night? I heard Daddy beat up Mommy? I was *fourteen*, Ellen.”

“Why do people keep using age as an excuse to fuck up everyone’s lives?”

“El. Just stop. This information, it doesn’t have to change anything, okay? We can go back to normal. This is *Dad* we’re talking about. This is the only parent we’ve got left, okay? You can’t do this to us.”

“I can’t do this to us? Col, what are you saying?”

“He didn’t mean it. He’s never done it again. It was a mistake and there’s no reason that we have to do anything about it. Mom’s gone, El. What’s the point? Listen, I’ve lived with this for ten plus years, okay? You’ll get through this. You just have to... calm down. He didn’t mean it.”

I sob through the phone for a long time, and when I speak again, it’s slow and quiet.

“Does he know you know?”

“No, of course not. Ellie, just don’t do anything impulsive, okay? Just come to me and we’ll talk it out.”

My voice shakes. “How dare you?”

“Ellen, just hear me out.”

“You fucking asshole. You fucking asshole.” I slam my finger on the end button.

My hands are shaking and I phone Alex through heavy tears. He doesn’t answer. I text him, using my knees to drive. *Please call me*. I drop my phone into the passenger seat and it bounces over the edge, into the crack by the door. It starts to ring. Crying, I pull over to the shoulder, and lean over to grab the phone. It’s Alex. I don’t answer. He phones again. I don’t answer. Can’t answer. Can’t tell him. Don’t even know what I’d say. I scream at the steering wheel, choke it and strangle it. Beat it.

Maybe Mom did the right thing, getting the hell out of dodge. Maybe she realized how fucked up this family was before the rest of us did. Maybe she was leading the way, showing me how. I shut my phone off.

I'm halfway back to Raleigh when I realize I didn't get to hug Marcus and Noelle goodbye. It takes all of me to keep on driving.

Dad and Shelley are out for walk when I pull into Surrey Green. I'm sure the front door is unlocked, but I can't go in there just yet. Can't face it alone. So I lay down on the brick front porch stairs with my hoodie behind my head, looking up at the stars. I see the Seven Sisters, Orion's Belt, the Big and Little Dippers. I trace them with my fingers, remembering how Dad showed me, all those years ago. I wish on them that I could forget what I learned in Kill Devil, but I know I won't. Can't. I stroke the bricks with my hand and wish them goodbye.

I help Shelley cook dinner that night. I set the table and put candles in Dad's birthday cake while she cuts and slices in the kitchen. Shelley cuts the cantaloupe different from Mom, in long pretty slices with the rind still on.

She smiles at me as she stirs the green beans, and it's a big smile, full of years of broken birthdays and loneliness. My stomach lurches for her, thinking of her alone in this house with him, thinking of her alone in the one place she shouldn't be lonely. Thinking of her in the bed where he killed that woman. After dinner, she rests her fingers on mine when I pick up her plate, and I feel the gratitude through her skin.

We eat cake and ice cream and Dad opens his presents. Shelley hands him a trash bag and as he opens his presents, he shoves the torn-up paper into it. By the time we're done, it's full, and Dad's got on a new pair of New Balances and a button-down sweater with the tag still on over top of his pajamas. He swings a tennis racket around the room.

Shelley goes to bed early as she always does, leaving Dad and I in the recliners in the living room. We watch Seinfeld until he falls asleep. I watch him sleep and think about how easy sleep comes to those who don't think about anything other than themselves.

"Dad?" I say softly.

He hums a reply, his eyes opening reluctantly.

“Why did Mom leave?”

He looks over at me, and I see his face harden, then he closes his eyes again and rests his head back before he answers. “Because she wanted someone else more than she wanted us.”

I might have forgiven him then, if he broke down and cried. If he told me everything. If he repented, apologized, told the truth. But then again, maybe he wasn't lying, not intentionally, at least. Maybe that's his truth. Maybe he really thinks she left for Isa. Maybe he genuinely believes he was good to her. Maybe he still thinks that Mom would've stayed, would've tolerated all of that abuse, would've helped him bury a body, would've kept on living here until she simply drifted away, if it hadn't been for that Black girl from Kill Devil.

I realized then that he didn't know Mom at all. Never did. Never even tried.

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Dad heads up at 10:30 for bed. He plants a kiss on my forehead as he leaves the room and goes upstairs to Alex's old room, which Shelley renovated into the Master. The stairs creak heavily under his weight. I wait until I hear the dog jump up on the bed, the last crescendo in Dad's nighttime ensemble: spitting, gargling, blowing his nose, the rip of paper as he pulls out a nose strip, lights out, grunt, dog up on the bed.

I pour two glasses of wine. I put one on the dining table by the bay window and take the other to the couch. I flip through an old Newsweek magazine from the basket on the table but I'm not really reading it. The room feels too small. Too heavy.

I take my wine for a walk around the house, my bare feet cold against the hardwood. I slide my palm across the smooth wood of the dining room table, decorated with Shelley's hideous centerpiece that Mom would've hated. I lay down on the entry carpet, country blue and soft and sweet smelling, and remember the scratchy red one that used to be here, the heavy scent of dog that hung on the fibers and greeted you when you came in the front door. In the sunroom, I run my fingers lightly across the piano keys. In the old living room, I lean back against the curved corner and watch Mom pack away the Christmas decorations in my mind—her favorite Santas, the little wooden reindeer, the fake holly she would lay between picture frames and along the fireplace mantle. I apologize to every crack in the wall, every fleck of paint, for what it's been through. What it's seen. I wish everything goodbye.

On the way through the kitchen, I pull two Pop Tarts from the pantry, smiling at the groan of the door that's been there since I was a kid. I pop them in the toaster, and while I wait, I open all of the kitchen cupboards and imagine them before she left. Nesquik replaced with Lipton, Mom's mugs replaced with a matching grey set, her lemon bowls swapped out for fiesta-colored ones of all shapes and sizes. My Pop Tarts are done and I crack them open, burning my fingers and scraping the filling with my teeth.

I look back at the bay window, Mom's glass of wine untouched. I walk over and empty it into mine and sit down in her chair. She used to sit there for hours just looking out at the cardinals. She kept that one window clean—wouldn't clean another window in the whole house, but I'd spot her out there at least once a week with some spray and a cloth, cleaning her vantage point to the outside world. That clean window killed quite a few cardinals in its day, a loud "thud" ricocheting through the house as they flew full force into the glass. Mom often tried to help them, pushing them softly onto a rag and putting them out of reach of the cat. Giving them a little bowl of water. Other times she'd stand by the back door and look out and watch them die slowly, chirping gruesomely. More than once, I saw her shoo the cat outside with her foot, towards the still flailing creature.

One time, a bird died instantly, a sweet little finch, and she insisted we have a funeral in the backyard. We buried it and made a little cross out of small sticks and super glue and stuck it in the ground over the small mound. Standing there, she put her hands on my shoulders.

"Ellen, if I die, don't you dare put one of those things on top of me," she said to the cross. I liked the way she said it, *if I die*. Like she might not.

"There's nothing here for me now," I say to the two empty glasses. I think of my mother, sitting here, looking out the window and thinking the same goddamn thing.

I pull on my coat and walk out the side door. The screen door slaps against the frame and I don't care. Let him hear. Let him hear it for all of us, for Mom, for Isa, for me. Let him know he's alone. Let him watch from the window as one more woman walks away and doesn't come back. Let him crawl back to Shelley. I resist the urge to walk upstairs, grab her by the wrist and take her with me. But I'm not scared for her. She doesn't push him like Mom did. Doesn't make him look too hard at himself like Mom did. That's what happened, after all. Mom made him look hard at himself and when he found himself lacking, he blamed Mom for it. Like she'd taken

something away from him. Like he'd ever had that missing thing. Like he wasn't just half a man. Shelley lets him walk around like he's a whole man. Like he's a big man.

Maybe I don't give her enough credit, Shelley. Maybe she's just playing the game. Maybe she already knows. I look around the house, its pretty trinkets, the matching grey mugs, the marble countertops. Maybe she's playing the game and winning.

I climb into the car and flip on my headlights. In the beams, I see Mom's old hostas. She'd be so proud to see them still hanging on, too pretty for Shelley to get rid of. Or maybe Shelley keeps them as a peace offering. Or maybe, as a reminder.

I get out of the car, leaving the keys in the ignition and the doors wide open, beeping. I walk to the garage and grab a shovel.

I dig up every single hosta. But I don't stop. I dig up the whole flowerbed. I take the pansies, the black-eyed Susans, the chrysanthemum, the lamb's ear. The cicadas and the windchimes are my battle cry. That woman's buried in here somewhere. Carmen. I can feel her in the blooms, angry red blooms and river blue blooms and pure white blooms. I can feel her, throwing her anger into the roots, giving them life, sprouting in defiance. As I dig, she eggs me on. *Dig, baby*. I rip the plants up by the roots. I pull the tarp off the woodpile, push down the back row of my car, and lay the tarp down across it. One by one I carry the plants to the open trunk and lay them down on the plastic. A light comes on in the Master bedroom. I don't care.

New York's no place for a flower. Maybe I'll go south and plant them in Florida. Maybe I'll take them to Noelle. Or to San Diego. I hope Mom made it there after all.

I sit back down in my car and look out at my handiwork through the headlights, thick with mosquitos. The flower bed is empty except for Shelley's favorite blue irises, which I left untouched. As a peace offering. As a reminder. They stand alone, surrounded by upturned dirt and holes I didn't bother to fill up. Maybe now she can start again, now that we're gone.

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