

We Once Lived in Caves and Other Stories

by

Khristian Mecom

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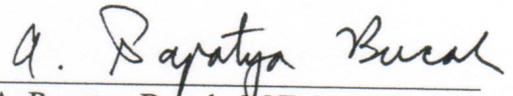
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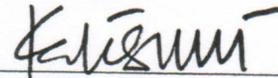
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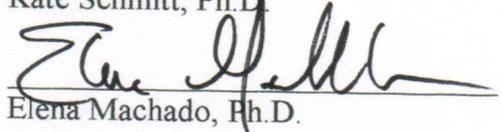
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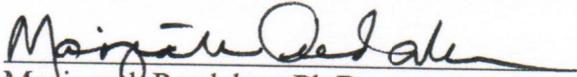
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## Abstract

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The following manuscript is a collection of eight short stories that center on the theme of how stories and storytelling, in all their different forms, fill our lives. In one story a girl that lives in other people's houses, longs to tell her story, while in another story a girl struggles with a secret her grandmother leaves behind as she tries to reconstruct her grandmother's story. Some stories use magical and fairy tale-like elements, which work as allusions in the stories and echo the events happening in characters' lives. Another theme present in the collection is that of family and how familial relationships affect identity and self-discovery. In one story, a wildfire allows the stories of different generations to be told, while a widow builds a family out of the aftermath of her husband's death in a different story.

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## We Once Lived in Caves

### **There once was a girl who lived in many houses.**

In the house across the street, that's her, right there, peering out from behind the blinds, a glimmer of blonde hair, the shadow of a shifting body trying to get a better look, and she's watching the young man across the street leave for work, which is strange for many reasons; one being the young man leaving work, Peter, could have sworn that she lived in the house next door to him. He doesn't know her name, has never been properly introduced to her, but he's seen her around. She's something of a fixture in the neighborhood ever since he moved in.

Peter remembers seeing her coming out the back door of the house next door to him once, and remembers thinking that she was pretty, although she didn't look a thing like the family who lived there. All their children were dark haired while she had hair that was the shade of a yellow crayon, and those children were extremely vocal, laughing and yelling at the close of summer days as they played in their backyard. Peter would open his windows on those days and let the sound drift in, and he was sure he had never heard a voice that matched the girl he saw coming out of their house that day. He imagines her voice as airy and musical, not rough and loud like those children. The girl had stopped and looked at him, frozen for a moment, and as he was about to say something, a polite 'hi' or a similar greeting, she smiled, showing all her bright white teeth, and slipped away

before he could say anything or smile back. One day Peter drives by her as she walks down the sidewalk. She wears a backpack, although she looks a little too old to be going to school, maybe she's on her way to the bus stop, to some class at the local community college, he thinks. While he waits at the stop sign at the end of the block, she waves like a long lost friend, hand curving from side to side, fingers spread, and it feels as if she is trying to call him back as she has something to give him that he has forgotten. But as usual, he is late and as he turns the corner, she stands waiting as if she is making sure she has disappeared from his rearview mirror before she leaves.

Well, that girl's name is Amelia and she lives in many houses, but none of them are hers, and she lives in Peter's house, and although Peter doesn't know her yet, she knows him.

It is far easier than one would expect to live in someone's house without them knowing it. There are some fairly simple rules, of course, the Do's and Don'ts of coexisting in secret, a standard of living, if you will. On the top of the list, and this is the real trick, is to put things back exactly where you find them. *Exactly*, not in the general area, not guessing where it might have been, but in the precise spot, down to the last detail where you picked it up. When taking a toothbrush out of the holder, before even touching it, be sure to memorize the angle that it's leaning, which way the bristles are facing, and only when you can close your eyes and build the picture of that toothbrush in your mind can you then remove, use, and place it back exactly the way you found it. Likewise, you must always remember what station the TV is on before you change the channel, don't worry about the remote, people ever remember where they put that

anyway. You can never tell what little misplaced item can call attention to your presence. Any of those small miscalculations can ruin the whole thing, forcing you to make a hasty exit when someone comes home early because of a gut feeling. Never underestimate the ability of a person to notice the little things.

Who's to say for certain why Amelia breaks the rules, why she lets herself get noticed. It might have started off as an accident but what happened after surely wasn't. She's coming out of a house on Earhart Street, a place she's been staying at on and off for years now. It's a real nice ranch style with a family of five living in it. She almost feels like a part of the family, almost, as she has watched the children grow up, seen them age in their school pictures hanging in the hallway, and slept in their beds that have continued to expand larger from singles to doubles. The family cat greets her affectionately. She knows their names (Tom and Diane, little George, Tiffany, and Laura) and hobbies (model cars for George, Tiffany and her paintings, Laura's ball of rubber bands), and where they go on vacation (always to Pennsylvania to visit the grandparents). But to Amelia's credit they do not know her, have never seen her close up, but once or twice they've driven by her as Diane, the mom, drives them to school, and Amelia always waves in hope that they will wave back.

At three o'clock, just before the children come home from school, Amelia exits the house by the back door, careful to lock it back up with her spare key; the one Tiffany's mother scolded her for losing. Amelia senses someone watching her as puts the key back into her pocket. She glances up to find a young man watching her. It seems he was in the process of bringing the garbage cans around to the side of his house. She

recognizes him. He is the next door neighbor. She knows everyone on this street; she was there when he moved in.

His name is Peter Fischer. He lives at 8395 Earhart Street. He works a lot; leaves very early in the morning, and comes home after it is dark. She is sure that he is not supposed to be home at this time. He's very good looking, she thinks, and he almost reminds her of someone she once knew, a boy from her first grade class or a guy out of a soap opera she used to watch when she stayed home sick from school. And it is the first time that anyone has ever reminded her of a time when she had a home of her own.

It's been a long time since she's been caught like this, exiting a house, and for a second she's unable to move because her joints and connected muscles have seized up on her. He doesn't say anything at first. He looks as surprised as she feels, but as he's about to speak, she smiles widely in a confident manner, and quickly heads in the opposite direction. It's only when she rounds the corner of the street that she stops. She ducks between two houses. Her heart's beating fast. Her hands are shaking. She closes her eyes and replays the moment. She builds a picture of his face, not wanting to let his image go just yet, imagining his features: brown eyes so dark they looked black, slim nose, messy black hair that stood up at odd angles, defined cheekbones, a bit unshaven. She quietly wonders why she never paid him any attention before.

Be nice to the neighbors, always smile politely and wave a little so they don't call the police about that strange girl lurking around the neighborhood, that odd girl who nobody knows for sure what house she lives in. Be a familiar face that inspires confidence. But don't be too nice or polite to the neighbors, people grow suspicious of

overly polite people, it's just not natural. Keep a respectable distance (never offer to help carry their groceries in or volunteer to pick up their newspaper while there're out of town), so they don't try and ask your name or what your relation is to the owner of the house you're currently residing in. Now, the key is being seen without being noticed. Being seen is good, they know your face, accept that you're always around, even if they can't quite place you. Being noticed is bad, it means the neighbors notice you're out at odd hours, usually use the back door, and never are actually with or talking to the people who live in the house. So under no circumstance ever get yourself noticed.

**These are the facts about Amelia as we know them:**

She's noiseless and sneaky. She comes and goes. She hides but never seeks.

Her hair is dirty. She's fond of putting tiny braids in it when she's bored, which is most of the time.

No one knows where she goes during the night, where she sleeps. Rumor has it she returns to the sky as a constellation.

She was once a medical student who dropped out of school because she couldn't stand the sight of blood.

Some think she's a mythical creature, maybe a fairy or a witch, maybe both, probably neither.

Her singing voice sounds like Patsy Cline reincarnated.

Amelia is not her real name.

Her favorite word is "wayward."

She owns one pair of white sneakers, so she keeps them spick and span clean at all times.

Her fear of airplanes is crippling; she can't even look at them in the sky, let alone board one.

She's young, but definitely older than most.

Others think she's a girl from Wisconsin (she's very fond of cheese) who got left behind on a family vacation to the Grand Canyon and now wanders from house to house, looking for home.

**There once was a girl who wanted you to know her.**

Peter looks for her. And it seems odd to him that now that he wants to see this girl again, he cannot find her anywhere. Before the encounter in his neighbor's backyard she was everywhere, every morning she was walking along the sidewalk or loitering around the corner. Come to think of, she was always just hovering out of the corner of his eye, just on the periphery of his life. She had been there that first day he moved into this house, he remembers only now. He had never thought anything of it, just thought that she was a curious neighbor. But she stood there across the street in the shade of what he assumed was her porch and watched him carry boxes from his car to his new house. And he thought her a little rude for not offering to help. What he doesn't know, what he can't know, is that Amelia was simply following the rules then. She couldn't offer to help him.

Amelia watches him carefully now, trying to get his schedule down pat. It's a bit more erratic than she thought at first; he never leaves the house at the same time in the mornings, sometimes he gets home early, but mostly he's gone till long after dark. After a few weeks, she thinks she's got it well figured out. There's an extra key he keeps under a

fake rock that Amelia saw him use after he locked himself out. It was late at night, after midnight, and someone dropped him off, then it took him over five minutes to make it up to his house as he was unsteady on his feet and he turned over every rock in his yard before he found the key. Amelia knew then that she had a way in. It was a thrilling, desperate feeling. She was breaking the rules, but she couldn't help herself.

Peter isn't too friendly with his neighbors, so it's not like he can just go up and knock on their doors to see if she will answer or ask them if they know her name. Besides how strange would they think him, going around asking about a girl who he doesn't even know? He's beginning to think that she doesn't live around here. Maybe she has some relatives on the street that she visits or is some sort of babysitter for the kids next door. He tries to come up for some reasonable excuse as to how she could simply disappear so suddenly. After a couple of weeks, he stops looking, tries not to think about her, he gets busy at work, and really why does she matter at all to him? Then one day he sees her in his rearview mirror as he leaves for work. She is standing there, waving to him. She has waved to him before, he recalls, just like she is doing now as if asking him to come back. He overslept that morning and is already late. He can't stop now to talk to her. Besides what would he even say to her? Fighting the urge to turn his car around, he turns the corner, and she disappears again. He has to remind himself that she doesn't matter to him at all.

Amelia waits across the street from Peter's house on Wednesday morning at six in the morning, concealed in the house of an older couple gone for the week to a resort in

Aspen. As he gets into his car and pulls out of his driveway, she quickly shuts the older couples' front door behind her. She stands at the corner and watches him at the stop sign. She waves. When he is gone, she crosses the street, heads straight for the fake rock and finds the key underneath it. The anticipation is like nothing she has ever felt before. And after so much time only seeing the outside of the house, what a joy for Amelia to finally see the inside of it. It's not at all disappointing, though it may not be much. But it's fascinating to her. She goes from room to room. A lot of them have only the barest of furniture, just enough to live semi-comfortably. She imagines that if she would ever have a house of her own, it would look exactly like his.

It's important to pick houses with people who keep schedules, so you know what time to come in the morning and what time to leave in the afternoon. There are always unexpected surprises, say if a parent drops their kid home early because of pink eye or a forgotten report for that important meeting is remembered sitting at home on the counter, but that's to be expected. No one says it isn't dangerous at times, but be sure to give yourself the advantage of people who are predictable. Families are also a plus. When there are more people in the house, it's easier to get away with mistakes. Parents blame misplaced things on the children, and children leave things all over anyway, so if you put something in the wrong spot nobody finds it out of the ordinary. Never pick a house with only one person living in it, never.

Peter doesn't notice anything out of the ordinary. Nothing is out of place, the junk mail and bills are on the counter where he left them, his bed is as messed up as he left it,

and that leftover turkey club sandwich from two days ago is right there in the refrigerator, yet he can't quite shake the feeling that something isn't the same. He doesn't remember leaving the remote on the coffee table and he swears his toothbrush seems to be moving on its own. Sometimes he just walks around the place, examining things like he's never been there before. Standing in his living room, with hands on hips, he surveys the space he lives in. He imagines that it is not his house, that he's a stranger, here for the first time. What could he learn from the things around him? The couch doesn't say much, it's just a black leather sleeper, and there aren't any photos around, no little knickknacks or anything. This house says nothing about him. He comes to the conclusion that the walls are too bare, too stark white; he decides to buy a poster or two or better yet some kind of painting. That's what adults do, he thinks, they buy art for the walls and useless things to put in their houses. Unbidden the face of the girl flashes before him and he wonders where she is, if the place she lives is any different than his. He imagines her living in a place full of sunlight and warm colors on the walls, reds and yellows, bohemian drapes on the windows, and multi colored blankets on her bed, but he dismisses the image quickly, she's something he doesn't want to think about right now. And maybe a dog would help, he thinks, at least it would give him something to come home to.

Amelia comes back every day. She knows she is breaking almost every rule there is, but somehow she can't bring herself to care, can't make herself stay away. After that first day, she went to the hardware store to make a copy of his key, so she would have her very own. She spends the different days in different rooms. Once she sat in his bathtub all day, it got a little uncomfortable, but she finds bathrooms on the whole very comforting,

and his was surprisingly clean. She notices that the TV is always on the History Channel. His leather couch is worn and creased. There is a permanent indentation on the middle cushion and she sinks into it when she sits down. She never knew couches could be so welcoming. She falls asleep there one day, waking suddenly, thinking that she hears the garage door opening, and runs out the backdoor so fast that she forgets to lock it. She knows that it is a mistake, but that doesn't stop her from coming back the very next day. His closet draws her attention for several days. On the floor of the closet are boxes full of random belongings. One is nothing but loose pictures spanning the whole of his life; there are pictures as him as a child with his father, snapshots of him playing with his older brother, younger versions of him with friends at parties with beer cans in his hands, and one of him at his high school graduation. She compares herself to the pictures of his ex-girlfriends, confident that she is much prettier than any of them. He could do better. There's a box of baseball cards, far better organized than the pictures. His shoes are thrown in with everything, the different pairs separated haphazardly. She takes his clothes off the hangers and tries them all on. He has lots of suit jackets and blazers and collared shirts. She searches through a coat pocket, pulling out a box of matches that she returns to her own pocket. Soon she feels like she knows him better than anyone could as she knows not what he puts forth to the world, but knows what he is behind all that, knows what he hides in the secret corners of his home.

Never pick a house with a dog. Cats are okay, though, as they could care less that you were there or not. Dogs are loud and noisy, making the quiet, unseen entry loud and seen. Likewise, avoid the houses with those little security stickers in the front windows or

little warning signs posted by the door, who knows if they really do have an alarm system, yet it's best not to risk it.

**Further facts:**

All she could ever need she carries with her, including: a pink toothbrush, a pair of jeans, a flathead screwdriver, a pair of socks without holes, an assortment of borrowed garage door openers, a pack of peppermint gum, clean underwear, a pocket Oxford English dictionary, used guitar strings, seven shirts one for every day of the week, a key chain with lost keys, a busted cassette player, three expired credit cards, a pair of socks with a hole in the big toe, three used passports, assorted change, mostly nickels, a box of matches from Antonio's Italian Restaurant, cherry lip balm, a hair clip, a stuffed bunny rabbit, various bobby pins, and a map of the world expertly folded.

**There once was a girl who longed to paint on walls.**

Peter returns home late one night and something is definitely amiss. The first thing that tips him off is that when he goes to reach for the brownie he saved, he finds that it's not there anymore. He shuts the refrigerator slowly and stares at it. He remembers saving it, he is sure of it. All day he was looking forward to eating it. Suddenly he's alert, thinking there is somebody else in his house. All is quiet, but again there is something wrong. He turns on every light, checks to make sure all the doors and windows are locked. As he enters the bedroom, he flips the light switch and audibly gasps. On his wall, there is wet paint. He walks closer, touches the paint and takes his finger away covered in black. Collapsing on his bed, he closes his eyes and opens them

again. The painting is still there. It's all black lines, strokes of a paintbrush, a little clumsy looking as if this was the first time the person had held a brush. He tilts his head, trying to make out what it is. It is a series of images like a triptych painting. The first image is the form of a person, a girl maybe, and it looks like she's waving as her arm is raised and he counts five fingers on the hand. The second is obviously a house, drawn in three dimensional squares, a triangle as a roof. The last image is of the girl standing inside the house, but there is a second person there with her.

Amelia, in Peter's bedroom, makes herself comfortable on his bed with her hands behind her head. She likes it; it feels just right, not too soft and not too hard. Before her there is a blank wall. He has no TV in his bedroom and no paintings on the walls either. Amelia once watched a special on the Discovery Channel about cave paintings. There are these caves in France full of the most beautiful paintings of black ink animals covering the rough stone walls; horses, bison, and cattle. For days after all she could think about were those paintings and who made them. Thousands and thousands of years had passed and something they created was still *here*. Her, a girl living in a world they probably could have never imagined, was seeing those paintings now, seeing a picture depicting their world, their lives. How amazing that something could last that long, she had thought. She sits up, walks to the wall and places a bare hand on it. She feels the desire, maybe a distant long forgotten instinct from those cave painters, to draw on it. Draw a picture of herself. What if she could let Peter know that she was there in his house with him? Oh, what a rule to break. She reminds herself, however, that it would defeat the entire purpose of living in his house without him knowing it if she did this thing. She

wanders the house for some time, walking in and out of his bedroom. The family next door has paint, she knows that the kids use it for finger-painting. But, no, she can't. Restlessly, she goes to the kitchen, opens the refrigerator. And she does not know what comes over her, but she recklessly reaches for a brownie on a shelf and eats the whole thing.

One of the most difficult things is the refrigerator. People are very specific about their refrigerators. What shelf the milk is kept on, if the butter is kept in the little compartment or not, and so on. One time Amelia confused the house she was currently co-residing in with another one, and put the bread in the refrigerator, only after she left did she realize her mistake; she should have put it back into the bread box, and she knew that she could never go back there. It was a shame, too, as she really had liked that house. Other refrigerator rules are to never ever eat the last of anything in a house and never open a new box, package, or container of something. That is Amelia's golden rule. People pay very close attention to their food. They notice if that one Hostess cupcake suddenly isn't there or if that orange juice jug was newly opened and they weren't the one to open it.

Amelia, for the first time, walks up to Peter's house while he is home. She is out in the open; it makes her feel uneasy, yet exhilarated, and she doesn't know what to do with her hands. He's outside, getting his mail, fingering through the envelopes, so engrossed in the task that he doesn't notice her. Amelia, for the first time, speaks to him,

saying “hello” in a bright cheery voice. At the sound he looks up, and he recognizes her, she can tell, as soon as his eyes focus on her face.

“Hey,” he says like he is greeting a long lost friend, and he wonders why it feels like that, too. After he saw her waving that day from his car, he had come up with a plan, worked out a list of the things he wanted to ask her. But he’s not sure what to say to her now that she is right here. “You live around here, right? I’ve seen you around.”

Amelia nods and answers, “Yes, I live around.”

There is a pause. Amelia hasn’t spoken to anyone for a long time like this, a general conversation. Peter thinks that everything he wanted to know about her is general, too general.

“Well, there have been some break-ins, you know, around here so you should be careful to lock your doors. They broke into my place,” he tells her, not sure why he is bringing this up when there are more important things to say to her.

Amelia acts surprised, covering her mouth with a hand. “Really? What did they take?”

Peter runs a hand through his hair, it stands weirdly on end, and he shakes his head. “Nothing. They just painted something on my wall.”

“How strange,” she says, trying to disguise the eagerness in her voice. “What was it of?”

“It was,” he begins then stops. The sun is setting behind her, he squints, the glare bright in his eyes. He gestures with his hands an abstract version of the painting on his wall, thinking of how he can explain this to her and continues, “Kind of a picture of a girl and a guy in a house. I’m not really sure, to be honest.”

“Are you going to paint over it?” Amelia asks, a small amount of anticipation filling her. Please say no, please say no, she repeats to herself. Amelia thinks for a moment that he might make the connection, see the resemblance of the girl in the painting to her real self, a part of her hopes he does, the other is slightly terrified that he will.

Peter stares at her, a crease between his eyes. He hasn't painted over it, the triptych painting has a pull over him, and he finds it beautiful in some odd way. It kind of reminds him of this girl, although he can't figure just why, but he had thought of her as he stared at it that first night. He says to her, “I'm not sure if I want to paint over it. It's actually like a piece of real art. Not what you would think someone would paint when they're vandalizing someone's home.”

“Oh, how interesting,” she replies, secretly pleased.

Their talk winds down, he doesn't know what else to ask her, and she doesn't want to say too much just yet. They say goodbye, he tells her he will see her around, and she agrees happily that he just might. She turns to look at him; he is still standing by his mailbox watching her, she smiles and waves, and he waves back.

Amelia knows that she should leave this neighborhood and never come back. But how could she go back to living under the rules when she knows what is like to break them? How could she move on from here and find a new neighborhood, a new set of houses and people? But she wonders if she could do it, if she could stay still, live in one place. This idea of letting people know her is a scary proposition. Then there is Peter, and she thinks that she might accidentally on purpose run into him, check up on him, and maybe next time she'll tell him her name, maybe even the real one. She'll be sure to ask

his, make it look like she doesn't already know it, doesn't already know what it's like to live right there with him.

Peter tells himself once he's back inside his house that he should have asked for her name, he can't believe he didn't think of that, but the next time he sees her, he'll ask and maybe even invite her inside.

The last and most important rule: Never become attached to just one house, because inevitably you will have to leave it, no matter how much you might want to stay. Eventually, you will be discovered through a mistake or just by chance. You can't expect to stay unseen, unheard, unnoticed forever. So it is better to move on by your own choice, to not be tied down by sentiments to one place than to be forced out against your will.

This was the last rule that Amelia ever broke.

### **Where is Amelia now? Good Question.**

She's tucked in your closet, hidden behind the winter coats, trying on your snow boots.

She's outside your window, trying to get a glimpse of the inside, so don't close the curtains.

She's taking a bath in your bathtub, using your lavender scented bubble bath.

She's walking past you on the sidewalk, look, she's waving, too.

She's in your backyard, hiding in the bushes, right there, behind the tree line.

She's living with a young man, they're in love, and they live by nobody's rules.

She's painting an image on your wall that looks like a girl you once knew.

## Love & Black Holes

### 1. Penelope is slowly being pulled apart.

And she is being pulled apart in this way forever. Although Penelope cannot know this about herself yet as it is happening to her in such small increments. She does not feel her limbs being stretched, and she does not feel her spine being stretched. Her arms, her hands, her fingers are leaving her behind. Her legs, her knees, her toes are reaching for things beyond her in the blackness.

When people stop to look inside the black hole, they see Penelope. When they come back a week later, they see Penelope exactly where she was before. She remains motionless. Some say it looks as if she is swimming in the deepest reaches of black space; some say, no, it looks like she has already drowned in it. Some say she looks as if she is flying in the nothingness; some say, no, it looks as if she has been trapped in the moment of falling. Eventually, people stop coming as nothing ever changes in the black hole, and it fills them with a sadness that they can't bear. They can never know how Penelope landed in that black hole; they cannot know the reason why. Penelope is unable to tell them now. And what is the point of it all they ask themselves. Why keep coming back to this place where nothing changes, ever? What they know, which Penelope is

beginning to understand, is that nothing good comes from something that refuses to change, to let itself die.

And Penelope continues to be pulled apart, ever so slightly.

It started off as such a small thing. A barely noticed blackness on the living room wall, hovering over the worn couch, which was more like a shadow, an absence of light. It was nothing more than a sneaking suspicion that crept in at the corner of Penelope's eye. Yet when she looked at it, there would be nothing there to focus on as her eyes would just slide past it. There was only the blank wall, which was strange because there used to be a picture there; a framed punk rock band poster that her boyfriend Oliver had hung up the day they moved in, despite her protests. For months, she was startled by this thing and could not name the feeling the mysterious shade of nothingness invoked in her; a knowing forbearance or something akin to fear. And she could not then know what the meaning of it was, know that the first moment she saw that black hole was the very moment in which she began to be pulled apart.

Some months after the black hole had formed, Penelope stopped as she was walking toward the front door, ready to leave for work. With car keys in hand, she stood, staring at the wall.

"What," Oliver asked her as he sat on the couch, "are you looking at?"

His head rested on the back of the couch, bent at an odd angle to look up at her. He continued to strum the guitar he held in his hands. Penelope wondered briefly what he saw when he looked at her that way.

She asked, "Do you not see it?"

“I don’t see anything,” he said, turning back to his guitar. He did not even glance at the thing devouring the wall. “Am I supposed to be seeing something?”

“I guess not,” Penelope answered as she continued to stare at the wall longingly. He always seemed to miss things, miss the important things. If he was missing this strange darkness on the wall, what was Oliver missing about her? The shadow had gained mass, gained substance, and if she was not mistaken it seemed to be pulling in the light streaming in through the window. Even the sound from the TV seemed to be fading into it.

“I have band practice tonight, so I won’t be around,” he said.

“Okay. I’m late for work,” she said. Nothing new there; he always had band practice, was always out on tour somewhere. Penelope did not expect him to be around. But she could not stop from asking him one more time, “Are you sure you don’t see anything?”

“No, Penny, I see nothing that hasn’t always been here,” he said, and he was done paying her any mind. “Aren’t you late or something?”

Penelope could not stop looking at it. And somehow, whether by instinct or some universal psychic energy granted to her, she knew what it was. That shadow, that darkness was a small, swirling, light and matter sucking, deeper than the blackest black at midnight black hole. Oliver did not even turn his head when she kissed his cheek. To him, she was already gone, out the door, on her way someplace else. Penelope stood behind him, only able to see the dark hair on his head, and she felt as if something was being pulled taut inside her.

Inside the black hole, Penelope feels weightless. Her body is nothing to her; every part of her weighs the exact same amount all at the same time. It's wonderful. It's scary. In the moment before she hit the event horizon and entered the black hole, she hoped it would not be like dying an instant death where you are there one moment then gone the next. She wanted there to be a moment after. And to her relief there was something beyond the event horizon. As she fell, she imagined it was like jumping into an undisturbed body of water and as her body hit the stillness, she would send out ripples forever. There should have been something romantic about it like that, she thinks. But instead there is just this: a constant movement toward the singularity, the center of the black hole, and the uncertainty of what will happen to her when she reaches it.

It was all for love, Penelope wants to tell Oliver. She just loved him that much. It was nothing she planned. She had not schemed for days on how to get him close to the black hole or devised a strategy or calculated how much force it would take for her to push him in. She really didn't. It all happened so fast. She didn't even think about it, didn't think of the consequences, and didn't think past the moment or what would happen once they were in there. The look on his face as he was falling in was startling, and she immediately regretted it right then and there. But it wasn't like she meant to leave him in there alone, after all. She went in right after. If she could take it all back, she would. On her hands, she feels the solid bones and muscles of his arm and shoulder where she pushed him. And that will be the last time that she ever touches him, she knows. She just wanted him to stay, that was all, really, just to stay. She loved him, maybe not a good reason to push him into a black hole, she knows, but it was all the reason she had.

## 2. The formation of a black hole as told by an astrophysicist.

A lone astrophysicist comes to study the black hole in what was once the house of Penelope and Oliver. It is a long time after the initial event of Penelope maybe, possibly on accident pushing Oliver into the black hole. No one is ever sure, of course, who went in first, although it has been debated. Penelope's mother being sure that this Oliver character did something horrible to her daughter. Many who initially came to see the black hole remarked on the surprise etched on Oliver's face and surmised that the girl was probably up to no good. Many scientists have come and gone from their house. They have taken measurements on the black hole's size and radius and circumference and color and density and gravitational pull. They have taken pictures and made drawings. They have written papers and peer reviewed articles on it. There have been theories and counter theories. There have been very heated arguments and quarrels about it. The lone astrophysicist does not have anything new to add to the debate. But hearing about the black hole, he had to see it just once before the house was locked up for good.

The astrophysicist, too, is struck by the loneliness of those two figures in the black hole. He had come for the black hole, for the science of it all and hadn't expected his heart to be so moved by them. Their stillness, their frozen faces unnerve his sensibilities, his scientific objectivity. He wonders if there is something that he can do for them, although he knows there is nothing anybody can do for them now. All he can give them is an explanation, give them the scientific reason why this black hole formed in their living room.

He says to Penelope and Oliver as if they were students listening to a lecture during one of his class, “First, there is the collapsing of the star. But it can’t be just any star. Out there in the universe, stars die all the time. Some are swept away by stellar winds, stripped down to nothing, some explode in a supernova brilliance that scatters what is left of them to the unknown distant cosmos. It’s only those really dense stars that transform into black holes; the ones that have some heft to them. As they die, these stars are unable to bear the weight of their own gravity. They are overwhelmed by their own greatness. Collapsing in on themselves, they create something that sucks in everything that nears it as if it is so hungry, so desperate to regain what was lost of itself.”

And if Penelope could have heard him, she would have been brought to tears as she now knows what desperation like that feels like and the terrible things that she has done because of it.

### 3. Penelope is somehow always waiting.

When they first met, Penelope was taken aback by Oliver. In that first moment when her friend introduced them, he seemed to know instantly that he was going to love her. He took it for granted that she was going to feel the same. And it was a theme that would play itself out in their relationship; he would always be taking her for granted in some way. So Penelope resisted his advances, not because she didn’t feel the same, but because she did not believe in the notion that love should come that easily. And she did not fall in love with him all at once either. The only falling in their relationship happened

as she pushed him in the black hole. Their relationship happened through Oliver's stubborn persistence and Penelope's vow to play it coy:

"Penny, hey, you want to get something to eat with me, dinner, maybe?"

"My name's not Penny. Please stop calling me that. I won't ask again."

"Hey, I'm heading out to hear this great band, Penny, wanna come with?"

"No, I don't. And if you keep calling me that, I will not answer you anymore."

"Come on, just one night of your life. I promise I'll stop calling you 'Penny.'"

"Fine, but I'll hold you to that, and god help you if you persist in calling me that."

The promise of using her real, proper name was just an excuse, really, because she did like it when he called her that. No one had ever given her a nickname before; it made her feel special, like someone knew her so well, so deeply that they didn't even have to use her real name, that there was a secret language between them. And after that first date, for a time, everything was so easy with him. Penelope understood exactly what he made her feel; all that lightheadedness and giddiness and happiness was love. Something along the way had shifted in her, and she began to think that maybe love should be easy.

They moved in together after they had been seeing each other for about a month. It was sudden. When Penelope's mother asked her what on earth she was thinking, Penelope answered that it just felt *right*. Her mother asked her just what she meant by *right*, and Penelope answered that in this moment with Oliver everything felt *right* and every moment before, she realized now, was not *right*. Her mother told her that was a

stupid reason to move in with a guy she had only known for a month, something that Penelope would have agreed with before she met Oliver.

For the first two months, Penelope was happy to learn that her mother could not have been more wrong. Living with Oliver was not like living with a stranger at all like her mother said it would be. She felt as if they had always known each other. They liked the same television shows. They woke up at the same time in the morning. They never argued over who would wash the dishes or who would do the laundry as the other always offered. If only they could have stayed like that, Penelope thinks as she lingers in the black hole. She remembers those nights in the beginning. As they slept in the same bed, Oliver reached for her like she had always been there waiting for him. Wrapping himself in her, he told her that he had been adrift for so long. And he knew, just knew that she was somewhere out there and that was what kept him going. Whispering this into her ear, his breath on her neck, Penelope was convinced that all her life had been spent simply waiting for him, too.

Oliver was in a band. He was away on tour a lot. At first Penelope didn't mind that much. It was nice to have time for herself. She read the books she had always wanted to read but never had the time for. She stayed home on Saturday nights. She taught herself to knit, as it seemed a good idea at the time. The idea that she could kill time while creating something appealed to her. She knitted hats for the winter that were either too big or too small for her head. She knitted socks that were a bit lopsided that she couldn't manage to pull on her feet as they were too narrow at the ankle. She knitted a sweater for Oliver that fit her small nephew perfectly. She began knitting a blanket for

Oliver instead, having given up on knitting anything that required proper fitting. And she planned it out where she would finish the blanket by the time Oliver came back from his tour of small clubs in the Northeast. But the tour was extended just as she was about to finish it and Oliver was about to come home. And that she thinks, in the black hole now, was when something inside her broke, just that easily. She refused to finish the blanket until he came home. Every extra night that he was gone, she would undo her day's work, unspooling the multi-colored yarn with her fingers, undoing all the stitches, letting the whole thing fall apart in her hands. But when Oliver did come home, she left it all half-finished anyway. Oliver, upon seeing it, remarked, in that offhand manner of his, that she wasn't very good at knitting things, was she? And Penelope could only agree and convince herself that it was just a stupid blanket anyway.

After a different tour of small clubs in the Southwest, Penelope confronted Oliver about his constant disappearance, her constant waiting. She sat on the couch in their living room as he sat beside her.

"You're gone all the time, Oliver," she said. "It's like we don't even live together. We just happen to sleep in the same bed some nights. Why did you even ask me to move in?"

"Because I wanted to live with you. And you knew that I would be gone, Penny. I told you that before we moved in together. I warned you and you said that you didn't care," he said in a quiet voice as if wounded by her. He hadn't seen this coming, Penelope knew.

“I didn’t think I would mind so much,” Penelope answered. “It’s just harder than I thought it would be, lonelier. Maybe I thought I could handle it all better, that you being gone wouldn’t bother me as much as it does.”

“So what do you want to do then, Penelope? Break-up? End it?” he said, and his tone was harsher. He stood up suddenly. “Because I don’t care one way or another, okay?”

Penelope panicked at those words; she knew that he didn’t mean it. “No, I don’t want that at all. I didn’t mean that. I just thought we could spend more time together that’s all, you know, when you’re home. I want the opposite of breaking up,” she said in a rush of words.

Oliver did, for a time, make more of an effort to be with her. He canceled some band practices, and she even went out of state with him to one of his shows. They went out to dinner a couple of times and to the movies. Then they began to stay in, just watching TV together. Oliver was antsy most of the time. Penelope was sullen at his antsy-ness. She could not understand why he thought being at home with her was such a terrible thing. Things then returned to how they had always been; Oliver out on tour somewhere, Penelope at home with her knitting. She reverted back to making things that had no use. And resentment for the things that she made began to grow in her. She hated every four-fingered glove and every hat that looked like a deformed sock. And one day she gathered every knitting needle, every string of yarn, every small sweater and uneven blanket she ever made and threw it all in the garbage. And she waited for something to happen, for something to change, for something that would make Oliver stay.

Penelope sees things on the outside; light and shadow, the distorted images of people. She wonders who invited them into her living room. She hopes that they remembered to remove their shoes. But of course, she asks herself, what does that all matter now? She is detached from that living room now, that house; it should not matter if someone tracks mud in. She can't go back. And that wasn't her intention at all. She did not think about all the things she would miss and never do as she pushed Oliver into the black hole and followed right behind him.

Penelope will miss her mother and her childhood best friend and eating ham sandwiches, and she will miss the sound of her father playing the violin and her favorite tennis shoes that fit like no other shoes ever had before. She never made it to Europe like she planned, backpacking through unknown countries with no money, and she will never write that memoir of her life when she is sixty, and she will never get that promotion at the ad agency she worked so hard for.

And she never thought at all about the things Oliver will miss and never do. He will never release a platinum selling record or win an award for songwriting, thanking her for all her support or sell out a tour of Europe. He will never marry her like he said he wanted so desperately to do, and he will never have a child when he so wanted to teach his son to play guitar, too, like his father had taught him. With trepidation, she realizes that she and Oliver will never be anything more than what they are right now.

"I'm sorry, Oliver," she tries to say, but no sound carries in here.

#### 4. Correspondences from the outside.

At the beginning there was always someone there, always shifts of people coming to continue the vigil. The house was constantly crowded; people elbowing their way to the front, people standing close together, people talking in hushed whispers. People who didn't even know Penelope and Oliver stopped by to take a look, although afterwards most regretted it as the image of that young girl and boy floating in that darkness never left them. But slowly, very slowly, people stopped coming, stopped leaving flowers and cards. The oddity of it wore off. Nothing ever changed in there. And life was beckoning them to stop looking and get back to the things they were missing. And for the family and friends in Penelope's and Oliver's lives, there came a time when they knew that they would not go back there to watch Penelope and Oliver in the black hole anymore. So from the outside, people came to say their goodbyes.

Penelope's best friend who introduced her to Oliver came after it had just happened. Penelope had lost touch with most of her other friends. Penelope's best friend expressed her regret that she ever pointed Oliver out to Penelope that night. She said to her friend, the girl she knew since middle school, "You just let him take over your life. You never wanted to do anything without him. All those times you never came out with me, just because you were waiting for him to call you. God, Penelope, he really wasn't all that cute in the first place. I can't bear to see you like this anymore."

Oliver's band came to visit sometimes, but eventually they got too busy with band practices or so they said. The bassist from Oliver's band on his last visit said, "Dude, we found a replacement for you. He's not very good. He only knows like three guitar chords. And I don't know why you ever wanted to date her, man. Music was always your first love, you knew that, and still you had to have her in the wings, too. Your replacement

does have a good voice, though. At least that's something." He threw a guitar pick into the black, while no one was looking, just in case Oliver didn't have one.

Penelope's mother came every day without fail. She was the only person in the world who could endure the sight of Penelope in the black hole without looking away quickly. She had a special spot right up front, close to the event horizon, that afforded her the best view of her daughter inside the black hole. She sat there for hours at a time and watched her daughter never move. She worried that Penelope was cold in there and wished she could give her daughter a warm sweater. At times she yelled at Penelope for doing something so childish as playing around a black hole, only to fall in. She worried that Penelope might be hungry and wished she could make her a warm bowl of soup. At times she begged for Penelope to come home, to reach a hand out of the blackness so that she could be pulled out. She worried that Penelope had not fallen in, but as her horrible suspicion told her, jumped into the depths of this black hole. Penelope's mother did not know that her last night visiting the black hole would be her last. Going home that night, she sat in her car at a stop light. The sky was wide and dark above her. And she admitted to herself for the first time that her daughter was not coming home. And that was what children did; they left home and did not come back. Penelope's mother had said all she could to her daughter, and she would never get a response back. Staring at the expanse above her that night, she understood that Penelope was someone who did a terrible, terrible thing for love and could not see the world that lay beyond that love. The last thing that Penelope's mother said to her daughter was this: "Good night, Penelope."

Penelope's father only came once and played her favorite song on his violin; that was all he could bear.

## 5. Penelope is, and always will be, here.

As she could not sleep one night, Penelope went to sit in the living room. The black hole would not leave her mind; it had been there for over four months and it was only growing bigger. She sat on the couch staring at it, tempting it to reveal its secrets, why it had to come into her life. That Wednesday night was when the idea to send objects into the black hole occurred to her. She started small. The remote control was sitting on the coffee table in front of her so she picked it up, stood in front of the black hole, and let it go. It went careening into the darkness, flipping end over end until it seemed to just stop in time. In went a couch cushion, the spare keys, and a potted fern from the entryway. They all floated there, suspended. And then she could not stop herself: Oliver's boots that he forgot to put in the closet, and his dirty clothes he left on the laundry room floor; his shirts and pants billowing out like someone was wearing them, one by one she tossed in his CD's, shiny metallic discs like alien spaceships; and even though she knew it would hurt him, she threw in his guitar.

Oliver must have heard her, because he came out of the bedroom. She knew that he did not understand what was happening as he could only stare at her in a quizzical way, lips turned up and eyebrows furrowed. He was in the shadows; she had thrown in the lamp, too.

"Penelope?" he called. And she hated the way her full name sounded when he said it.

“Do you see it now?” she asked, sounding hysterical even to herself. She took a deep breath and said calmly, “Please, Oliver, say that you can see it now.”

And maybe she imagined it, she thinks, as she floats in the black hole, but she could have sworn that as Oliver stepped closer to her that she saw the black hole reflected darkly in his eyes.

“I see it, Penny,” he said, lapsing into using her nickname. “What does it mean?”

The black hole had grown so large that it had swallowed up the entire wall. Penelope watched Oliver inch closer to it. It swam and pulsated as it swirled. It was an impossible thing, right there in front of them.

“I don’t know what it means,” Penny said. She was lying.

“Is that?” he asked. “Is that *my* guitar? What the hell, *Penelope*?”

“Sorry, it fell in by accident,” she said with no remorse.

He did not believe her. He walked closer to the black hole, too close, Penelope thought. And maybe that was when the idea entered her heart. Or maybe it was a reflex after sending in so many other things into the black hole. But as Oliver turned to say something to her, she couldn’t bear to hear it, because she knew that it would cause her to say something, and then he would get angry, and she would become angry at his becoming angry, and before they knew it things would be said that couldn’t be taken back, and he would have stormed out like he always did, and they would be over for good this time.

So she pushed him. Pushed him into the black hole.

Just two hands on his shoulder was all it took, just that much force from her, transferred to him, and before she realized what she had done, she followed him in.

Penelope cannot see Oliver from here. He is behind her somewhere in the darkness. She tries to turn her body, but despite feeling weightless, she cannot move at all. She has lost control of herself. Her arms won't move, can't reach out for anything, her legs dangle below her uselessly, and her head might as well weigh a thousand pounds. As she went in head first she cannot tell how close she is getting to the singularity, the center. And now she begins to feel her body being stretched. She does not like this feeling at all. Like someone is trying to pull her head off of her body in slow, dangerous degrees.

Penelope is fearful now that this is how all things end. It is how she and Oliver are ending, too, even still. In the black hole, Penelope tries to trace it back to the beginning. How could this have happened? Well, Penelope knows, it happened like this: Penelope stopped smiling at his lame jokes; Oliver stopped calling her Penny. Penelope stopped caring about his band; Oliver stopped caring that she didn't care. Penelope stopped cleaning up after him; Oliver stopped pretending to clean up after himself. Penelope started lying to him just to see if she could get away with it; Oliver started lying to her because he knew he could. Moment by moment they were pulled apart from each other without even knowing it until it was too late. It was such an easy thing to do, Penelope thinks, letting Oliver go would have been the harder thing.

Here is Penelope. And there is Oliver. And she wants to tell him things: explain, maybe, why she did this to them, apologize for it all, or tell him not to be angry with her, ask him if he remembers when he used to call her Penny. But there is a distance between them. It only takes minutes for Penelope and Oliver to be over. As in, within minutes

they will reach the singularity, and they will be pulled apart. The gravitational forces will be so strong that they will lose parts of themselves. There will go their fingers and arms, and toes and legs, and it will only get messier from there, and then they will be gone. But from the outside, from their living room, they will live in this moment forever. The moment just before.

## The Pretty Fall

### **A prayer for The Tightrope Artist's ankles.**

The Tightrope Artist was known all over for her delicate ankles. When she performed her crowd-drawing stunts, barely anyone remembered her pretty face afterward, and it was such a pretty face, too, all small features with doll-like porcelain skin and eyes like a Siamese cat. And no, they didn't recall what she was wearing, either, not the shining sequins on her bodice or the skirt flared out like a ballerina's; no, it was those ankles they couldn't ever forget. Ah, her ankles. Like God himself had molded them out of the clay of the earth and attached them to the bottom of her legs. There was something about the way they bent as she took one daring step after another. First timers to her performances couldn't ever believe their eyes, in soft wonder they would whisper, "Amazing, just amazing. It's as if they balance her whole body for her. So effortless."

As The Tightrope Artist began her long fall, you began praying to as many deities as you could recall, please God, who art in heaven, oh Allah, all praise, and the lovely, vengeful Hera, and the peaceful Buddha, please, please not our ankles. You prayed for the talus bone, and the calcaneus bone, and all the cuneiform bones, and all the other ankle bones you could not recite from memory. On the descent, The Tightrope Artist and you became the same worshipper untied in a swell of *please, please, please*.

And perhaps someone was listening to you, although you would never know, maybe Drogo, the patron saint of broken bones, because The Tightrope Artist's ankles were about the only bones that weren't broken after she hit the ground.

### **The humble beginnings of The Tightrope Artist.**

Well, it was all a bit of a mystery really. Like the origins of most mythic figures, hers had many versions. The article that announced her arrival and the dates of her shows in the local papers stated she was born in Oregon to happy, well-adjusted parents, her mother was a housewife and her father worked in sales. But the one and only time The Tightrope Artist spoke of her parents, spoke of her life before fame, her life before her art, she was reported as saying that she never knew her real mother, who left her at the gate of a commune of Hippies. And that was where she first learned the skill of tightrope walking. The Hippies were very environmentally conscious and staged sit-ins to save various natural resources. She said, The very first time I ever walked a rope was at a protest to save a forest of ancient Sequoias. She explained that The Hippies built themselves nests in the trees and lived up there for months. They had strung ropes from tree to tree in some kind of pulley system. She said, with a flick of her wrist, as if what she did meant very little, I just wanted to get to the next tree over because they had the snacks there and the fastest way I could see to get there was to walk the rope between them. That statement conjured up in the minds of those who read it images of a young Tightrope Artist balanced on a thin rope, barefoot, her arms flung out for balance, her tongue between her lips in concentration as she discovered the one thing in the whole world that she was

good at. What a feeling of euphoria it must have been for her, what terror on the faces of all those Hippies. Oh, she said, it was really nothing, only a few hundred feet or so.

But you knew that was all hogwash. The Tightrope Artist once at another time received a letter addressed to you. As she read the letter, she began to change as if her features were morphing into someone else's. She leaned against a tree in a field in Virginia. She had a big performance in a few hours, and the largest crowd she had ever drawn was already filing into the billowing tent. Continuing to read, it was as if she was becoming a part of the tree itself; she was growing out of the tree, she was a part of the root system. She carefully placed the letter back into the envelope, then she tore it up with furious motions. The pieces scattered in the wind, on them snippets of words such as home and please and your mother and a postmark from Kansas.

The Tightrope Artist pulled out a makeup mirror from her bag. In the small circle, she saw you reflected back. You with your mouse brown hair hiding your too large blue eyes, and your nose that seemed awkwardly too small for your face, and you with your pale, lifeless lips. It was as if the letter had transformed her, reverting her back to an early evolution of herself, and she didn't like it all. The Tightrope Artist applied deep red lipstick, and made herself smile, forcing her cheek muscles to work. She then carved herself away from the tree and walked away as if she had never read a word of anything, let alone a letter, in all her life.

You deemed it so that The Tightrope Artist couldn't have a mother, let alone one who wanted her to quit walking, and she never even set foot in Kansas. She was never a small child with dreams of being famous or an unruly, restless teen who left home too young. No, you told yourself, she was never any of those things. You convinced yourself of this because you wanted so badly for others, as well as yourself, to believe in the mystery of her.

The Tightrope Artist was still young then, at the start of her career, on the verge of fame and adoration by the masses. During the show, she had not shown even an expression that could be said to be like yours. She had walked across a tightrope, balancing knives by the tips in her open palms, then walked with an apple balanced on her head, and finished the whole show by walking backward while from below her assistants fired knives, fruit, and streamers into the air at her that she caught gracefully with a smile that never once faltered.

**The first love of The Tightrope Artist wasn't a boy.**

It was the tightrope. It was the feel of the wire beneath her, like a constant, the way it pressed through her skin and up through the metatarsal bones of her foot. It made her ache. It made her happy. It was all she ever wanted in life. But, after all, she didn't have to tell you this. You loved the tightrope long before she did; she only came into the picture when you needed a face for the flyers that advertised her performances as your face was too homespun. You will concede, however, that The Tightrope Artist's

dedication to the art far surpassed yours. The Tightrope Artist would never dream of quitting, while you sometimes dreamed of going home.

The Tightrope Artist was once married. In her unofficial biography, the whole affair only took up one measly sentence: She was once married to an ice hockey player, but is now no longer married to an ice hockey player.

You knew her when she was Mrs. Ice Hockey Player. You were there when they first met, and you called it before anyone else, those two were going somewhere together, but it would probably be a short trip. It was after one of her performances as she stood outside the tent and greeted fans, signing posed photographs of her own face. The Ice Hockey Player stood back, hands in pockets, but he was so large he towered over the heads in front of him. He didn't speak to her that night or the next or even the one after that. But after the final performance of that tour, he finally collected enough bravery to approach her. The Tightrope Artist kept glancing up at him. You knew that she was anxious to see if he would walk up to her, and when he finally did, she smiled like an open book. He had a fading black eye; she only came up to his sternum. What a pair. He gave her a rose that looked like it had been trampled by horses. It was always a source of humor for her; that this Ice Hockey Player who had no qualms about skating out into the rink to get his face and body pummeled was so nervous to come up to little old her.

They had more in common than one would think. They talked balance. They were both skilled in the art of balancing their bodies on razor thin surfaces. They were both

fascinated by it. They would spend whole nights talking about it. After the first time they made love, The Tightrope Artist talked him to sleep by describing her thoughts on balance, the way in which putting the wrong amount of weight on the outside of her right foot could send her tumbling over, and how she had to be constantly aware of the weight of every part of her, from her stomach muscles to her toenails to her torso to her hair to her knees in order to achieve that perfect balance. And the Ice Hockey Player would take her to ice rinks, and she watched him as he slid across the ice, shifting his weight from the inside edges of his blades to the outside edges in perfect balance. A mutual admiration developed between them as they both understood the importance of balance, the skill it took, the hours of practice it required, and the consequences when you let your concentration slip for even a second.

But you knew it wasn't enough to hold them together; she hated the cold, and he hated heights.

The reason you loved the Ice Hockey Player was because he reminded you there were things that existed beyond the world of art and performance. Things like quiet, sleepy Sunday mornings, a shared closet of clothes, someone expecting you even when you're late, the comfort found in hands, those things that only belonged to the two of you. You were very tempted many times to tell the Ice Hockey Player, although you always remained quiet, that you were convinced that you loved him more than anything, even walking the tightrope.

### **The one scandalous secret of The Tightrope Artist.**

Was you, of course: her greatest, her deepest, her most intriguing of secrets. She let very few people know you, of your existence. People from her past knew you; her mother, her uncle, her elementary school best friend, her first talent manger, her childhood boyfriend. Although for those people, you disappeared slowly from their lives as if made of nothing more than mist. And it was the strangest thing, but you never noticed how pieces of you fell away; your name went first, a name without glamour, then your face was improved with cosmetics, you ceased to have the same look in your eyes, you stopped walking in that adorable downtrodden way and started striding as if all the world was your stage, and before you could stop, even if you had wanted to, you were nothing more than a secret. The second self. The true artist. The creator that nobody could know.

The Tightrope Artist, by mistake she later swore, let the Ice Hockey Player know you, love you even. But he could only know you in glimpses and small moments. In the mornings, that moment right before The Tightrope Artist woke, before she could pull herself together, the Ice Hockey Player would kiss you on your bare forehead lovingly. The one time The Tightrope Artist had spoken to her mother on the telephone, she had in tears and homesickness turned to the Ice Hockey Player, and it was suddenly you again and for the life of you, you could not understand how you got there. And when The Tightrope Artist had no performances, no engagements, no daring stunts to perform, you and the Ice Hockey Player would go to the movies together, and he would hold your hand and your heart was as full as you imagined it could ever get.

But he knew you so fleetingly, in pieces and fragments, and you understood that was no way to know someone, really. And you were bound to The Tightrope Artist in a way that you could never be bound to him. The Tightrope Artist kept you closely guarded for your own safety and comfort, and you thought it best that way in the end.

**A short interview with The Tightrope Artist.**

Reporter: Why do you risk your life walking a thin, shaky wire strung between two buildings when a single wrong step would have you plunging to your certain death?

The Tightrope Artist: For world peace.

**The recurring nightmare of The Tightrope Artist.**

Her skin had become oil paint. She touched a finger to her wrist and the paint smeared, deforming her radius bone. A mother-type figure presented her with wings, turned her round and affixed them to her back. Then without so much as a warning, the not-so-kind mother-type figure, who thought she was really helping, pushed her violently out of an open window. But luckily the wings worked despite being nothing more than oil paint. She flew high, she let out a Whoop! of joy, but she flew too high, and the sun began to melt the paint. She felt the wings dripping down her back, mixing with the paint that made up her little vertebrae and scapulas. Free falling, she plunged into the ocean below her, mixing with the painted blue water and white waves until there was nothing left of herself to distinguish. She didn't mind so much about the disintegration into formless paint. The worst of it all was that nobody paid her a lick of attention as she drowned.

### **A Meditation on Art by The Tightrope Artist.**

When her marriage ended The Tightrope Artist said quite profoundly in an interview that the reason she could not stay with the Ice Hockey Player was because he relied on the ground in a way that she never would. They hadn't even been married for that long, a little over a year. She had said that no matter how much they tried to make it work, it always circled around to one key issue: the Ice Hockey Player could not understand art.

But you knew that it came down to something much simpler; The Tightrope Artist wouldn't stay, and the Ice Hockey Player wanted her to.

The Tightrope Artist would say, I have to go. This is the most important performance of my career.

Then the Ice Hockey Player would say, Oh, please, you say that about every performance. This one doesn't matter. You're never home anymore, always gone. Not to mention how dangerous it is. One of these days you won't be coming home.

That would make The Tightrope Artist reply, You know nothing about art or its importance in the world. What I do matters. I'm an artist. I have to push myself in order to further my art. I can't not walk a tightrope because it's unsafe. Danger is a part of my art.

The Ice Hockey Player would shake his head and mutter, But what about me?

In the end it happened in a way The Tightrope Artist would later wish had been more dramatic, more fitting of an ending for them. But what happened was that the Ice Hockey Player asked The Tightrope Artist a question she could not answer: I was thinking that maybe we could get a dog? That sounds like a good idea, right?

You froze at the question, reflected on The Tightrope Artist. Was she the type of person that owned a dog? What would that say about her? What would people think if they found out that she owned a dog? Was she the type of artist that had to be home at certain times to feed a dog? To walk a dog? Clean up after it when did its business? You could see her suddenly walking a huge dog on a leash, completely done up in her performance tights and sequined bodice, her makeup flawless as the dog pulled her down the sidewalk.

I don't know, The Tightrope Artist answered, her voice sounding like yours, all hollow and thin.

Then the Ice Hockey Player said, somewhat desperately, Or a cat even. What about a cat?

That night as you were packing for a trip to California where The Tightrope Artist was going to walk across a section of the San Francisco Bay, something in you changed, shifted closer to being The Tightrope Artist.

It was The Tightrope Artist that said, He'll never understand. He's too connected to the ordinary, the mundane. He's satisfied with playing in the minors, with being married, with living the same life day after day, owning a dog, having domestic responsibilities. She said, While I am an artist. I stretch the boundaries of what is possible. When I'm up there, I create something important in the hearts of everyone on the ground. I inspire something in them. And that's what art is, it's creation, it's beauty, it's daring. You shook your head in agreement, that was what art was.

The Ice Hockey Player just wanted The Tightrope Artist, he could leave the art. But if The Tightrope Artist were to stay, quit performing, give up on art, keep his house, take care of his dog, as the limelight faded all that would be left was you. And you were keenly aware that it was The Tightrope Artist he had fallen in love with, that lovely face with lined eyes and painted lips, and those pretty ankles that drew big crowds. If you stayed, it would never last anyway. The Ice Hockey Player could never love you, simple you, a plain girl from Kansas, whose only talent lay in the art of her creation. He would leave you, that you were sure of. He wouldn't stay if it was just you.

So, confirming the Ice Hockey Player's worst fear, The Tightrope Artist left for a performance and never came back to him.

**The final thoughts of The Tightrope Artist.**

The comfort of a mother's hug would be nice. Why doesn't he understand? My dress is torn. I did really love them. Oh, the thrill of such great heights. The sun is in my eyes.

Blueberries in summer. The sharp blade of an ice skate. There is a pain in my heart. I once walked over treetops. It stopped. The rushing of the ocean in a shell. I always hoped it would end this way. Wax wings melting in the sun. I'm so old now. Maybe a dog wouldn't have been so bad. I should have gone to church more. Oh, damnation. To hell with it all. I wish I could take it all back.

**An observation about The Tightrope Artist.**

You never noticed until the Ice Hockey Player mentioned it, one of the only keen observations he ever made.

He said to his new wife, You always walk like you're on a tightrope, even if you're just walking to the bathroom or something. Just one foot right in front of the other, like the floor wasn't completely flat, like you're constantly afraid that you might fall over non-existent edge.

And by his tone of voice you couldn't tell whether he was deeply impressed by her dedication or highly annoyed that she just couldn't walk normally.

**A collection of eulogies for The Tightrope Artist.**

Her hippie uncle began with an anecdote: I was the first to notice how good she was on her feet, real sturdy like, and confident, you know? Not like those other babies who fall on their faces when they start walking and have to be coaxed along. She just one day stood up, took a step, then another step, and bam! she was walking around like one of

them tall ostrich birds. So one day, I get this idea as I used to work in this traveling circus as The Strongman, back when I believed in the capitalist system. So I set up this line between two trees, a slack line, and I plopped that girl up there and I'm holding her under her armpits so she doesn't topple over like, and I'll be damned if she doesn't need my support at all, and there she goes, this little balancing ostrich walking a rope like she was a Tightrope Artist reincarnated. Brought tears to my eyes, it really did.

The Ice Hockey Player was not done arguing with The Tightrope Artist and said only this: Why did she have to be an artist? Was having a life with me so damn bad?

A reporter that followed her career said the following: Damn, that woman was the biggest draw I ever saw. Filled the tents every time, filled the seats, filled the streets. I saw her first public performance at a county fair in Kansas by luck one summer. I witnessed her walk across Niagara Falls, balancing a basket of kittens on her head that got her all famous. And she gave me an exclusive after that time she walked across that stadium during a World Series baseball game and caught a home run ball. Gave me the ball, too. What a doll. My pieces on her made my career. I'll never find another one like *her* to write about.

One of her biggest fans, a heavy-set mid-western woman, hardly got any words out, all the mourners could make out was something about the beauty of her delicate ankles.

A person claiming to be her mother said this: It was me that was there when she fell for the first time and scraped her knees and the palms of her hand. I set her back on her feet as she cried. She refused to get back on the rope for days. And it was me that told her, So you fell and you hurt yourself, but now you have to get right back on. You have a chance to be someone, be someone different. You're something special when you're on that rope, up there balancing like a bird on a wire. You can grow up and be something, something more than you are now. And the mother figure paused as tears mingled with black mascara streaked down her face. She ended with this: But when she got all famous, she forgot who she was, she stopped calling home, stopped visiting. More than anything I wish that on that day when she fell, I wish I had let her be, taken down that rope, never let her walk again, never pushed her to be anything more than what she was. I loved her, not that Tightrope Artist she became.

Another person claiming to be her biggest fan, could only thank The Tightrope Artist for what she called The Tightrope Artist's beauty, sheer beauty, and the frail woman said, She made me feel like *I* was the one up there.

You unfortunately couldn't make it to the funeral, so you left behind a letter to be read aloud, written as a just in case something happened to you, it said, The Tightrope Artist had a damn good time up there.

**The one thing The Tightrope Artist did not miss.**

Was the thing that you missed the most. On the nights you couldn't sleep, you missed the Ice Hockey Player, but not all of him, just the feel of his hands. To put himself to sleep he used to lift up The Tightrope Artist's night shirt and count her rib bones as if he were counting sheep. With clumsy fingers, he would trace the bones outward from her sternum, working his way up. One by one, a finger outlined the shape of her chest cavity. Down one side, up the next, until her reached the end, and would rest his hand flat against the ribs that protected her heart. Then he would count her heartbeats, his breath echoing in her ear until they both fell asleep. It was an unspoken ritual between them, the kind of thing that connected them as something more than Tightrope Artist and Hockey Player. Unlike you, The Tightrope Artist insists there was nothing she missed about him. She refused to say his name, later refused to answer questions about him when asked by interviewers. But you hear her counting out slowly some nights. And you could swear you feel the light touch of rough fingers on your own ribs.

#### **A brief moment with The Tightrope Artist.**

In which she wondered why she was so compelled to walk the tightrope. Her conclusion: It must be love, why else sacrifice herself and others for it?

#### **The last walk of The Tightrope Artist.**

You stood with her in her makeshift dressing room, which was really the women's bathroom positioned on the 45<sup>th</sup> floor of a skyscraper. You pulled on her sequined bodice nice and tight, and twisted her hair up into an elegant bun, smoothing down the flyaway

hairs with ample amounts of hairspray, and applied gloss to her lips so everyone could see her smile. For the first time, you saw yourself in a glimmer of her beauty.

In the elevator to the roof, you both nervously counted the floor numbers as they went higher and higher. The Tightrope Artist complained that her toes were cold, like little ice cubes, as she was barefoot like always. She did not believe in shoes. But as soon as the doors opened, the corners of her mouth reached toward her eyes. She confidently strutted to the edge of the building, ignoring all the safety crew, who were doing last minute checks on the wire. She raised an arm over her head in greeting to the crowd below, who could only faintly recognize her.

She stepped up to the starting platform, licked a finger and held it out to test the direction of the wind. She nodded in satisfaction. Someone handed over her balancing pole and she weighed it in her hands carefully as if it was the first time she had ever held it. Then The Tightrope Artist raised her right foot and it came down on the wire, followed by her left foot. The achingly familiar feel of the wire under her, the way it echoed up her ten phalanges, through her delicate ankles and up her tibias and fibulas then her two sturdy femurs, situating itself somewhere in the ventricles of her heart, was the only feeling she ever wanted to feel for the rest of her life.

**The greatest fear of The Tightrope Artist was never falling.**

It was the thought that when she wasn't up on a wire, she failed to exist. It mirrored your own greatest fear: that without The Tightrope Artist, you, too, ceased to be.

when we still had the rest of our lives

She had to be convinced to move to Crescent City. They weren't married yet, and he was military, just joined, straight out of boot camp. It was a waiting game for them.

"It sounds like it should be a city on the Moon," she said. "*Crescent City*, the Moon, Space."

"What?"

"That's where people would have to address letters to us."

"I think it would have to be more like, Crescent City, the Moon, the Earth, the Milky Way Galaxy, the Universe. If you really want to get specific about it," he said.

"We'll go one weekend. To Crescent City, not the moon."

He brought her to a lighthouse standing on a small piece of windswept land that jutted out from the coast. The lighthouse was nothing more than a little house with whitewashed walls, a red-shingled roof. A light set on the roof resembled the top of the long body of some lighthouse out East that had been chopped off and molded onto this dwelling.

On top of that hill, looking out over the water, she thought to herself, *I could live here.*

He said, "Not bad, huh?"

"Not bad at all."

“We’ll get married before I deploy, won’t we?”

“If we live here, we can,” she said. Then, “You’ll write me a letter about this day three months from now. You’ll be somewhere that’s nothing but sand and ash and you’ll long for the ocean and lighthouses on top of hills in the sea and me with my hair still long and a time when we still had the rest of our lives and we lived on the verge of things only, not in the midst.”

And maybe that was something she only meant to say if she could see past this day, or maybe it was something she added to her memory a long time afterward.

In the Southwest, a billionaire disappeared in an experimental plane, simply flew off into the horizon, became a small spot in the distance, then a blip on a radar screen, and finally nothing. She thought, *How strange to just disappear like that.*

The same day that billionaire disappeared into the desert, her husband was somewhere in the Middle East. He, too, vanished, simply flew off in a Black Hawk helicopter in a whirl of sand, became a fast-moving black speck against tan, then nothing. Unlike the billionaire, he was eventually found. He did not wake up after the crash, although his heart kept beating, which was so very like him.

When she got the call that he was missing in action, she couldn’t for the life of her figure how it could be that you are somewhere, flying in a helicopter, and then nowhere.

Cave Junction, Oregon: It was so cold inside the caves, water dripping quietly from seemingly everywhere. Rocks shaped like deformed human knees rose out of the ground. Limbs came out of the ceiling, arms straining down from heaven. Through the

rocks, she saw a faint light filtering in, thinking it was the sun, but it was only the lamps set up to illuminate the path and rock structures. Grasping that she was alone, she called out her husband's name. He came around the corner.

She said, "Do not lose me in a cave system, for Christ's sake."

"You lagged behind. Keep up." Then, "When I'm in the hospital, I'll dream of caves, and I won't be able to open my eyes no matter how much I try. I'll dream of large caverns echoing with faint drips and a cool breeze on my skin coming from deep within and overhead. I will fear that the stalactites will fall on me, and I will wonder why you are always just behind me and why you cannot catch up."

She answered, "And I will believe that you don't dream of anything at all."

And she dreams that she is flying in a small experimental plane with a billionaire in a flight suit and aviator glasses.

"I'm going to make all the papers. This plane is state of the art, built it myself," he explains proudly.

"Oh, you'll make the news all right," she tells him.

Suddenly, the plane shakes violently. She tightens her seat belt, clutches at her armrests. Through the windshield, the earth is growing bigger, rising up to meet them. The billionaire is at the controls, trying to keep it steady, but he is failing.

"Well, this wasn't in the plan, damn it," he shouts.

Her husband leaned against the doorframe on the night before he left. He didn't question what she was doing, just stood comfortably with his arms crossed, watching.

She was not sure how to start; cutting hair seemed impossibly complicated. Deciding to get rid of as much as possible at once, she gathered her hair in a ponytail, reached behind her to cut it off above the rubber band. The scissor blades were dull. It took a bit of strength and a few cutting motions to get all the way through. Her ponytail fell to the floor as the remaining hair swung forward.

Her husband walked up behind her, ran a hand through the back of her hair, said, “That’s the way to get it done. Quick and painless. We should remember that.”

The back of her neck, exposed, made her feel strangely exposed herself. She gave him the scissors. He trimmed the ends so that they were even, hands unsteady. Already she was becoming someone else, and he hadn’t even left yet. She looked at their image in the mirror, no longer remembering what they looked like before.

“Nothing for it now,” she said.

She wants to seclude herself in a lighthouse somewhere on the coast. Or crawl into a cave and lose herself among the carved rock walls and become a slimy, sightless thing, never letting the sun touch her skin. More than anything, she wishes for her husband to wake from his deep sleep, to be found.

## Cerberus

### I.

Remember that old saying: Beware the wolf in sheep's clothing; the many warnings in the Bible to beware the wolf amongst you. He was a deceiver. He was evil masquerading in the shape of the innocent. The wolf, finding the discarded fleece of a sheep, was struck with the beginnings of a conniving plan. He slipped the fleece over his body. Hunching down, he moved with a tottering step, and snuck into the herd, but before he could kidnap a small sheep for his dinner, the shepherd came along with the same thought. He grabbed the wolf, telling him what a nice large sheep he was, enough to feed the shepherd's family for a week, and slit the wolf's throat right there in the field, blood seeping into the green grass. The shepherd realized his good fortune as he discovered the dirty fur hidden beneath the white fleece. He skinned the wolf completely anyway, planning to hang up the wolf's fur as a warning to other wolves with thoughts of invading his herd. This wolf, he believed would have killed his whole herd one by one, and he never would have known there was a trespasser amongst them.

For Rebekah, however, it was a wolf in dog's clothing. This was the reoccurring nightmare she had: She was standing outside in the backyard. She was waiting for someone. No, not someone, her husband. Her hands were cold; her feet were cold. She had forgotten to put on her gloves, to put socks and boots on her feet. She was impatient, gritting her teeth against the agitation, the cold. The dog came from somewhere, he was

suddenly before her. She didn't even hear his approach. It was not fear that she felt, it was something that went deeper than that. Unexpectedly, the dog lifted himself up, a solid movement into the air. He was standing on his hind legs like he was doing a circus trick. As his front legs rose before him, there were cracking sounds like hundreds of wish bones being pulled apart. His paws reached up to his head, but they had become human hands on the thin bones of a dog's legs. He took off his wolf head like it was a Halloween mask, his skin peeling away from his skull. The head of a man was then exposed, slick with a thin layer of mucus and what looked like blood. In the thin light, she saw patches of fur dropping slowly from the rest of his pale and smooth skin. He had familiar features and she knew his lips and cheekbones, but his eyes were still amber, wolf-like in their depths.

“Oh, that's where you've been,” she said with longing in her voice. “I've been waiting.”

Rebekah was three months pregnant, her husband was dead, and she couldn't even sleep in her own bed. It did not matter what she tried; she could not get the dog off the bed. Time and time again, she would place two hands on Cerberus' muscular back and push hard on his spine, the entire mass refusing to yield, and the animal would simply raise his head, looking over his shoulder at her, his strange eyes telling her she would do better to stop. With her strength unable to match his, she tried to outsmart him instead. She thought she could lure him off with treats of all kinds: pig's feet, leftovers from her own dinner, rawhide bones, but Cerberus simply pretended that he had lost the taste for these things.

Rebekah purposely stopped feeding him in the evening, instead waiting until she was ready to go to bed. While Cerberus ate, she quietly retreated to her bedroom before he noticed. It worked at first. The need to eat overpowered his desire to sleep in her bed. For a few nights, with the door locked, she was able to sleep through the night. After a week or so, he caught on and installed himself on her bed when the sun went down, refusing to heed her calls for dinner from the kitchen. He waited for her to give up, for her to return to the bedroom, for her to pull the blankets out from under him, and for her to fall uneasily asleep before he snuck into the kitchen to eat. Then he would stealthily maneuver himself back onto the bed without her waking. She knew this to be true as his bowl was empty every morning, yet he was still the first thing she was aware of when she woke in the morning. Defeated, she gave up on that strategy.

Rebekah could not understand how she could be outsmarted by this dog. Her hatred for him was amplified each time she felt his presence beside her. She couldn't stand the warmth of his breath touching the skin on the back of her neck, or the heat that radiated off his body during the night that warmed the entire bed, or the way he made the sheets, no matter how many times she washed them, smell like wet dog, or the accompanying dirt and grass that settled into the folds of the sheets, sticking to her bare skin.

But more than any of those things, more than the dog's physical presence, Rebekah hated waking in the early morning hours with Cerberus there, because for a moment, only a moment, she confused the mass of that animal with someone else. If she didn't open her eyes, she could imagine it was her husband, and some mornings she almost convinced herself that he was really there. She could feel his deep breaths

reverberate in the empty room. She felt his solid weight beside her. Sometimes she even began to reach out her hand toward him, fully expecting her fingers to touch skin, not fur. Slowly her senses returned to her, though, and she knew that it was only the dog.

That dog came into her life like a specter. When her husband brought Cerberus home, she had walked into the backyard and was startled by him, fully believing that a wolf had somehow ended up in their backyard. But her husband assured her there hadn't been any wolves in Oklahoma since the 1930's, that it was a dog, probably a mix, possibly some wolf blood in him from distant kin, he had said, excitement and awe in his voice. She knew that he had always wanted a dog, and she could tell that he was somehow already in love with this one. He told her that he would make a good guard for her and the house when he was deployed again. Little did he know the only thing it would guard with its life was her bed. He promised to train him then, finish it when he got back. He would make Cerberus into a real proper dog. Although there was something about this dog that made her instinctively nervous, she couldn't deny him anything, not when his face took on the character of the little boy he once was, not when she knew that being assured that she wasn't alone when he was across the world would make it easier for him to be gone, if not easier for her.

The dog-wolf Cerberus was a dark grey color, his fur short and thick with a lighter white coat underneath. His legs were long and agile. He had the face of a wolf; long snout, dark markings around his eyes, and amber colored eyes. He looked like he had emerged fully formed from some wildlife documentary, she thought; or, better yet, her husband had dragged him up from the depths of some dark place. Cerberus roamed the yard, hedging the fence, declaring the territory his own. As Rebekah stood outside in

the cold morning air, her breath clouding before her, shaking her head at her husband in disbelief for bringing this animal home, Cerberus widely circled them, then leapt at her, pushing her down, knocking the wind out of her. Her vision was filled with sharp white teeth, she felt hot breath on her face, and the sound of a growl in her ears before her husband pulled the dog off her. She had round paw-shaped bruises on her chest for a week after where, with all the force of his strong body, Cerberus had collided with her. This first meeting between them would dictate the rest of their relationship. She and this dog would never get along.

When she arrived home after a trip to the grocery store, Rebekah let the truck idle. Through the windshield she was struck by the beauty of this house that was now hers alone. Someone driving by might think that the house was abandoned with the overgrown grass and hedges in the yard and the overall worn quality of the wood siding. It was the first house she ever lived in; she grew up in apartments and trailer parks. Her husband had inherited it from his father when he passed. It was the house he had grown up in, and when they married this was where they came. It was an old farmhouse that creaked and sang in the night; something that kept her up when they first moved in, though her husband slept deeply with the familiar songs. It was set back from the road by a long driveway, nestled among large trees. Rebekah could easily imagine that it had always been here, something out of a storybook, a place that existed for the safety and comfort of wayward travelers who would stay a night then move on. But not until her husband died did she realize the loneliness of the place.

Heaving the groceries to the house, curiously, the dog was not there to greet her. “Cerberus,” she called, but there was no returning movement to tell her she was heard. “Good, stay outside,” she muttered.

The house was usually stuffy in the summer months, dead air filling the rooms, but it felt warmer than usual. There was no central air, just a little unit that hung out of one window. Setting the groceries down she went to turn it on, but nothing happened, there was no thud or rushing cold air.

“God damn air conditioner,” she said, her teeth gritted. She went outside to look at the unit but it was already dusk and she didn’t know what she was supposed to be looking for. She wiped away the drips of sweat that were already tracing down her cheeks. But she remembered her husband telling her months ago that the air conditioner was getting old, that when he had some free time he was going to look into replacing it with a bigger unit. But this was just one more thing that he never got around to starting or finishing.

Not knowing what else to do, she began banging on the unit with the palm of her hand, then with her closed fist, the force of her hits increasing with every contact. She only stopped when she noticed a bloody smear on the air conditioner. She uncurled her fist; blood was running down her palm and wrist. With her other hand, she smeared away the blood to reveal a fine jagged cut, and a part of her skin peeling off. And only then did she begin to feel a sharp pain radiating up her hand. When she turned, Cerberus was there, ears raised and alert, eyes keenly watching her.

Back inside, Rebekah rinsed off her hand. She let it bleed, watching the dark blood as it mixed and lightened in the water. Under the bathroom sink, she found some

gauze and bandages to wrap it with. She knew that she should call someone, find the telephone book and look up a repairman as the house was close to being unbearable, but she couldn't find the desire to make any effort. It must have been the pregnancy hormones that made her feel so tired, apathetic. So instead she lay down in the living room. And although she didn't mean to, she fell asleep.

She woke suddenly to the sound of Cerberus barking from somewhere in the house. She was covered in sweat. Her clothes stuck uncomfortably to her skin. Her injured hand throbbed in time with the blood in her ears. There was a light on in the kitchen, the sound of muffled voices and of Cerberus growling. Rebekah still felt like she was asleep as she headed toward the sounds, it filtered through her head that she was dreaming, dreaming about ghosts in her house. She recalled the fairytale of Goldilocks, of those poor bears that returned home to find that little girl sleeping in their beds. But she wasn't sure which one she would be in that story. *Shouldn't I be the little girl?* she thought.

Through the small hallway, she found Cerberus guarding the entrance. He turned when he sensed her presence, prepared to come at her. But he recognized her on sight, moving to circle around her. Rebekah moved him out of the way by pushing his body with her leg. Her mind was oddly still as she entered the kitchen, all she felt was a tension in her chest, and she wasn't sure why she wasn't more afraid. But a thief wouldn't be so care less as to turn the television on, wouldn't make so much noise, wouldn't stick around after encountering Cerberus.

A step around the corner revealed a man sitting at the table and for only half a moment, she let herself be drawn back to time past, to believe that her husband had come home. Cerberus pushed past her, colliding with the back of her legs, almost knocking her on her knees. And Rebekah came back to herself. No, it was not her husband.

“Rebekah,” the man said over Cerberus’ barks which reverberated around the small room.

“Jesus Christ, John, what are you doing here?” Rebekah said.

John stood up, attempted to step toward her, but quickly retracted his step as Cerberus lunged at him. Rebekah grabbed Cerberus by the collar, repeatedly telling him to heel. She struggled to pull him back, using all of her weight to lead him to the back door. Once outside, she closed the door on him, although his barks continued as he scratched at the door to be let back in.

Rebekah turned to John, who had sat back down at the table, where she noticed a six pack of beer sitting. “What’re you doing here? You haven’t called in a while.”

“I just wanted to check on my sister-in law. Did you know that your door was half open and Cerberus was running wild in the yard? I wrangled him back in while you were sleeping. You should be more careful,” he said. “You want a beer?”

Rebekah stared at the beer he was offering her in disbelief. “I’m pregnant, John.”

John’s eyes flickered to her stomach then back to the bottle in his hand, which he opened for himself. “Right, sorry I forgot there for a second.”

Outside the door, Cerberus refused to give up. Rebekah tried her best to ignore him, sitting across from John at the table. She hadn’t seen John for a few weeks now and he looked a little worse for the wear. When her husband was alive, she never really saw

the resemblance between the two brothers, but now it was inescapable. It was as if they were copies of each other, but with deliberate mistakes. John had a different nose from her husband and was shorter with darker hair, but they shared the same eye color and the curve of the jaw was the same. While John had expressions that were impossible to read at times, her husband was always so open. It was a bit unnerving now, and that was why she was not too concerned that John had disappeared.

“What happened to your hand there?”

“Nothing. It’s fine,” she answered quickly, not wanting to explain what had happened.

John frowned at her; his beer was already half gone. “Doesn’t look like nothing. Did Cerberus bite you?”

“No, it’s just a cut. I cut it on the air conditioner today,” she said. “What are you doing here really, John?” she asked.

He didn’t answer at first, just emptied the bottle and set it down. “I got laid off today.”

Rebekah then understood. Whenever things went wrong for John this was the place that he came to; home, to be with his brother, to drink, to wallow. And she didn’t know how to play the part of her husband, or if she even should.

“I’m sorry,” she said. Glancing around the kitchen, she noticed the groceries that she never put away. “Are you hungry? I haven’t eaten yet.”

John flipped a bottle cap onto the table, then immediately picked it up again. “No, I’m good. I should probably get going,” he said, standing up and collecting the empty bottles he had drunk alone.

“You don’t have to leave, John,” she said, not sure if she really wanted him to stay.

“I’ll see you later. Lock your door. You don’t want to let just anybody in now,” he said, pointing a finger at her before he left the kitchen with the rest of the beer.

Later in the night she tried to sleep, but the heat was suffocating. Opening the windows didn’t help, and the presence of Cerberus on the bed was more overbearing than usual. She pushed all the sheets off her, set up a small fan to blow on her, but nothing eased her into sleep.

At last she abandoned her bed in favor of the bathroom floor. It was the only cool place in the house she could find. Rebekah lay on her side, her cheek pressed to the tile, which was hard, but radiated a thin sheet of coolness. A pillow was propped under her, even though her stomach was mostly smooth, she worried that the baby would feel the hard floor, that was if it felt anything yet. From the doorway, Cerberus watched her get comfortable.

“You should be the one sleeping in here,” she said to him. “Dirty mutt.”

He turned away from her, clearly off to enjoy the entire bed to himself for once, and she almost called him back. It was a restless night. The tiles on the floor eventually were warmed by her body heat and the hot air in the house. Rebekah had to change positions constantly searching out cool spots. Her mind kept replaying the scene with John in the kitchen, wondering if she should have tried harder to make him stay, wondering if he was out there drinking himself into a stupor.

But she woke in the morning feeling something watching her. Stretched out at the door’s threshold, Cerberus was sleeping, his body blocking the entrance, half of him in

the bathroom, half in the hallway. His head rested on his paws. She looked at him, and his eyes opened as if he could feel her stare. Somehow she got the feeling that he had been there for a while.

## II.

Remember the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood: The good little girl who went to visit her sick grandmother because she was that sweet and thoughtful. But the Big Bad Wolf was stalking her every step, moving silently behind her in the trees, the shadow out of the corner of her eye, planning and scheming on how to kill her and her grandmother. A clever disguise and more clever words were all it took. And there went Little Red down his gullet to rest in his stomach with her beloved grandmother until the heroic huntsman came to the rescue. He cuts the wolf open, splits him right down the middle with his axe, Little Red and grandmother falling out of the wolf along with all his innards. To make sure the wolf would die, they filled his belly with heavy stones, and then sewed him back up. The wolf then stumbled to the river, bending his neck down to get a drink as he was so very thirsty, and fell in and drowned as Little Red, her grandmother, and the huntsman watched.

Rebekah didn't even know she was pregnant until her mother forced her to go to the doctor because she had been so sick and exhausted, even more than she should have been after dealing with her husband's funeral arrangements.

The first night she knew she was pregnant, she dreamt she was in a forest, gently lying on the cold earthy ground, and there were people standing over her. Faceless outlines in the shape of human bodies that mixed with the dark outlines of the trees. The

smell of dirt was strong, a musky smell of newly uncovered earth that has been deep in the ground for ages. When she looked up, she saw the sky through the branches, a pale blue, shimmering in the dusk. There was a flash of red before her, and she suddenly realized that one of the outlines had an axe in their hand, a sharp, glinting axe. Before she could even scream or move, they were cutting her open, a quick slice down the center of her rib cage, and down through her stomach. She filleted open, her insides shining. They filled her up with rocks; it didn't hurt, but she felt the weight of the rocks pressing against the inside of her skin, knocking against the bones of her spine, settling inside her, anchoring her to the ground.

Rebekah stood watching John as he examined the air conditioner. When he turned it on there was a quiet pattering noise, but no rush of air. It was dripping some kind of foul smelling water, which trailed its way down the outside wall. Cerberus was inside the house. Rebekah heard his barks and whines coming from the other side of the door along with his paws pounding the floor and nails scratching the wood.

“Don't think there is anything I can do for it,” he said. “It needs to be replaced.”

“Great,” Rebekah answered. “How am I supposed to pay for that now?”

“I can help you out,” he said.

Rebekah shook her head. “Yeah, and how are you going to manage that seeing as you currently have no job, John?”

“Well, damn, Rebekah, I'm just trying to help,” he shot back.

“Yes, thanks so much for that,” she said. She knew that she was being unfair to him, yet she couldn't keep her irritation in check. From inside the house, Cerberus' barks

were getting more desperate. John was starting to pace, Rebekah noticed, realizing that she had really upset him.

“God dammit, you know what, Rebekah, I am trying my best here to deal with the mess he left us in, alright? So if that means I’m going to help my pregnant sister-in-law buy a new air conditioner that’s what I’ll do.”

With a loud bang, Cerberus finally conquered the door and he emerged with teeth bared, growls emitting from the depths of his ribcage. Cerberus circled around, surveying John. Rebekah understood in a moment of clarity as she felt Cerberus brush against her legs what John meant. Just as her husband had left her Cerberus to deal with, John was left with her. She wondered if that was what she was to John: Something to be taken care of, not out of love for the thing itself, but for love of the person who left it behind.

“I’m going to start taking this down, that okay with you?” he asked.

“Oaky,” she answered. She tried to call Cerberus back inside the house, but he wouldn’t heed her calls. Instead he installed himself a good distance away from John on the grass, but Rebekah could see his eyes following John’s every movement, so she left them both outside in the heat.

Later that night, a thunderstorm settled over the house. Sitting in her dim kitchen, Rebekah listened as rain fell heavy on the roof, and ate her dinner. Cerberus was agitated. He never did well when big storms hit. And he could always tell when they were coming, even if they were miles away. She had found him earlier sitting in the driveway, having escaped once again from the backyard. Rebekah couldn’t figure out how he was doing it; there were no holes under the fence, so she could only imagine he was jumping it

completely. He was off patrolling the house as she finished her dinner and cleaned up. Her husband used to say that Cerberus was afraid of the sound of the thunder because he mistook it for an invading wolf pack. As she washed her plate in the sink, she was suddenly struck by the fact that all had gone quiet. She dried off her hands, listening. There was a crack of thunder from above, yet the rain had lessened, and then far off she heard Cerberus. He was no longer in the house. As she made her way through the rooms, she could feel a draft of air that smelled of fallen rain. The front door had blown open, or perhaps Cerberus had opened it; he was getting far too skilled at that. The air was cool on her skin for it still being late summer and it had a charge to it, a subtle vibration that raised the hair on her arms.

“Cerberus,” she called; her voice carried out into the storm with a clarity that startled her. The grass was wet underneath her feet. She called for Cerberus again, but once again there was no answer. *He always comes*, she thought. A part of her wanted to just turn away, go back inside and escape the rain that was beginning anew, yet a sliver of fear was forming in her chest. If Cerberus had gotten lost out in a storm, then she would be completely alone in the house. She called again, louder this time. Relief came over her as she heard Cerberus’ barking in return. He came running, and she saw that in his mouth he carried a dead squirrel. Just as he was about to approach her with the dead animal, lightning sparked in the sky, followed too closely by the sound of thunder. Rebekah felt the trembling of earth under her feet, the shock moving up her body. Cerberus, in his wrath, dropped the forgotten squirrel as he looked to the heavens, and sent up a howl of rage. Rebekah stood shaken. A new sensation stirred in her belly, not the electric current

from the lightning or a vibration from the thunder, but an undeniable movement from inside her as if someone had softly run their fingers along the inside of her skin.

She pressed a hand against her shirt. It was the first she had felt the baby move. The storm paid her no heed, rain falling on her face, nor did Cerberus who continued to prance around the yard, his head pointed to the clouds. She saw now that there were three beings alive in her house; her, Cerberus, and this baby.

### III.

Remember that old fable: The Shepherd boy who cried wolf for a laugh. It was so dull watching those sheep all day, every day, and oh, what joy to see the villagers running up the hill in panic. It was all fun and games until the real wolf came. And the wolf knew what the boy had done. He taunted the boy saying, “Nobody will ever come, scream my name all you want. Wolf! Wolf! There is a wolf! All you ever did was lie. Who will believe you now?” The wolf then killed every sheep in the flock, ripping out their throats one by one as the boy looked on in horror, his calls for help unheeded by the villagers. The boy was left in shock, in tears to bear witness to the bloody mess the wolf left behind. And he asked himself, Who will believe me?

“The dog is evil, Ma,” Rebekah said. “There’s nothing else for it. Every time John comes around Cerberus tries to rip his throat out.”

It was the beginning of October; the weather had cooled, and Rebekah was sitting out in the backyard. She heard her mother’s loud sigh through the phone’s receiver, knew she was sick of hearing about this dog.

“Well, I’m sure you’re exaggerating, but I honestly don’t know what to tell you, Rebekah,” her mother said. “If you hate him so much then ship him out somewhere, leave him on the side of the road. All I know is that the stress isn’t good for the baby.”

And for the first time Rebekah seriously considered it. Maybe she could just drop him off at the humane society. Although she didn’t know if she could really go through with it, or if the shelter would even want to take him. Maybe she could make flyers or something, give him away for free.

“So,” her mother said. “John’s back in the picture, huh? When did that happen? I didn’t see him at all when I was visiting.”

“I don’t know, Ma, he’s just been around more. He helped me get a new air conditioner. Installed it and everything.”

“Hmm,” her mother answered, moving on to ask about the baby. Rebekah laid a hand on her rounded stomach, answering with a “yes,” when needed.

She saw Cerberus from a distance coming around the side of the house. When he saw her sitting there, he picked up his step. Lying in the grass before her feet, he rolled onto his back, his legs stretching up in the air, his body wobbling back and forth. She probably couldn’t give him away if she wanted to. Who would even want him? Cerberus looked at her as if trying to make himself appear endearing, his head upside down, tongue hanging out of his mouth. In her ear, her mother was still rattling on about the baby, but she couldn’t for the life of her follow along to her words.

Speaking quietly enough so that her mother couldn’t hear her, Rebekah asked, “What am I going to do with you?”

Rebekah reached over to turn the heat up in John's car. He took his eyes off the road for a moment to glance over at her. She self-consciously smoothed her sweater. As her stomach grew with each minute, it seemed to her, she felt that people were paying closer attention to her and she did not like it all.

As they pulled into the parking lot of a small restaurant in town, Rebekah said. "Finally, I'm starving."

John laughed as he turned off the engine. "I hate to break it to you, but these days you always say you're starving, so forgive me if I don't believe you anymore."

"Well," Rebekah said. "I never believe anything you say, so I guess we're even."

It was not their usual waitress today. Although Rebekah did not know the young woman, John seemed to. The waitress, Alison, smiled brightly at him, asking him how he was and telling him that she had just moved back to town, and that she was sorry to hear about his brother. Alison must not have known who Rebekah was or she would have said something to her as well, telling her she was sorry that she had lost her husband. But Rebekah didn't mind not having the attention on her. She thought that sometimes people forgot that John had lost a brother just as she had lost a husband.

After they placed their orders and she left, Rebekah asked, "How do you know her?"

"Went to high school together. Long time ago," he said.

"She's pretty," Rebekah said. "Nice, too."

"Always was," John replied. "Always out of my league, too."

Rebekah turned her head to peer at the waitress behind the counter. She was looking over at John. "I don't know about that."

As the waitress set their food down before them, she said, looking at John, “Make sure you let me know if you need anything else.”

When she walked away, John looked after her, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“What is it?” Rebekah said.

“It’s just that she looks the same, but different somehow. Not just that she’s older, but she never used to let herself smile before. She always took everything so seriously. I wonder what changed in her.”

Rebekah could only stare at him. “Did you take some psychology classes in college or something?”

“Just an observation,” he said.

*But what a strange thing to notice about someone,* she thought.

As they finished up their lunch, John set his plate to the side and said, “Now, how are doing? You know, with things? The baby and all?”

“I’m fine,” Rebekah said instantly.

John looked skeptically at her and Rebekah felt like a child in his gaze, a child who was caught in lie. “You don’t need to make me feel better, Rebekah. We’re not fine. Not yet anyway.”

“It’s bearable. Most of the time,” Rebekah answered honestly, busying herself with wiping the crumbs from the table and stacking her silverware on her empty plate. “It’s just that I feel like everything has changed, including me, but he’s stayed the same. I worry about leaving him behind, sometimes.”

John sighed, folding his hands together on the table. “But I think that’s what we have to do, though.”

Alison the waitress came with the check and another smile for John. And Rebekah noticed him turn a shade of red at the attention. Rebekah planned to casually mention to the waitress that John was single the next time they came in. It would be good for John to get out, have something besides his brother to think about.

As they were leaving, Rebekah noticed John stop to pull the classified section out of a newspaper left on a table. “What are you looking for? Is the job at the garage not working out?”

“No, it’s going good,” he said. “The landlord is selling my place and I can’t afford to buy it, so.”

Rebekah looked up at him, and before the thought even fully formed in her head, said, “Why don’t you move in with me?”

“What?”

“There’re two empty rooms already. I guess one will be the baby’s room, so that leaves one free, that is if you don’t mind moving back home, And it would only be until you found somewhere you liked. And you could save up for something nice,” she finished.

John laughed and said, “Sounds great except for the small matter, Rebekah, that your dog has it out for me.”

Automatically she answered, “He’s not my dog.”

“Yeah, then who does he belong to?”

For a moment, Rebekah wanted to tell him that Cerberus belonged to the dead. He had belonged to her husband, not to her. She now wondered if he really belonged to anyone. There was something about him that was unlike other dogs. But she simply shook her head, not answering, and repeated the offer. John didn't answer right away, he mulled it over for days, which Rebekah came to understand was his way of dealing with things, before he eventually agreed. And he made it clear that it would only be until he saved up enough to get a place of his own. What went unspoken in her offer was a plea to not be alone, not to be alone with the baby when it came. And she believed that was what swayed John in the end, even though it went unspoken by him, too, as he didn't want to be alone either. They needed each other, but those things, Rebekah believed, went better unacknowledged sometimes.

Cerberus took the new intrusion with little grace. With John moving in, he had been sulkier than usual, a little more aggressive. In the evenings, he placed himself on the couch next to Rebekah, far enough away that they didn't touch, but close enough to keep her every movement in his sights. John sat in the armchair, watching television, Cerberus focusing in on him every time he spoke even a word. And through all the padding of the couch Rebekah felt his low growl, the rumble emanating from in his chest. Cerberus wouldn't touch his food if John fed him; he now would only eat if it came from Rebekah's hands. If John tried to let him outside, Cerberus would look at him in defiance and lay his body down on the floor, refusing to move for anything. It was as if he thought he could erase John's presence from the house simply by acting as if John had no voice or control over him. Rebekah, however, was glad to have another human presence in the

house. She had not realized how much she missed just knowing that there was somebody else there in the next room. And she had not realized how much she had been relying on Cerberus for conversation and how much she had been talking to herself. After her husband died, she supposed she had gotten use to the house being quiet. But she came to know that houses needed people in them.

One morning, during the fifth month of her pregnancy, she told John that she had a doctor's appointment. They sat in the kitchen together, Cerberus stationed under a chair, with what she could only describe as a sullen look on his face.

"I can go with you if you want," he said. "Drive you."

Cerberus answered John with a low growl. Without thinking about it Rebekah reached out a hand to pat his head and he became quiet again.

"You don't need to. I'm fine going on my own. Besides I thought you were seeing Alison today. What is this your third date now?"

"Something like that," he answered. John rose from the table, and perhaps he had forgotten that Cerberus was there or did not yet know the extent of his wrath, but as he moved around the table, Cerberus sensing an opportunity, lunged at him. Cerberus' teeth barely grazed John's legs, snagging on the fabric of his jeans. Cerberus upset the chair Rebekah was sitting in, almost causing it to fall backwards, but she was able to catch herself as her hands shot out to grab the table.

"Jesus Christ," Rebekah shouted. "Are you okay?"

John was cursing under his breath. "Fine. He only got my pants. Man, what is wrong with this dog?"

Cerberus had cowered back under her chair, faintly growling still at John. Rebekah tried to command him outside, pointing toward the door, but he did not heed her. He hunkered down, his eyes aglow in the dim kitchen lights, his lips bared ever so slightly to show teeth. Rebekah wondered, too, what was wrong with Cerberus. She looked over at John and thought, *What is it about him?* And as John turned his head slightly away and down, she was suddenly reminded of her husband. The idea came to her that maybe Cerberus, like her, had noticed the uncanny likeness to her husband.

“He looks so much him like sometimes,” she said, not really speaking to John, but to Cerberus whose head was tilted up to meet her eye.

“What?” John asked, still examining the whole in his pants.

“You look like your brother,” she said.

John furrowed his brows. “What has that got to do with anything?”

Rebekah frowned. Cerberus had stopped growling now. She leaned down, reaching a hand out toward him, and laid it on his hand. “That’s what he doesn’t like about you. He loved your brother and maybe sometimes he mistakes you for him.”

John said, “Well, that’s just great freaking dog psychology there. But you have a baby to think about here. And that dog is dangerous, no matter what the reason.”

Rebekah understood that John was right. But Cerberus was docile in her hands now. As the anger dissipated in him, he returned to the gentle eyed dog that her husband had brought out in him through kindness. He had spent weeks training him to sit, to stay, to come all with a gentle hand that Cerberus had never known before. Cerberus had looked at her husband as the leader of his pack, something to be respected and obeyed. Every day Cerberus spent with her husband, the more he became a dog, the more he shed

his wolf clothes. Rebekah had never once thought about what his absence had meant to Cerberus.

In line at the grocery store there was a small girl in front of Rebekah who she couldn't help but take quick glances at. She had never really taken much notice of children before her pregnancy. But now they seemed to be everywhere. It moved Rebekah to imagine what her child would be like. When she tried to visualize this child inside of her, she saw him, not his face or hair color, but the way all his movements were so slow and fluid, the ease in which he held himself, and she saw this child having his laugh, that silent laughter that seemed to take the breath from his lungs, and his determination, that relentless drive of his. That is what she hoped for.

Rebekah caught the girl glancing down at her stomach, although she couldn't blame her because she had gotten rather large.

"Do you know yet?" the girl asked. "If it's a boy or girl?"

Rebekah smiled at her. "A girl," she answered. "It's a girl."

#### IV.

Remember the myth of the guardian of the underworld: Cerberus, the three headed dog, born of giants, tasked to watch the entrance of the dead, forever being conquered by men who tricked the poor beast into letting them cross the threshold. Orpheus lulled Cerberus into a gentle sleep with the sweet strains of his music, slipping past to reclaim his dead love, Eurydice. Then there was Aeneas, the Trojan hero, in search of his dead father, who crossed the river Styx and fed Cerberus honeyed cakes

with poppy seeds, which once again put him into slumber. But the most famous, the most brutal of the tamings of the guardian Cerberus was Hercules, who in his last long labor traveled to the underworld, asked Hades politely if he could take the beast to the land of the living, and Hades politely gave him permission with the condition that Hercules could take him as long as he used no weapons. Poor Cerberus was set upon by Hercules, strangled and choked by strong arms, wrestled to the ground, and bound by unbreakable chains. Cerberus was dragged into the light of day, blinking his many eyes at the brightness. And what did the beast ever do to deserve such treatment? Perhaps Cerberus understood better than most that there is no good in trying to recall the dead; Orpheus learned that lesson when he could not keep his eyes from Eurydice, and Aeneas upon meeting his dead father was unable to even touch him. And eventually even Hercules returned Cerberus to his proper place as guardian.

The first dream Rebekah had about her daughter, not a dream where she was pregnant, but a dream where her daughter was already born and alive, she was searching the backyard for her. Rebekah heard her laughter coming from beyond the trees. She followed the sound. And she wasn't sure why, but she was afraid as she opened the gate that protected their house and stepped out into a damp forest. She heard the sounds of a dog, barks and yaps, mingling with her daughter's mirth. Her daughter was there; she was older than Rebekah expected her to be, and Rebekah did not understand how she missed so many years of her daughter's life. The girl was sitting with her back to Rebekah. Cerberus was standing over her, his head bent close to hers. They both turned when they heard her approach. Her daughter smiled at her, and it was horrifying, because instead of a child's smile, her jaw was disfigured by the teeth of a wolf, shining white in the dull

light, sharp teeth that her lips couldn't quite cover. In one hand she held a honeyed cake with poppy seed, outstretched like an offering to her mother as Cerberus licked her face in apparent delight.

Rebekah's mother came to stay with them as the birth of the baby approached and she wanted to be there when her first grandchild was born. The activity in the house reached a crescendo that Cerberus could not deal with. He was barely tolerating John, but the new addition of her mother, Rebekah understood he could not abide with it. He often could not be found anywhere in the house or outside of it. At night, Rebekah would stand outside in the dark, calling for him until he came. He would not answer to John or her mother. John told her one day, "Your mother and me, I guess, aren't part of the pack." He had laughed when he said it, but both he and Rebekah knew it to be true. But there were more important things for Rebekah to be worrying about than Cerberus; there were things to buy, plans to be made for the baby when she came. Her mother took her shopping for a crib one day.

"We'll have to figure out which room to put it in," her mother said. "Have you decided which room will be the baby's?"

Rebekah did not answer right away. Her mother had been hinting at her uncertainty about John living with her. She had never particularly liked John from the little she knew about him. Always said that she found it strange that two brothers could be so different.

Rebekah took a deep breath, running a hand over her stomach, and said, "The smallest room. I want to put her in the room you're staying in."

“Hmm,” her mother answered. “I suppose that will work if John is staying for a while?”

“No, he’s not staying a while. He’s found a place and said that after the baby comes home, he’ll move out. He has a steady job and he’s seeing a nice girl now, too. Why don’t you just come out and say you don’t care for him, Ma?” Rebekah said her anger rising. “He’s never done anything to you. So why do you have such a problem with him?”

Her mother tried to hold her tongue, Rebekah saw the struggle in her face. “I don’t have a problem with him,” she said. “It just doesn’t seem right that you should be living with your brother-in-law. And he’s never struck me as the reliable type.”

“He’s been reliable to me, Ma,” Rebekah said. “Isn’t that all that matters?”

Her mother was silent after that and together they choose a crib made of dark wood. When they got home, John helped her mother lift the boxed up crib out of the back of the truck. Bringing it inside, they set it down in the third bedroom. John opened the box.

Rebekah asked, “Do you think that you can put it together?”

John looked up at her. “Well, I never have before, but how hard can it be, really? I put a bookcase together before, so.”

“And a crib and a bookcase are so similar, too,” Rebekah said.

Her mother entered the room behind her. “It’s not rocket science, you two. I’ll read the directions, John, and you can work the screwdriver,” she said.

Rebekah leaned against the doorframe. Her feet ached, as well as her back, but she stood and watched the two pull out the pieces for her daughter’s crib. A small part of

her heart felt broken at the scene. This was not the way it was supposed to be. Her husband should have been the one putting together the crib for his first child, not her mother and his brother. She felt a cold nose on her hand and glanced down to find Cerberus there. He nudged her hand again and she placed a hand on his head, giving it a quick pack. But there was something else inside her, too, that made her heart grow as she watched her mother dictate instructions to John who dutifully did as he was told, although he could probably have done it all on his own. It was not what was supposed to be, but it was what she had.

It was a strange turn of events, Rebekah admitted, but when the weather worsened in December and the house filled with ice cold air, she actually was thankful for Cerberus. He became her personal blanket, a heavy solid body of heat. Most nights she could get him to lie at the end of the bed, so she could put her feet underneath him. The baby was more active at night. Rebekah rested her hand on her stomach and felt her movements, her legs and arms knocking against the inside of her skin. She sometimes woke in the middle of night to that feeling, but she found it comforting, a sign that the baby was all right. Some nights she even reached out to make sure Cerberus was still there, too, keeping one hand on her belly and the other against his rib cage, to feel the movements of her baby, and the beat of his heart steady against her own two hands.

## V.

The Shoshoni people tell this tale about the origin of death: The Wolf was the great creator of all things, the keeper of life and death. He was powerful and could bring the dead back to life by shooting an arrow under them. Coyote, the trickster, was jealous

of the honor and respect shown to the Wolf by the Shoshoni, so he devised a cunning plan to turn them against the Wolf. Speaking with the Wolf one day, Coyote argued that if the Wolf brought people back from the dead there would soon be no space left on the Earth.

“So, you see, Wolf,” the Coyote said slyly. “Those who die *must* remain dead or else the land will grow too small for everyone to live on.”

The Wolf had no reply. Knowing the Coyote was a deceiver, he knew that it must be some kind of trick, but still he recognized the wisdom of those words. Coyote believed that once the Shoshoni learned that the Wolf no longer raised the dead, he would be hated, so he went off, content with his success.

Time passed, and one day, the Coyote came running, panicked, distraught, his fur stained with blood, in search of the Wolf.

“My son,” he said to the Wolf. “My son has been bitten by a rattlesnake. He is dead. Please, Wolf, I beg you, bring him back, I know that you can. Bring him back.”

But the Wolf, with coldness and with sympathy, only repeated the very words that Coyote himself had said, “Those who die must remain dead. From now on I will no longer bring the dead back to life. The land is too small for both those who are dead and those who live.”

The Shoshoni say that was the day that death came to the land, and as punishment for his conniving ways, the Coyote’s son was the first to die.

As December ended, Rebekah was in the last weeks of her pregnancy. She had taken to sleeping on the couch with pillows placed under knees and back as she found her

bed intolerable. And since the living room was the only room with a fireplace, it was the warmest at night. Cerberus had tried to install himself on the end of the couch, but he had been banished to find a suitable place on the floor below her. Night was now the only time that Cerberus made himself known. Her mother hustled around the house by day cleaning, cooking, worrying, and checking on Rebekah. In the evening Rebekah, her mother, and John would eat in the living room together. John would leave Cerberus' food outside for him. When everyone else had gone to bed, Cerberus would appear by the couch, wagging his tail, and nudging Rebekah's hand for attention. He would then curl close to the couch and lie quietly. Rebekah watched his eyes those nights, glowing with the heat of reflected flames. Every morning when she would wake up, Cerberus would be gone.

On a particularly cold night, Rebekah heard someone moving in the dark. She wasn't sure if she was really sleeping or in that half-awake state in between when it happened. All she could figure out later was that her mother must have startled Cerberus from sleep. She didn't remember her mother entering the room or what she said exactly. Later, her mother said that she was just checking on her, worried that the fire was dying out. But all Rebekah recalled was the sound of Cerberus' feet scrambling up, the scratching sound his nails made against the hard wood floors, the echoing howls and snarls. She had nothing more than a still shot in her head of her mother's face, a streak of fear washed over it, as she stumbled backward the same way Rebekah did that first morning when her husband had brought Cerberus home.

She was unable to lift herself fully up from the couch, all she could do was shout, "No, Cerberus, no! Down!"

It was the first time that he had ever listened to her voice. Her husband's commands were the only ones he would obey before; he was the only one who could get him to sit, to heel, to stop attacking a helpless animal he had cornered. Cerberus' head had turned toward her and he actually halted his attack, his growls ceasing, and he returned to her side. John was already out of his room.

It wasn't as bad as it could have been. Her mother had a small bite mark on her forearm, where his front teeth had almost locked on to her arm as he lunged forward and she pulled back. John had taken her mother to the bathroom where he cleaned away the blood on her arm, and wrapped it in a bandage.

In the light of morning her mother absolutely refused to ever be near Cerberus again, let alone look at him. He was banished for good to the backyard. Rebekah sat at the table, her back aching from trying to get up so fast. Faintly, she thought for a moment she heard Cerberus' bark like crying.

"I didn't understand what you meant before," her mother said. "About that dog." Her voice was quiet as she spoke, a hush in her words as if she was afraid Cerberus would overhear. She rubbed her arm, tracing the broken skin and teeth marks underneath the wrapping. "There was something in his eyes. It wasn't normal anger you see in other dogs. It was something else, something not right. I don't know why you've let that animal stay for so long."

John stood listening. Rebekah looked toward him and he said the thing that Rebekah was both anticipating and dreading, "The baby won't be safe around him."

There was only one possible solution; Cerberus could not stay in the house.

John crossed his arms and said, “I can take him to the animal shelter tomorrow. They’ll take him in when I explain the situation.”

“No,” Rebekah said. “I’ll do it.”

Her mother stood at the words. “Now, Rebekah I don’t think that is a good idea at all. You know that the doctor said that you and the baby shouldn’t be under any stress, physical or emotional. John should do it.”

Rebekah was adamant. “He was left to me. He’s my responsibility. If he can’t stay here, it has to me that does it. I’ll take him.”

On the drive to the animal shelter, Rebekah found it difficult to look over at Cerberus. He sat perfectly still in the passenger seat, following the movement of the passing cars with rapt attention. Pulling into the small parking lot, she took the key out of the ignition but didn’t get out. The animal shelter was a shabby looking building that gave the sure impression that it would not be still standing for much longer; the outside walls had paint peeling off them and most of the trees and bushes surrounding the place looked close to death. There were cages made of chain link fence off to one side. Next to her, Cerberus stood up, making a small circle in the seat, clearly anxious to get out. Without really realizing it, she put the key back in the ignition and started the car. She was halfway home before she pulled the car off to the side of the road.

She turned to Cerberus and told him, “It’s just because I’m pregnant. It’s all the hormones and my maternal instinct kicking in, otherwise I would do it, I would just leave you on the side of the road and be rid of you once and for all.”

The car felt suddenly suffocating, so Rebekah undid her seatbelt and flung the car door open, stepping out. It was freezing out; the cold hit her lungs painfully. It had not started to snow yet, but all the signs were there as the sky was steadily growing darker, and the wind was picking up. She cradled her stomach with her hands. She was wearing a thick coat, yet already she was shivering. Cerberus jumped from the car, thinking he was home, Rebekah guessed. And before she could react, he was already heading for the trees lining the road.

“Stop,” Rebekah yelled at him, but the wind took her words and he did not turn. She glanced up and down the road, no cars or people were in sight. There was a moment when she considered it. Just leaving. She imagined herself getting into the car, starting the engine, driving off, and leaving that dog behind to fend for himself in the forest. She was moving back to the car and was already sitting behind the wheel when she noticed small spots of newly fallen snow on her windshield.

“Damn it,” she muttered, hitting the steering wheel with her palms. She heaved herself out of the car again, and followed the path that Cerberus had taken. As soon as she reached the trees, the light grew fainter. It was already late afternoon but it was as if night had suddenly descended on her. It felt as if the temperature had dropped even more. Her teeth began to chatter, and a chill ran down her spine. The ground she walked on was sparse, and a little bit icy, most of the trees were bare, nothing but swaying limbs. It was so silent that when she began to call out Cerberus’ name it echoed around her like someone was calling the name back to her. She wandered around for some time before she heard his barking close by. Following the sound, she came upon him sitting at the

base of a tree. He sat in perfect silence, still as if he was a part of the tree itself as he waited for her to approach.

“Oh, Cerberus, what’re you doing?” she asked. But he suddenly heard something above them in the branches. He let out something that sounded like a roar as he turned his head to the sky. He circled the tree in agitation, jumping on the trunk with his two powerful front paws, scattering bark on the bare ground. Rebekah was startled, seeing the sudden movement of a small animal jumping for another tree. She walked up to Cerberus, grabbed hold of his collar, trying to pull him away from the tree, but he was too strong for her and determined to stay where he was.

“Jesus, I’m too pregnant to be dealing with this.” Rebekah leaned against the trunk, and lowered herself very carefully and slowly to the ground. Wrapping her arms around her stomach, she pulled her coat tighter around her. Cerberus finally took notice of her, placing himself next to her. She pushed his head away when he tried to look at her. “I never wanted you, you know. I thought you were a dirty, violent mutt the first time I saw you. I only put up with you because of him. He wouldn’t hear a word against you, thought you were the greatest dog in whole world,” she told him. “I miss him. Always will. But we can’t have him back now. So you’re just going to have to deal with that and shape up. No more of this anger you have for everyone who isn’t him. That’s the only way you can stay here with us.”

She looked at Cerberus, who was not heeding her words at all as he surveyed the frozen ground and trees around him. Reaching out a hand, she laid it on his body; he was incredibly warm in the coldness around her.

Her mother and John were not pleased to see Cerberus return. Yet Rebekah promised them that from now on, until she could train him better, Cerberus would live outside. Her mother tried to plead the case for getting rid of him again, John stood in silence. But Rebekah had made up her mind. She would continue to take care of Cerberus; he would stay. Cerberus for his part, refused to enter the house, perhaps paying his own kind of contrition. Rebekah fed him dinner outside as the snow continued to build. She was worried that it might be too cold for him, but she remembered her husband telling her that dogs like him that had so much wolf in them were built to live in the cold. Having Cerberus outside was the only thing keeping her mother in the house. And Cerberus seemed to pay little mind to the snow falling on him.

Later that night, Rebekah felt more tired than usual. All the movement of the day had made everything ache from the bones in her spine to the bones her feet. She lay on the couch and felt a strange tightening in her back that made her wince. John entered the living room. Rebekah moved her feet to allow him a place to sit on the couch. In the silence, Rebekah waited and watched the flickering of the flames in the fireplace.

Finally John said, “Do you really think keeping Cerberus is a good idea, Rebekah?”

“He just needs some good training,” she answered.

John laughed at that. “Yeah, that’s what my brother told me when he first got that dog,” he said, then imitating his brother’s words, “Listen, John, some good training, he’ll be a great dog. He just needs some good lesson in obedience.”

“He trained him some though and Cerberus took to it,” she said. “And I never put any effort into Cerberus. So it’s partly my fault he’s like this now. I let him get away with doing whatever he wanted. And when he bit her, I think he was just trying to protect me.”

John sighed. “I don’t think that he would be angry at you for giving Cerberus up. He knew that dog was more than a handful. He never meant for you to take care of him on your own.”

“I need to learn to take care of things better, John,” Rebekah said. “I couldn’t let him go, throw him out like he was nothing to me.”

John was silent and did not answer, perhaps knowing that he could not change her mind, could not bear this responsibility for her.

Again she felt her back tightening, but the pain was worse this time. “Oh, that hurts.”

“What is it?” John asked with worry.

Rebekah took a deep breath. “Nothing, it’s passing.” But the pain returned again. “Oh,” she said in panic. “I think it’s labor pains.”

“I’m getting your mother,” John said.

Her mother came and took one look at her, then told Rebekah that they were going to the hospital straight away. As her mother went in search of the bag she had packed for just this occasion, John helped her from the couch as another surge of pain almost made her double over. Rebekah leaned against John as he led her out the door to the truck and into the cab.

He started the car for her, turning the heat on, saying, “I’ll be right back. You need a coat.”

“John?” She said, not knowing what she was asking for.

He paused and said, “You’re going to be okay. And so is she.”

The once sparse flakes of snow had transformed into a steady flutter of pure white. The headlights were bright, stretching across the yard, revealing snowflakes as they fell. Rebekah watched John cross the snowy yard back into the house. She was alone. Another contraction came over her, and she braced herself, with a hand on her stomach. Rebekah looked toward the house, wondering what was taking them so long, but suddenly there was Cerberus. He stood in the glow of the headlights, illuminated with great clarity as snow drifted around him. Rebekah saw his eyes watching her. She was able to breathe again as the pain slipped away for the moment. She could not look away from him. But he turned, his ears perked, hearing something in the distance, and was gone.

The first thing she knew about her child was the sound of her voice, crying out, and it was the most beautiful thing she had ever heard.

On the last day in the hospital, her mother moved around her room collecting things and packing. Rebekah laid back in her hospital bed with her daughter in her arms. Rebekah had not named her yet. Of all the names she read, all the suggestions she had gotten from her mother and John, none of them seemed to fit. Against her mother’s desire to choose a name before the baby was born, Rebekah had waited, put it off. But now that she was here, Rebekah knew her name like it had already been written somewhere, waiting for someone to give it voice.

Her mother finally finished her packing. “Well,” she said. “Only one thing left to do. Name that child, please, Rebekah,” she said. “I’ve been patient with you, but now that we’re leaving, she needs a name.”

“I have named her,” she replied. “Jamie. After her father.”

When they returned home, Cerberus was gone.

“What do you mean he’s gone?” Rebekah asked her mother. “What did you do to him?”

“Me?” her mother exclaimed, her face stretched open in surprise. “I didn’t do anything. When I came home after the baby was born, he wasn’t here, but I didn’t think that much about it. I thought he was just outside or something, so I picked up clothes for you, and left food out for him a couple of times. I had more important things to worry about then where that dog had got to. Good riddance, I say.”

Weeks passed and still Cerberus did not appear. Rebekah left food out for him, but it was always there in the morning. One night, Rebekah sat awake in her daughter’s room, not able to sleep, despite knowing it might be her only chance all night to get any rest. Jamie was due to wake at any moment. The clock on the nursery wall read three o’clock. Rebekah leaned over the side of her daughter’s crib and saw her fast asleep. Carefully so to not wake her again, she placed her hand over the baby’s chest. Heat radiated through her palm. Rebekah closed her eyes and began to count. Underneath her fingers, she felt her daughter’s heart beating steadily, the contractions of her muscles pushing warm blood through her veins.

After some time, she heard something from outside the window that startled her out of the silent vigil; something like the sound of snow crunching under feet. She covered her daughter more fully with a blanket. Looking out the window, she didn't see anything, no movements except for the falling snow. So she dismissed the sound as the breaking of a branch, the creak of a tree. In the kitchen, she fixed herself a cup of tea before she went back to bed to try and get some sleep. As she was stirring in the teabag in the hot water, there was another sound, this time like a body thudding against the backdoor trying to open it. She barely managed to hold on to the mug in her hands, some of the tea spilling over her hand onto to the floor. She was frozen. Thinking it was someone trying to break in, she almost turned to go wake John, but she remembered that he was no longer in the house with them. Then she heard it; the muffled sound of a bark. Rebekah walked slowly to the door and unlocked it. There was a rush of cold air and snow flurries as it opened; they stung her face, made her turn her head away, but she peered into the blackness.

“Oh, god,” she said. Before the door, looking like an offering in the snow, was the mutilated, bloody body of what must have been a small deer. The motion detector light turned on suddenly. She stepped back from the sight involuntarily, the black, devoid eyes of the dead animal glittering in the artificial light. There was blood covering the ground, soaking into the wet snow, looking almost like spilled watercolor ink, and as her eyes scanned the scene, she saw familiar paw prints in the snow.

“Cerberus,” she called, but there was no answering bark, no movement in the darkness.

## The Outlaw Cordelia Powell

Cordelia Powell, fifteen, impatient, stood awkwardly with her carry-on bag over her shoulder. At baggage claim, she spotted her father, giving him half a wave as he finally noticed her. His eyes had moved past her several times, and she knew that he did not recognize her. She didn't believe that she could look all that different, taller maybe, her hair might be shorter, too. She felt a surge of something, anger or annoyance at him. Barely there five minutes and already she wanted to turn around and go home.

Her father moved in to hug her, telling her it had been too long, telling her he was glad she was finally there. It was a one armed hug and, he squeezed her arm too hard; Cordelia winced. In return, she halfheartedly put an arm around him, too. He knocked the bag off her shoulder as he pulled away. Cordelia reached down before he could pick it up for her.

“Your flight was good? No turbulence? Did they give you something to eat? Peanuts or a sandwich? Do you want to stop and get something?”

Cordelia answered in muffled tones of ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ She watched for her suitcase to make the loop around to her. She went to grab the handle as it reached her, but it was too heavy, and she stumbled over her own feet. Her father’s hand closed over hers and with his strength, they pulled her suitcase over the lip of the conveyer and onto the ground.

“There you go,” he said.

Cordelia answered, “Thanks,” as she looked around the crowd, hoping that no one was watching her look like an idiot.

“I’m parked out here,” he went on to say, taking the handle of the suitcase before she could and wheeling it behind him.

Cordelia sat in her father’s truck as he loaded up her suitcase. The truck was a mess; papers littered the dashboard, it smelled of sweat and paint, and fast food wrappers were on the floor. She had to move random work tools before she could even sit down. But she remembered this truck. She had a startling clear memory of sitting in this exact same spot, when the truck was newer and cleaner, with cold air blowing on her face as she drank a cherry limeade soda her father had just bought her.

Her father slammed the door as he got in. “Are you sure you’re not feeling hungry? There won’t be nearly anywhere to stop once we’re out of the city and it’s a long a drive to your grandmother’s house on the lake.”

“I’m fine,” Cordelia said.

The drive was quiet as they got going. Cordelia watched the scenery of Kansas City pass her by as they headed for the city limits. Slowly the signs of civilization got more and more sparse; fast food restaurants, apartment buildings, food markets, houses all thinned out until eventually darkness and open space stretched out before her and to all sides. With the loss of the city, Cordelia also felt an ache inside herself; there was really no turning back now. She had faced this trip to visit her father with the idea that something could happen at any moment that would cancel it. She convinced herself that she was coming down with strep throat the week before, developed a phobia of small

spaces that would prevent her from flying, and she had even thrown a tantrum that would rival that of any two year old the night before. But her mother had kissed her goodbye at the gate, not heeding any of her complaints or fears. And now here she was, sitting next to her father in silence, not knowing what to say to him.

“What happened to your birthmark?”

Cordelia’s hand, in a familiar arching movement, settled on her face to cover the spot. “Just covered it with makeup,” she said in a low voice. Reflecting in the side mirror, Cordelia saw her face, the hand covering it and forced herself to drop that hand, hearing her mother scolding her from this far distance to keep her hands off her face like she always did. It was a habit she developed when she started school as the other kids would stare at her birthmark and make fun of it. Running just under her right eye, a red mark reached down to her cheekbone, before sweeping itself like a stroke of red paint toward her temple. Her mother had only just allowed her to begin to cover it up with makeup. But Cordelia still saw the outline of it, saw the color of it like a raw burn mark showing through, and she turned her head so she couldn’t see herself anymore.

“I always loved your birthmark,” he said.

Cordelia crossed her arms against herself. “That’s because you don’t have to live with it on your face,” she answered back, the words coming out harsher than she intended. But he never did understand how much she hated that birthmark, so he didn’t understand the relief she felt at finally being able to hide it.

The next morning her father was determined to take her fishing at an hour that she didn’t know existed. And before Cordelia knew exactly what was happening to her, she was out on a small boat in the middle of a lake, wondering how her life came to this. He

had given her just enough time to get dressed, so she had forgotten to cover her birthmark, and she had no time to eat breakfast either. She was hungry now, imagining the breakfast her grandmother had promised her the night before; biscuits and gravy with ham and eggs over easy.

“Are we done yet?” she asked, halfheartedly bobbing her fishing pole up and down in the water.

Her father had already caught a couple of fish that he had placed in a bucket filled with water in order to keep them alive. Cordelia felt a tug of sympathy for those fish, but somehow she felt worse for herself. The smell was getting to her; it was a unique mix of old fish and lake water and rust. The sun had risen and was beating down on her neck. She was beginning to sweat an uncomfortable amount.

“But you haven’t even caught anything,” her father said.

“Yeah, I don’t really want to murder any fish today like you, so I’m okay with not catching anything,” she answered.

“Alright then,” he said in resignation. He reeled his line in, and then took her fishing pole from her.

Cordelia was reminded of what her mother told her the night before she left, that her father was really excited about her coming. Her mother had reminded her gently to watch what she said to him and how she said it. Her mother had said, “You can be awfully mean sometimes, Cordelia, and that’s coming from someone who loves you.” So Cordelia wanted to take back what she said, tell him that she would stay out here with him until she caught a fish. But he was already revving the engine of the boat, and suddenly there was fresh air blowing her hair back and filling her lungs, so she couldn’t

say anything anyway. He was only trying to spend time with her, and of course she had to go and ruin that for him. She didn't understand why she couldn't just let him be nice to her. By the time they pulled up to the dock, she wasn't even hungry anymore.

"Head up to breakfast if you want," he said as he gathered the things in the boat, setting them up on the dock.

She stood back on the dock, watching him, judging if she had the nerve to say something to him, apologize maybe. But it was not in her. He didn't even look up at as she walked away.

The next day was the Fourth of July. Cordelia should have been home, lighting sparklers with her friends, watching the firework display from the beach, a warm breeze blowing on her skin, and the smell of salt water surrounding her. Instead, she sat alone with an uneasy feeling in her stomach. All the grownups were gathered in the house drinking beer and laughing, content with being surrounded by good company, good friends and family. She was hyper aware of the fact that she didn't know anyone here, that she couldn't tell the difference between one of her family members and a random stranger. The last Cordelia saw of her father he was inside the house playing the guitar loudly and badly with her Uncle Mike. She felt the urge to stay and watch the scene, but the smell of cigarettes smoke was too much for her lungs and the back door was an easy escape.

Cordelia sat on a retaining wall overlooking the lake. Below her there was a four foot drop down to the shore, which was nothing more than a thin strip of dirty gray sand with large, smooth rocks. She twirled a red lighter in her hand as if it was a very small

baton, her fingers becoming little drum majorettes in a marching band. Cordelia had swiped it off a table where it was lying next to a half empty pack of cigarettes earlier in the evening. Running her thumb over the metal wheel, she liked the rough feel of the metal grooves. She would let a flame burst forth for a moment before letting it go out again. There was something comforting in the repetition. Over and over she repeated the action: roll wheel, press button, flame in, and flame out.

Skimming the water's surface, a burst of laughter reached her. Out on the dock, her cousins and some of their friends were lighting off fireworks. Somehow they thought that it would be a real neat idea to fill up pop cans with little firecrackers like makeshift bombs. Cordelia watched as another can went sailing through the dark, tiny muffled explosions ringing from inside, until it was extinguished in the lapping waves of the lake.

“How come you're not out there?”

The voice startled her and the lighter slipped from her fingers. It landed four feet below her, bouncing off a rock and disappearing into the dark.

“I'm sorry?” She didn't know who was speaking to her. His face was in shadow as his back was turned from the lights coming from the house. A flash of light illuminated them accompanied by a succession of loud gunshot like booms. Across the water her cousins had moved on to more high tech fireworks; ribbons of sparks were shooting up into the air, reflecting oddly on the lake as if someone was lighting them from underneath the water. Cordelia, in flashes of dull light, saw the profile of his face, his blonde hair, the cigarette tucked behind his ear. She glanced away when he looked at her again.

“You're Tim's cousin, right?”

She nodded, not sure why he was talking to her or what he wanted. Cordelia focused her gaze on the ground below; faintly she thought that she could make out the red lighter.

“You don’t like fireworks or something?”

“I like them fine,” she answered, tilting her head so she could see him out of the corner of her eye.

“Then why aren’t you out there? It’s the Fourth of July. You should be celebrating the birth of our country by blowing up cheap fireworks from China. It’s tradition, ya know.”

Her tongue felt heavy in her mouth, she stumbled over her words as she said, “I’m just not, it’s no reason, I don’t know.”

“Alright then,” he said, from out behind his ear he pulled out the cigarette, placing it between his lips. “You should come out there if you feel like it.”

Cordelia watched the boy as he walked out on the dock. Even if she wanted to follow, she was too embarrassed to do so now, not after she made an incoherent fool out of herself.

Hours later with the party slowly dwindling, Cordelia sat sleepily on a chair she had pulled up to the edge of the lake. The dock was empty and quiet now. There was just enough room between the shore and the retaining wall for her to stretch out her legs with only her bare toes hitting the water. The sounds of a commotion faintly broke through the drowsiness in her head. At first, she paid it no attention, but the voices rose suddenly and one of them was too familiar. It was the same tenor she heard all those times through her

bedroom door late at night when her parents thought she was asleep. She got out of her chair and with cautious steps walked to the built in stairs that lead up from the shore. And when she was halfway up the sloped lawn, she caught sight of her father and her Uncle Mike arguing with each other. Behind them she barely registered the other people; her grandmother, an aunt, cousins, strangers. When her father shoved her uncle, she stopped where she was. Never before had she seen her father in an actual fight. A moment later her uncle's arm reeled back then sprang forward, colliding with the side of her father's face. Her father stepped back as if he only lost his balance a little, and someone was struggling to cart off her uncle, who was shaking his head, and looking both angry and ashamed. Her father was rubbing his face in shock; he still looked angry.

She couldn't think of what to do. All she knew was she didn't want to be anywhere near her father, anywhere near what just happened. Her only thought was that no one had seen her standing there. Her cousin Tim was laughing obnoxiously and her eyes were drawn to him.

"Oh Jesus, he fucking got dropped hard," he said, clearly exaggerating what had just happened.

Yet for a moment, Cordelia imagined herself walking up to Tim and dropping *him*, and she even balled her fist, what did he think he was laughing at anyway? She would give him something to really laugh at. The boy who spoke to her earlier was standing next to him, which somehow made the whole situation worse.

He said to Tim, "Come on man, it wasn't that hard of a punch. Mike hardly grazed him."

Cordelia could tell he was glancing at her, but she refused to shift her eyes from her cousin who was still babbling on. Suddenly, she couldn't stand to be there anymore, to know that he was watching her, so she turned away swiftly. Behind her she heard the boy tell her cousin to shut the hell up.

Cordelia was sitting back on the lawn chair before she realized where she was. She hated these people, all of them. It was inconceivable that she was related to any of them. She didn't have a clue how she was going to survive the rest of her time here. If it was up to her, she would get up and walk home, walk the thousand or whatever miles back home to Florida. With her head in her hands, she absolutely refused to cry. Across the lake somewhere more fireworks were going off, red and blue stars expanding and exploding with force, but Cordelia was too sick of fireworks to lift her eyes up to see them.

The next morning Cordelia woke to find that she had slept late. After eating a bowl of cereal, she got dressed. Carefully, in the bathroom mirror she applied concealer over her birthmark, nabbing it with some powder. She turned her head from side to side; she could still see it. It was so obvious to her as the concealer wasn't quite the right color for her skin tone because it was too light. She saw the redness of the mark burning through, but it was the best she could do to hide it. She didn't know what was worse: not concealing the mark and having people stare at it or having people wondering what it was that she was concealing.

Cordelia escaped the house before she ran into anyone. There wasn't any particular place that she planned on going as it wasn't like she knew the place all that

well. She began to walk, sticking to the edge of dirt roads because there were no sidewalks. An hour so into her walk, Cordelia sensed a car coming up from behind her. She expected it to pass by, but an uneasy feeling filled her as it slowed down instead. All the scenarios she had ever heard of strangers abducting children by enticing them into cars by means of candy and lost puppies flew through her mind. The car pulled to a stop in front of her, the driver's door opening, and she half turned in the opposite direction, ready to run when her name was called with some familiarity. It was the boy from last night that stepped out of the car. The tension in her body collapsed for a moment with the thought that she didn't have to run for life from a serial killer, but then she was filled with a different kind of nervous energy, that of anticipation mixed with a little dread.

“Where are you headed?” he asked as he leaned against the car door, his arm draping lazily over the top.

She fully realized in that moment how much younger she must be than him. He had such a square jaw, and she saw the shade of hair on his cheeks from not shaving that morning. He had to be at least a foot taller than her. She had always been apprehensive about her height. She was always the shortest kid in the class in elementary school. And when they had to line up in PE in order to be paired up for square dancing, she always got stuck up with that weird boy Frank who smelled strongly of maple syrup because they were the same height and she then had to endure his incessant chatter and had to literally touch his bony arm when they dosy doed.

“Nowhere. I'm not really headed anywhere. I don't think I could find my way even if I was headed somewhere,” she said, quite pleased with herself that she managed

complete sentences. Quickly, she reached up and let her hair out of its ponytail as her friends always told her that she looked more mature with it down.

He nodded at her meaning. “Well, I’m just riding around, not doing shit, if you want to come along.”

Cordelia only hesitated for a fraction of a second before heading around to the passenger side. The door was so heavy on the old car that she stumbled a bit opening it. As the car took off, she squirmed in her seat and tried not to think about what her mother would say if she ever found out she got into the car with a strange boy who she had only briefly met.

“I don’t know your name,” she said.

It was Nathan. For a while, they were silent as they drove around, passing old beat up houses with trucks parked on the lawns and boats pulled up in the side yards. Eventually, they parked in front of the club house, a small building used as a kind of community center, which had a small cove for public swimming. There was a fair amount of people already in the water.

“Do you want to go swimming or something?” he asked.

Immediately, Cordelia thought about her birthmark. She knew from an afternoon spent at the beach that the concealer covering her birthmark didn’t take well to water. “I don’t really like the lake all that much, to be honest,” she answered.

“Why not?”

Cordelia paused, and nervously played with her hair, swinging it in front of her face. “I kind of have this weird, irrational fear of the lake,” she said, which wasn’t a complete lie; the lake did give her an uneasy feeling.

“And why is that?”

She remembered the previous day when she went fishing with her father, remembered staring over the edge of the boat, and wondering what was swimming below her. “It’s just that I can’t help imagining all those things beneath me in the water, you know, like the slimy bottom of silt and then I think about what if a large bass brushes up against my legs or tries to eat my toes or something. It just freaks me out so much that I only last like five minutes in the water before I have to get back out.”

Nathan only stared ahead through the windshield, but she could tell that he was fighting a smile. “Yeah, no I get that. But don’t you live like in Florida, what about the ocean? You swim in that, don’t you?”

“Oh, I’d take the ocean over the lake any day,” she said resolutely.

“But what about sharks and stingrays and things, not afraid of those, huh?”

“Shark attacks are very rare,” she said. “You’re more likely to get hit by lightning.”

“Well, that’s a special kind of bravery there. Frightened of bass but not sharks,” he said as he turned his body in the driver’s seat to face her sideways.

Cordelia smiled and said, “Yes, but at least you can see sharks coming, and lifeguards warn you about them. Bass are sneaky little fish.”

“That’s true,” he agreed, nodding his head in a mock solemn fashion. “Bass are nothing if not sneaky.”

For the first time since she had arrived here, Cordelia found herself actually having a good time; she felt giddy and light. But a knock against the window broke in on

the easy banter between them, and someone greeted Nathan, saying, “Hey, man, what’s going on?”

Cordelia saw the boy’s face as he peered into the window, but once again it was someone she didn’t know. Nathan turned to his window, which was rolled down half way, and then he turned to Cordelia, telling her he would be right back. Turning around in her seat to see out the back window, she saw a group of teenagers. Cordelia noticed one girl in a bathing suit squint at her with arms crossed over her chest. The girl said something to Nathan as she nodded her head toward the car’s direction. Nathan glanced back at Cordelia, too, but as he answered he turned his back, so Cordelia couldn’t make out any of what was said or how he looked when he said it. The girl laid a hand on his arm, but he almost nonchalantly moved a step away, and her arm dropped. A minute later, he was walking back as his friends walked away in the opposite direction.

Cordelia didn’t want to ask what they wanted, but back in the car Nathan said, “Just some friends, they wanted to know if we wanted to go out on the lake with them.”

“Oh,” she said, a little unsure of what else to say.

“But I think we’ve established your feelings about the lake,” he said, starting the car, and shooting her a quick half-smile.

The giddiness she felt just moments ago faded. “You didn’t have to not go on my account.”

“Not a big deal. We go out on the lake every weekend,” he answered. “And frankly, it’s gotten a bit old. Same faces, same lame jokes, same warm beer. I’ll pass.”

Cordelia wondered if by lame faces he was referring to that girl in the bathing suit. It was a strange kind of joy she felt as they pulled away from the club house. He

chose her over his friends, and that made her aware that she had some kind of power that she didn't realize she ever had before.

"I know somewhere we can go, but fair warning, it's pretty lame," Nathan said.

"What is it?" Cordelia asked.

Nathan paused, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel to the beat of the song playing on the radio. "It's this museum that my grandfather runs. I used to work there in the summers, so I'm a bit of an expert on the subject matter. It's Coffeyville's big claim to fame. The story goes that a gang of gunslingers got themselves shot up while trying to rob a bank back in the 1800's. And like any good piece of history, the town tries to cash in on it by having a museum where they can sell crap and lord it over the other towns that were not as fortunate to have a bunch of outlaws killed in their town."

"That sounds cool, I guess," she said. She wasn't too interested in the Wild West or museums for that matter, but she wanted to spend more time with him in any way she could get. "Do you need to let someone know you're taking me?"

"Nah, not really," he said with a shrug as if he didn't really care if anybody ever knew where he was going. But a moment later he added, "My mother's not really too keen on speaking to me lately."

His voice was hesitant. Cordelia, being well versed in holding things in, knew that this was something he hadn't spoken about before. "How come?"

"She's mad at me for wanting to enlist and she won't sign the consent form," he said in a rush of words that come out like he was holding his breath.

At first, Cordelia didn't realize what he meant by wanting to enlist. The window was rolled down on her side and a rush of air blew her hair into her eyes, then his

meaning clicked into place. The army. She held her hair back from her face, wishing that she could see more than just the profile of his face.

“Why does she need to sign it?”

“Because I’m seventeen and you need written consent from both parents. My dad signed, he thinks it’s the best fucking idea I ever had in my life, thinks the army will straighten me out good and proper. But my mother’s throwing fits over it like I’m asking her to give me permission to stand in front of a damn firing squad or something,” he said, shaking his head at the apparent absurdity of his mother.

Cordelia couldn’t help but think that his mother had a point. She tried to imagine Nathan in army fatigues with a rifle in the hands that were now gripping the steering wheel, but the picture faded from her mind quickly. He seemed too easy-going, too light hearted for the military somehow, too much like a little boy, even though he was older than she was.

“Why do you want to join?” she asked.

Nathan reached for the console, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed but there’s not too many opportunities knocking on peoples’ doors here. Would you really want to spend the rest of your life here, working in some bait shop or at some gas station? Because those are about my only two options, considering high school didn’t work out too well for me.”

Cordelia only nodded, she was only going in her second year of high school, and thoughts about college or what happened after that had never even entered her head.

Nathan placed a cigarette between his lips and asked her if she wanted one.

“I don’t smoke,” she answered.

He looked at her, Cordelia was impressed by his ability to speak with the cigarette in his mouth without dropping it as it bopped up and down with his words, and said, “Then why are you always playing with that lighter?”

“I’m not,” she said, wondering just how much he had been paying attention to her to notice that red lighter she had carried around.

“Welcome to the Dalton Gang Museum. A place full of rich history and interactive learning,” Nathan said, motioning to the outside wall of a small building with a mural painted on it depicting three cowboys from the waist up. They had their guns drawn, hats pushed back on their heads, lips drawn back in sneers, but the paint was old, slowly chipping away, and the menace of the cowboys had faded along with the now dull paint. Inside, she entered into a replica of a street from the 1800’s with façades of a salon, bank, and hotel covering the wall to her right. The scene was complete with dummies dressed up in old fashioned clothing posed as if strolling down the street or leaning on fake railings. It was, perhaps, the weirdest museum she has ever seen.

Nathan told her that the Dalton gang was made of three brothers and some other men who started out as lawmen but soon found out that life on the other side of law was more exciting. Together they held up and robbed passenger trains in the Indian Territory. Hoping to score big, they planned to rob two banks at once, Nathan said, but they didn’t count on being recognized by a local man. So, Nathan said casually, like this was a story he had told many times before, when the Dalton gang was inside the bank, collecting their prize, the townspeople gathered outside, armed. And as soon as they made it out the front door, shots rang out in the street.

“Is that them?” Cordelia asked. Almost covering one wall was a grainy photograph of four bodies laid out on wooden slats, clearly no longer living, their faces hollow, their eyes closed, arms folded across their chests. “That’s disturbing.”

“Yep, the townspeople did that afterward. Propped them up in a barn to have a photo session. They were quite proud of themselves,” Nathan said, standing behind her. “Proud of having taken down the Dalton gang.”

Cordelia turned to look up at him, but he was so close that she had to move away quickly as she felt heat go up her neck and she hoped the tips of her ears weren’t turning red. “Oh.”

“We have to go outside for this next part,” Nathan said, taking her hand. “Around the corner is the alleyway where the gang was cornered.”

Cordelia found the whole thing not just a little morbid, but there in the half shaded heat of the alley were the white painted outlines where two of the Dalton brothers fell as they died. Nathan walked up to them and to Cordelia’s confusion laid down within the white lines.

“Go on, try it,” he said, jerking his thumb at the body outline a couple of feet away.

Cordelia hesitated, but felt awkward just standing there, hovering, when Nathan was already on the ground looking up at her expectantly. So she sat on the concrete, easing herself to the ground. The concrete was warm from the sun and though her thin tee shirt heat spread along her skin.

“This is so weird,” she said, shielding her eyes to see Nathan.

“Shh,” he answered. “We’re supposed to be imagining what it was like that day, to lie here and stare at the sky while we die from gunshot wounds.”

“Um, okay,” she said, and for what felt like the longest time they lay in silence. It was so bright that it was hard to look at the sky at all.

“Why were your father and uncle fighting at that party, do you know? It didn’t really seem like them. They usually get along.”

The thought of her father caught her off guard. “I honestly have no idea,” she said. “It’s not really any of my business.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Nathan, propped up on his elbows.

“Of course it’s your *business*, he’s your father,” Nathan told her.

Before she could stop herself she said, “It doesn’t really feel like he is sometimes.” And she wished as soon as the last word left her mouth that she could take them back. This wasn’t something she wanted to talk about, especially with Nathan. She didn’t want anyone to know that she felt that way, like she didn’t belong to her father. To cover the sting of tears in her eyes, she covered them with one hand as if she was shielding them from the sun.

“You know that third Dalton brother who survived? He tried to pull the brother whose outline you’re in up onto his horse. Can you imagine that? Shots firing off everywhere, you on your horse, firing off your own shots, knowing that the whole thing has been shot to hell itself and instead of fleeing, you stay and try to save your brother who is as good as dead anyway.”

Cordelia sat up, her vision blurring as all the blood rushed to her head. “What happened to him after?”

Nathan rose to his feet and offered a hand to help her up. She felt the gravel and dirt from the ground on his palm and hers. To her disappointment he let go once she was on her feet.

“He was hit with buckshot, holes in him everywhere, but he lived, spent fourteen years in prison before being pardoned and moving to California to make his way in the real estate business and acting. He lived till he was 66.”

“That’s amazing,” she said.

“Yeah, I guess,” Nathan said with a causal shrug. “Sometimes I wonder if he ever regretted it.”

“What? Robbing the bank? I would hope so. Stupid thing to do, considering.”

“No,” he answered. “Not dying here with his brothers. If I had a family that did what they did for each other. . .”

They stood together in the alley. Cordelia didn’t really understand what he meant, how someone could regret surviving such a thing. A shadow grew across the alley, shading the white outlines, and she thought that if she didn’t know any better that the alley looked just like any other, nothing but plain concrete and weeds growing in the cracks, not a place where brothers in a Wild West gang fought and died.

It was just before dark when Nathan dropped Cordelia off at the lake house. She felt restless, and she didn’t want to go inside, not knowing who would be in there to question her on where she had been all day. Walking around to the back of the house, she heard her father’s voice carry to her on the breeze. At the side of the house, there was an old table used to gut and clean fish. Her father and uncle were standing next to each other

at the table; a bucket stood at their feet. Cordelia watched as the bloody innards of a fish landed into the bucket, making a squishing sound as they landed. They were talking quietly, not in the tones that Cordelia would have expected, but in soft tones, laughing tones. Her uncle turned suddenly and saw her.

“Hey there,” he said.

Her father, too, turned to look at her. “We caught dinner tonight. You still like fish, right?”

Cordelia saw that his hands were stained with blood and covered with scales from the fish he was cleaning. “We’re eating those?”

“Yep,” her father answered. Off to the side, cleaned white, fresh fish were being piled on a platter. “We’ll fry em’ up.”

“Nothing like any fish you’ve eaten, I’m sure,” he uncle added. “Those Florida fish aren’t as good as these.”

“Okay, I guess,” she said.

“But, hey,” her uncle said. “You want to help out here? We got a couple more to go.”

“No, that’s alright,” she said quickly, stepping back.

Her father laughed in his low way as her uncle smirked at him. It was like she was standing on the outside of something she didn’t understand at all. She could not imagine what they were doing there together, acting like friends, like nothing had happened between them. She stood and watched them a minute more, watched their backs, watched their arms and hands move in the familiar rhythm of cleaning a fish. Was that how things

got forgiven, she wondered, just like that? Let go so quickly, by just going fishing together. Somehow, she didn't think it should be so easy.

A few days later Cordelia was in a boat with Nathan. There was a stillness to the water as they skimmed along that was unnerving. It had seemed so alive during the day with voices drifting from passing boats, the roar of engines, the sun casting light down only to be reflected back into her eyes. But all that was gone now.

"There it is," he said.

A small cove appeared before them. The boat pulled up on a small stretch of beach that was lined with miniature cliffs. Nathan stepped out into the shallow water, pulling the boat further on shore. There wasn't that much room on the shore as the cliffs rose suddenly in the air before her and curved around to encapsulate the cove.

"Do you come here a lot?" she asked, wondering if he brought girls here before.

"You know, sometimes," he said, sitting down in the sand. "I used to more when I was younger, mostly after me and my dad got into it."

"It's nice," she said, wavering in front of him, suddenly too nervous to sit next to him. "Quiet."

Cordelia wandered around some, looking at ground. It was scraggly with a few weeds growing here and there and a few empty pop bottles buried in the sand. Nathan sat and stared off into the water.

"My mom signed the form," he said suddenly.

"Oh," she said, not expecting that. "You're leaving, then?"

"In a few days. Some things I need to do here before joining up."

“Like saying goodbye to people, your friends?” she asked, wondering if this was supposed to be some kind of goodbye, too.

“I guess,” he said.

Cordelia kept standing, digging her feet into the sand. “I thought you would be happier about it. Isn’t that what you wanted? For her to sign it?”

Nathan stood up quickly. “I did want it. I mean, I do want to enlist. I am going to enlist. I just thought it would feel...different. Like the second she signed it, I would be free of it all. Her and my dad, this whole town, this life. But I guess it doesn’t work like that.”

“They’re your family, though,” Cordelia said, not sure she could relate to what he must be feeling. “You can’t ever really be free from them, can you?”

Nathan didn’t answer, instead he said, “You know what we should do? Take the jump.”

“What? What jump?” she asked.

“That cliff up there. It’s easy to climb, there’s already a path made in it. Me and my friends used to do it all the time.”

Cordelia turned to look up. It looked impossibly high to her. No light shone up there as the moon was covered by the clouds. “Looks high,” she said.

“It looks higher than it is, I swear,” he said.

“But still pretty high,” she answered.

“Hey, if you don’t want to, you don’t have to,” he said, already moving toward the base of the cliff. “Be chicken, be afraid.”

“I’m not wearing a bathing suit and can’t get my clothes wet,” she argued.

He stopped, turning to look at her. He held out a hand as if he was sure she would take it. She didn't want to seem like a little kid, afraid of taking a risk, so she took the offered hand. Together they climbed the cliff. It angled up slowly, so it was an easy climb. At the top, the cliff made a straight line into the water below. From up there, Cordelia saw the lake reach out before her. On the shoreline in the distance, the square windows of houses were lighted. On the water, boats flashed blue and red lights as they moved silently on the waves. Her hands were shaking slightly and her legs felt weak like her muscles had all turned to liquid.

Nathan must have heard her shallow breathing because he said, "You don't really have to jump, Cordelia, if you don't want to it. I was just joking with you."

"No, no, I want to. I'm sure," she said. She had never done anything like this before. And she was not going to wimp out, especially not in front of Nathan.

"Okay, we'll take a running jump, it's best that way. Just make sure to really propel off, okay? No one has ever hit the side, so you know, don't be the first."

Cordelia inhaled deeply. "Wait, my shoes," she said, reaching down to take them off. "What do I do with them?"

"Here," Nathan said, tossing them down where they landed on the beach.

"Ready?"

"Ready," she said, not sure if she meant it.

Together they traced their steps backwards away from the edge of the cliff. Nathan looked over at her, and she saw him smiling like you did when you were a kid and you were about to do something you knew you shouldn't; it was the kind of rush she felt. He started to count down. Five. Her mother would kill her if she knew what she was

about to do right now. Four. Her best friend would die of jealousy when Cordelia told her about Nathan. Three. She wasn't sure if her legs would take off in a run to the edge when she told them to. Two. Her father was out there somewhere beyond the water. What was he doing? Missing her? One. This must have been just a fraction of what those Dalton Brothers felt that day; that mix of fear and of adrenaline and of the knowledge that you could never go back.

It was over in seconds. When she hit the water, she could still see an image of blurred lights that seemed to be rushing up as she was rushing down. It was only after she brushed her wet hair back and wiped away the water from her eyes that she remembered her birthmark. She had for sure smeared the makeup covering it. It seemed irrational, she knew, but she was afraid that if Nathan saw the birthmark, it would change something in the way he looked at her, change it for the worse. But as they swam back to the shore and sat together on that small beach, he gave her no strange looks that would have told her he was looking at it. Instead he laughed and smiled with her, and told her he didn't think she was really going to jump. And she told him that she was no chicken.

When Nathan pulled up to her grandmother's house on the lake, he didn't make a move to open his door, he only turned the car off, so Cordelia didn't move either. Her clothes were still damp, clinging to her awkwardly, but she didn't care. She didn't ever want to get out of that car. It took every ounce of courage in her to turn and face him in the darkness. "Thanks for taking me, it was nice."

Her friends would never believe her when she told them about this and she wasn't sure that she even would. It felt like something she wanted to hold on to, something that

would belong to only her. Even afterward, she questioned whether it really happened or if she made it up. It wasn't the first time a boy kissed her. Daniel Ward had done that a year ago in the middle of a darkened movie theatre, there was too much spit in his mouth and he tasted like stale popcorn, he bite her lip too hard, and she couldn't look him in the eyes even now out of embarrassment. Nathan had simply leaned toward her, telling her that he really liked the color of her hair, a thing that sounded so stupid when she repeated it to herself later. Even then in his car, she knew that there was more than a good chance she would never see him again. His mother had already signed the form, and she knew that he wouldn't stay for her, especially as she would be leaving soon herself. Soon he would be in the army, away at some training base, then he would be sent somewhere half the world away. And she would just be a high school girl he met one summer. It made her incredibly sad to think about it, so she pushed it away for the moment.

It's obvious he knew what he was doing, and Cordelia couldn't recall how long they stayed there together. But somewhere in the middle, he had reached up to touch her cheek, but had pulled his hand back.

"It doesn't hurt, does it?" he asked.

No one had ever thought to ask that about her birthmark before; they asked how she got it, why it was that color, asked her why she didn't cover it, and why she did cover it. But never had anyone asked if it hurt her.

Cordelia laughed then, a small laugh, a release of air from her lungs. "No, it doesn't hurt," she answered, and she felt the brush of his thumb over the skin that the birthmark covered.

Cordelia rested her head in her hand the next day as she sat on the shoreline. A flash of red caught her eye. There on the ground was the red lighter she dropped the night of the fight. She brushed the sand of it and clicked the wheel, pushed the button, and the flame ignited.

“Cordelia.”

Her head turned upwards, and she saw her father standing on the wall above her.

“Where have you been?” he asked.

Cordelia shook her head, her shoulder rising slightly. There was no way he could know where she was last night. “What?”

“This morning I was looking for you.”

“Oh, I’ve been around. We must have just missed each other.”

Her father sat down on the wall above her. She had not really talked to him the past couple of days. There was still a bruise hanging around his eye that made it look like he was squinting at her. She pocketed the lighter, not sure what to say. Nervously, she scratched the back of neck, adjusted her ponytail.

“Did you talk to your mother today?”

“No,” she answered. “I haven’t really talked to her since I’ve been here.”

“Oh,” he said, nodding his head. Cordelia waited for him to continue with what she knew he was going to ask of her, what she didn’t mind doing for him. “No need to mention anything about that business on the Fourth, is there? You know how she gets about things like that. Besides, not a big deal.”

Cordelia nodded. "I won't say anything. But," she said, not sure she knew how to ask what she had been half-thinking about since Nathan had taken her to that alley where those Dalton brothers had died.

"But what, sweetheart?" He unconsciously, it seemed, ran a hand over his eyes, lightly pressing the greenish bruise and wincing at the pain.

Her words slurred together as she asked, "Why-were-you-fighting-with-Uncle-Mike?"

Her father didn't immediately answer. He reached a hand up again to maybe test his bruise again, but instead ran it along the back of his neck. It was a familiar gesture, one she had seen him do so many times before when he was weighing his words, thinking of a way to phrase something, judging how much he should and shouldn't say. It was subtle, but there in his movements she recognized some of her own.

"I don't know Cordelia. If I'm being honest I had been drinking a little, and so had Mike," he said.

"And that's all?" she asked in disbelief. "He punched you. In the face."

"Me and Mike have always been like that, though, kid," he said. "Best of friends one minute, at each other's throats the next. Didn't speak to each other for all of 78' over something or other that I can't remember."

"But the other day you were gutting fish and cooking like nothing ever happened," she said. "Did he say he was sorry? And you just forgave him like that?"

Her father frowned at her. "Yeah, just like that, sweetheart. He didn't mean it, I know that. It's not the first time he's punched me, and I've got my fair share of shots in over the years, you be sure. Your grandmother's always said we're too much alike for our

own good and I reckon she's right on that account. We're brothers, Cordelia, that's how it is. What am I going to do? Not speak to him for the rest of my life because of one stupid thing he did? When I've done things to him just as bad? Sometimes you have to just let things go."

Cordelia remained quiet as small waves lapped at the lake shore.

"You're brothers," Cordelia repeated quietly, and something began to open up for her.

Her father stood up quickly, maybe afraid that he had said too much and told her, "I just remembered I have something for you. Meet me at the dock in five?"

Cordelia nodded yes, and he disappeared. She had never heard her father talk about his brother or family like that. Actually, he had never talked like that to her before, like she was an equal, a grown-up, someone capable of understanding the big things. It was hard for her as an only child to make sense of the relationship between her father and his brother. She thought of Nathan and his desire to escape his family. He was probably long gone by now even. But something larger loomed before her. An imagined image of that one Dalton brother, reaching down from his horse for his brother's hands came and went from before her eyes. She was almost glad that she didn't have to navigate a relationship like that, that she had no sister or brother to fight against, but it also made her sad.

Out on the dock, she waited. The sun had almost completely set, and soon she heard her father's footsteps behind her. In his hands, he carried a rectangle shaped box.

"Fireworks," she said. "You got me fireworks."

“Not just any fireworks, your favorite, Roman candles, remember? You always loved these but your mother never let you have any,” he said, laughing at some distant memory that Cordelia wishes suddenly that she could remember, too. “I noticed that night you didn’t get to light any.”

Together they opened the package. Cordelia pulled out a slender tube wrapped with colorful paper.

Her father searched his pockets, but came up empty. “I forgot the lighter.”

“I have one,” she said, pulling out the red lighter.

“I don’t even want to know why you have that,” he said with a shake of his head.

“No reason bad,” she said.

“Don’t lose any fingers now or your mother will kill me,” he said, only half joking.

Cordelia walked to the edge of the dock. She found the fuse at the end of the Roman candle and expertly ignited it with the motion of her thumb on the red lighter. In the moment before the firework went off, as the wick burned fiercely, she felt something building inside her, too, like the tightening of strings on a guitar, and then her hand resonated with the force of the Roman candle. A sound that reminded her of gunshots in an alleyway sounded and lights exploded over the water in a burst of color, illuminating the small dock. She searched for her father and his face was brilliantly lit up red and yellow with the light from the fireworks, and he smiled at her. Another burst of flame shot out of the Roman candle in her hand. She was laughing, the light felt like it was coming from her body as another explosion reached the sky, her father told her to hold

her arm up higher, and that wonderful tension doesn't leave her body even though the Roman candle was soon burnt out.

## When the House Burns Down

### one. Cecily

In the beginning, there was only Cecily standing in the wilderness, a catch in her breathing.

She wore no shoes. She had only one pair that her father had saved for months to buy. He told her she wasn't a child anymore and needed some good shoes. Cecily swore to wear them on special occasions, trips into town, but nowhere else. She refused to wear them out into this wilderness to become spoiled with mud and earth. And that was how he first saw her; a girl with no shoes in the hills of a wild land. He had stumbled loudly through the undergrowth. Cecily froze at the sound, thinking that it was a bear. Even when she knew it was not a bear, her breath would still not return to her.

As the young man did not speak at first, Cecily finally asked, "Are you lost?"

And he did not know until then, as he would one day tell her, that yes, he was indeed lost until he met her, yet he answered, "No, I'm heading to the river. It's this way, isn't?"

Cecily could not understand him through his, at least to her, thick accent. "Are you a foreigner?"

"No, I'm from New York," he answered in his Northeast accent that she had not heard before.

They had been getting a lot of strangers around there lately, all of them searching for their own fortune in gold. Cecily marveled at him as the leaves shifted above them, letting in and taking away light from his face. He had a nice face, she thought, honest and brave.

Months later when he found his first and only small piece of gold, he had it set as a necklace and bought a small delicate chain for it to hang on. He offered it to Cecily, his girl in the wilderness as he called her. When he dropped it into her open palm, the sun caught a glint of it. Cecily thought to herself that it felt like a small piece of fire in her hand. But she also knew what it meant. He had come all the way across the country for this, the piece of gold she held; it had been his dream, his future, and his fortune. And he was offering it to her. The piece of gold and her had switched places. She married him the following summer.

## two. Emily

At the end, Emily circles the house like a bird of prey searching for a place to land.

Unable to stay stationary for long, from room to room she wanders, rolling up the blinds, opening windows. This house is her only inheritance. It is the house her father had inherited from his father, the house Emily grew up in, the house she returned to with her husband as she couldn't bear to sell it to strangers when her father died.

It is a good sturdy house with three bedrooms, two of which she has no use for anymore, a rather small kitchen that she always wished was bigger, and high windows with beautiful views of a northern California landscape filled with valleys and rising mountains. The house fills with a musky scent that reminds her of a time she went

camping in the mountains with her father. She had sat in front of the campfire as the wind blew smoke into her lungs, and for days after her hair smelled wonderfully like burning wood and mountain air.

Emily emerges from the house, leaving the back door open behind her; it matters little now if the smoke from the wildfire billows in. She stands out on the deck in the backyard, built by her husband and son over one summer; the only time, perhaps, they ever got along. Her view of the canyon is lost in what could be mistaken for morning fog. But the haze in the air intensifies, becomes more solid, transforming the sun into a sharply defined red outline. The sky changes from a deep blue to a pale orange that reminds her of the color of icy sherbet.

For a moment, she imagines that she has traveled back to the beginning of time itself. A newly created earth is splayed before her feet. This smoke is not the smoke of wildfires, but it is the gray mists of new beginnings that cover the earth as it slowly shifts and violently collides and forms the very hills that she will one day live in. The fire now steadily moving toward her is not one of destruction, but one of creation, shaping a new landscape. She is the first and last to set eyes on the primordial world stretching out over the railing of her balcony and down the canyon.

Emily is descended from the gold miners. Her great-grandfather traveled from New York when he was only twenty. He didn't find his fortune in gold, but he found a rough, wild California girl called Cecily instead. She has only one memory of her great-grandmother from when she about five. Her great-grandmother was so ancient, a frail looking woman, almost bird like in her fluttery movements. Emily's mother had pushed her close and held her tight by the shoulder, and as she looked up to that face, there was a

fierceness in her great-grandmother's eyes that both awed and frightened her. Now, it is those eyes that seem to be watching her. It is what has kept her here. A vague belief that it would somehow be an insult to leave, when her ancestors had persevered, carved a life out of these hills. What are some wildfires to shove *her* out now? She has already resolved to stay where she is.

### three. Maria

Everyday felt like the day after a fire had burned through.

Maria in the wasteland, in the desert, longed for water. Any kind of water would do: rain, lakes, dew, rivers, snows, oceans, or maybe a nice ice cold glass of water. The landscape of her home was nothing but sand and cactus and dried up plants and dried up people to match. It was if a fire had crawled through the land a million years ago, destroying every living thing in sight, and nothing, Maria thought, nothing ever could be bothered to grow back. A longing for something different, something lush filled every day of her youth.

Maria fell in love with the first horse she ever saw. It terrified her and thrilled her. Her father had taken to her a friend's dude ranch. The smell of the place hit her suddenly as she got out of the truck. She wore a pair of cowboy boots her mother had bought for her; they hurt her feet, squeezing her small toes together, rubbing a blister on her heel. She kicked the dirt with her new boots, watched it rise up and fall in the windless air. After walking though the ranch, past the buildings set up to look like an old west town, they approached an old circular fence. Maria couldn't see over the top of the rail, so her father picked her up under the arms, lifted her onto the top bar.

And there it was; a horse as light and bright as the sun, a horse golden and gleaming.

Her father's friend brought it over to her, she shielded away from it, leaning against her father's chest.

"You can pet him if you want," the man said.

"Go ahead, Maria," her father told her.

She reached out; her small, trembling hand touched the neck of the golden horse. His muscles tensed and flexed under his shining coat. Maria felt his strength right there under the surface, under her hand. She did not understand how this horse could feel so smooth to the touch, yet conceal so much hidden power. From that moment on, horses were all she could talk about, think about, dream about. Her mother lamented the mistake of bringing her to the ranch that day. Her father took her riding every weekend until he died when she was fifteen. The day she met her husband he was riding a horse the color of burnished copper, the same exact color, Maria marveled, as that horse from her childhood she could never forget, could never find the likes of since. For long after she could never be sure which she fell in love with first, her husband or the horse he was riding.

#### four. Anna

Before the fire comes down from the hills, the horses are agitated.

Anna watches them from behind the fence, one knee propped up on a wooden beam, her arms folded over the top post, chin resting on them. Her favorite, a palomino American Quarter Horse, called Abacus keeps pawing the ground, circling the pen. He

doesn't come when she calls like he normally would. A dark brown yearling trots up to her; she lays a hand gently on his head, hoping to infuse him with a steadiness she does not feel herself. She reaches in her pocket, lays sugar cubes in the palm of her hand to give to him. They are right to be restless, anxious like they are, she thinks. She can already feel the heat from the fire on her skin. Even though she cannot yet see it, she knows that it is out there, building beyond the ridge, still miles off, but crawling closer.

Four days ago while she was sweeping the horse stalls in the barn, her father had come out to help, something he hadn't done for a long time. Anna, out of the corner of her eye, had watched him expertly sweep out a stall. They worked in silence. Anna pulled out the hose to wash the floor; the water sprayed out over the ground, over her boots, carrying dirt and horse manure and old straw away.

"It's not looking too good, Anna," her father had said. It was a vague comment, but she knew what he meant.

She asked, not stopping with her task, "What are we going to do?"

Her father again went quiet, tilting his hat back on his head, wiping the sweat from his brow with a worn handkerchief her mother had given him for his birthday one year. His voice was barely audibly over the sound of the water rushing from the hose, he said, "I don't know, Anna. Your mother would stay and put up a fight that I know for sure. There wasn't anything on God's green earth that would get Maria to leave this place." And his voice trailed off.

The ranch had been owned by her family for generations, given to her father by his father, the inheritance she always believed would be hers one day. The life on this ranch, raising and caring for horses, was all she could once imagine for herself. Anna was

now fifteen, when she was nine she was tasked with getting up at five in the morning, before the sun was even up, to start cleaning the stables, shoveling horse manure and dirty straw, hosing the floor down, feeding and grooming horses. Living on a ranch is a privilege, her father explained to her. If you enjoy riding horses, if you love them, you are responsible for them. It is a privilege to be able to saddle up a stallion because you feel like riding out into the wilderness. Anna's mother had come to work at the ranch after she married Anna's father. And as her father told Anna, Maria had worked hard for the ranch, too, out of both love and duty. Anna accepted the life she was given, the honor of breeding horses as if she had chosen it for herself.

#### five. Cecily

Cecily called frantically, almost shouting as a flame was growing steadily in the darkness.

Tendrils of red reaching up from the floor, searching up the wall, engulfing the small wooden table as it turned it to cinders and ash. A candle must have burned too low, Cecily thought. And then she remembered that her husband was not home yet, calling for him was useless. But Cecily stood mesmerized; she could not will herself to look away, to move, to run. She felt the heat on her face, brushing over her cheekbones. She imagined it was singeing the hair off her face, her eyelashes, her eyebrows. The light of the small fire seared itself into her eyes. The fire was done feeding on the table, although she still saw what she thought was the outline of the table. A sound of splintering and cracking reached her and it felt as if the fire was trying to impart some meaning to her.

“Tell me, please,” Cecily said.

Smoke was filling her lungs, making them ache and smolder in her chest. She choked suddenly, she had to clear her throat, clear her eyes, clear her mind. Cecily first moved her right foot, then left, and the rest of her body followed. Her husband found her standing outside as the house burned. The calmness in her frightened him at first. He held her shoulders, searching her face, yet his words were muffled in her ears.

“Are you okay? What happened? Are you okay? Okay?” He kept on repeating those words as if all other words had left him.

She heard her own voice tell him she was fine.

But then he understood the need for panic had passed. There was nothing to be done, by the time they could have made it to the city to get the fire department, to have them travel up to them, then work at bringing water, it would be too late. Cecily took his hand in one of her own, the other grasped at the gold necklace around her neck. As long as she had him and her necklace, she felt as if nothing else mattered. Cecily looked up at him, she could see the fire reflecting in his eyes and thought it beautiful, thought him beautiful.

“What is a house compared to that?” Cecily asked her husband as they stood watching the house slowly disintegrate into charred blackness.

#### six. Emily

Emily’s son calls almost every half-hour, warning her, urging her to leave.

He follows the news from further down south, updating her on the fire’s progress. His last phone call was rushed, he had said, “Mom, I’m driving up to get you.”

She answered, trying to reassure him, “That’s not really necessary, sweetheart. But thank you.”

“I’m almost there,” he said, and in the background she could hear the wind rushing through his open car window and the sound of the engine. “You have certainly proved your point by staying this long. We get that you don’t want to leave, but it’s getting dangerous now, and I’m not going to abandon you up there or let you foolishly fight off this fire yourself.”

At those words she had quietly laughed, holding her hand over the receiver so he couldn’t hear. She could just see herself singlehandedly holding back the wall of fire, sweat dripping down her face, smoke furling around her with her green garden hose in her hands emitting a gentle stream of water.

He is a sweet boy. She wouldn’t trade him for anything in the world. But he is a different kind than her, more like his father, always ready to get up and move, restlessness in his very bones. He moved out at eighteen with a thank you for all she had done for him and a promise to visit soon. Even as a child, he was full of movement, more than any other child she ever knew. Always off exploring in the hills, climbing trees, building hideouts, coming home after dark with bruises on his legs, tree sap on his hands, and twigs in his hair.

She always wanted him to need her more, to cry out for her when he was hurt or simply reach out for her hand as they walked down the street. He has always tried to look after her instead, especially after her husband left them. She believes him to be a good son, she knows he tries, that’s why she can’t fault him for his lack of respect for history, especially his own. To him this house is just walls and a floor, a place where he had too

many memories of his long gone father he resents and a place he stopped calling home a very long time ago. More than anything he doesn't understand that this house means everything to her.

There is a commotion coming from the street. The sudden rise of sirens from police cars and fire engines break into the quiet of the house, invading her thoughts, recalling her to the threat of the fire. Someone is banging, hammering on her front door in urgency, maybe her son or a fireman. On her way to answer the door, she pauses at the sight of herself in the hallway mirror. She looks old, she muses, older than she imagines herself to be. The face before her does not match her own. She tries to fix her hair, smoothing the fine, fragile strands down, although it doesn't do much good. But thankfully, she recognizes her own dark eyes, the ones her father would stare into and say, my word they look like your great-grandmother's, and in them she believes there is a trace of something like fierceness.

#### seven. Maria

The one thing that Maria wished for was a daughter of her own.

She just knew that if she ever had a child it would be a girl, just knew it. But they had been married for seven years and still they had no children. Her husband told her that it might not be in the cards for them, besides they had the ranch to tend to, the horses to tend to, each other to tend to. They would be alright if they never had a child. Maria would agree with her silence only while she held onto her own hope for a child. Life revolved on for them. Maria woke early in the mornings to care for the horses, and she took care of the house, cooked dinner, loved her husband, and was happy.

Then there was Anna.

It took Maria some time to even suspect that she was pregnant. She dismissed the tiredness as she slept in later than usual, the lack of appetite, and her heightened emotions brought on by small things of no importance like a horse having a loose shoe.

Her husband said one night as they were getting ready for bed, “Have you been feeling alright, Maria?”

And that was when she finally realized that she had not, in fact, been feeling alright lately. The shadow of the thought that she could be pregnant began to grow in her then. But they had tried so many times only to be disappointed time and time again that she now refused to let the hope grow any larger. She drove into town the next day and bought a pregnancy test at the local drug store.

After the test, she found her husband outside the barn. And when she told him that she was pregnant, he asked her in happiness and concern, “Why are you crying then, darling?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know why,” she answered. Maria could not explain to him that her tears were a mixture of happiness and shock at finally receiving something so long waited for, hoped for. She held on to her husband as the tears in her eyes blurred the light of the setting sun. A brilliant display of dying light reflected off the clouds. The world was awash for her in watercolors of oranges and reds and golds as she blinked away the tears.

She was going to have a child, a girl, she was sure of it as she was sure of her own name. She was going to have a child to pass things on to; her love of horses, the love her

father gave her, the new love she already had for the child inside her. A child, Maria understood, was something that survives after you; it was a passing on of self.

eight. Anna

Anna knows that it is of no use, but she wishes for her mother like she did when she was smaller.

It is now after sunset, but there is still an eerie glow in the sky, an orange haze of smoke or ash that is still reflecting the last light of the now sunken sun. Her father does not want to leave, abandon this place. He is on the phone with the neighbors in the south, the fire department, the city, the police. He tells her that leaving will be the last option, but most of the horses have already been moved and only the ones they own themselves are left. Abacus cautiously approaches her, perhaps lured by the promise of sugar cubes, tossing his head back and forth. Anna reaches a palm toward him, and he takes the offering in her hand. Even his dark eyes reflect a strange orange color as if the fire has invaded him. He turns in an instant and trots swiftly away from her, back to his pacings around the pen.

Through her mother, Anna has learned the subtle ways in which people change once they die. Her mother changes, even now when she's been gone for so long, changes slowly, almost painfully slow like a dull ache in the bones that spreads through her body. Her mother grows smaller somehow, distant. Mostly Anna can only clearly remember her hands, the feel of her fingers rubbing her back before she fell asleep, her painted nails, the curve of her open palm. Behind her eyes, Anna still sees her mother's slender, quick moving hands brushing down the coat of a golden colored horse, and she sees her hands

gripping the reins of a horse with confidence and skill. Only in pictures is she reminded of what her face looked like.

Anna tries, yet keeps failing, to imagine what her mother was. Her father tells her stories. How her mother cried for hours out of unfathomable happiness after finding out she was pregnant. How he first saw her leading a beautiful black filly toward him and that her hair was the exact same color as the horse's mane. But they are just stories to her; intangible things that do not anchor her to anyone or anything.

Anna finally turns to leave the horses. On the porch, her father meets her coming out, the phone still in his grip. His face is gaunt, the hollows in his cheeks more pronounced, his skinny shoulders slumped. His tallness seems exaggerated somehow. Her father once told her how her mother would tease him, you are all skin and bone, she would say, how is it that you can even hold the reins, let alone ride, no muscle at all, Anna can't recall her laugh, oh, she had said, how many horses have thrown you off? Anna does not need to ask her father as he limbers past her, calling loudly for George, the last ranch hand left. The words carry to her on the air; the wind has increased since the night has come. He is calling for the truck and last horse trailer. Sirens drown out the rest of his words. So be it, she thinks. They will surrender to the will of the wildfire.

#### nine. Cecily

Cecily was not old enough to be a widow yet, she told herself in a whisper.

But what, she thought, were her wants and desires compared to whatever grand scheme of things that God had laid down for her. Right after his death her own smallness was never more evident to her. And she cursed everything and everyone that ever made

her believe that she was ever important to anything or anyone. All she had ever wanted was a life with him from the moment she first saw him in that wilderness and that was taken away.

The thing she found most difficult about her husband's death was the process of detangling her life from his. Even though he was no longer there, she could not stop herself from doing things the way she had always done them; she cooked dinners that were too big for just her and her son, woke at the early hour when he was supposed to leave for work, sat up late in the kitchen as she did when she waited for him to return, and she could not sleep in her silent room without the sound of his deep snores and breathing that she had known since she was merely a girl.

Her son went about it all in a quiet reverie as if nothing had happened. He was determined that nothing else in life should change any. He did not mention his father, did not name him, did not mourn him, did not cry for him. Cecily imagined that he believed that if he could only maneuver around the hole his father left without looking at it, then everything in his life would be perfectly fine. He was old enough to understand what death was, but young enough to not understand what it meant.

In a way they were both mourning in similar fashion and that was what made Cecily decide that they needed something to change. They could continue on in silence and sadness or they could try to move themselves forward. He had been gone a year and she figured it was as good a time as any. They needed to take what little control they had over the directions of their lives. Her husband had built this house, built it on the ashes of the first, built it for her. Cecily once imagined her and husband growing old there, taking their last breaths here, she just did not know that would happen so soon for him.

Cecily told her son, “I want to sell the house.”

The reaction from him was not one that she was expecting. His face, almost the face of a man, a copy of his father’s, broke in an instant and tears came. “You can’t, we can’t, we can’t. He built it. It’s ours,” he sputtered out.

Cecily’s heart broke for him as grief finally took hold of him. “Okay, okay,” she told him as she herself took hold of him. “We won’t leave then. Okay? Okay?”

And Cecily did not leave, even when her son eventually out grew her and the house. And she grew old there herself until her son returned to take her from there when she could no longer care for herself. But the house remained for her grandson to raise a family in, for her great-granddaughter to protect from fire, and Cecily was amazed at how some things can remain, while others pass so easily.

ten. Emily

Emily is old enough, she tells her son, to remember a different wildfire.

Emily doesn’t know how this memory comes to her right now; she hasn’t thought about it in years. So she says, “My goodness, it must have been twenty or thirty years ago at least. Your father and I were driving somewhere down south near Antelope Valley. I can’t recall why we were there. I remember that to the relief of everybody, the rain had come after a long dry spell. There is nothing better than a thunderstorm after a long, dry, life taking drought to return that life that was taken.”

Emily relives the story for her son, sees anew for him:

They were young, his father and her, so it had to have been before he was born or he would have been there with them. It was late afternoon; it was spring. They had pulled

over to the side of the road to stretch their legs. The motion of the old car had made her slightly carsick. They walked and reached the crest of a hill, below them two horses were grazing on a field of newly sprung up wildflowers; small yellow poppies covered the land below.

Her husband took her hand, without looking at her and said how all those sunshine colored flowers made it look like a piece of the sky during dusk had fallen into the field. It was the most poetic she had ever heard him, and would ever hear him, and she couldn't help but laugh, which he took great offense to, but secretly she couldn't have agreed more. She tells her son that she had never been and never would be so in love with him than in that moment.

On their way down the hill, Emily tripped over something on the ground. There was a flash of white in the green grass. Her husband parted the flowers with both hands and a bleached by the sun skull of a horse was laid bare. Emily had stumbled over its dried rib cage. It was a startling discovery. During the whole trip back, she could not stop thinking about that horse and how it had died and how beautiful that valley was and how two things like that could exist together.

Emily stops speaking. She sees in his face that her son does not understand her. How can she make him understand that flowers would grow over the bones of this house, too, if she let it be? Flowers can grow over the bones of almost anything.

eleven. Maria

In the barn, Maria stopped at the door to watch Anna.

The little girl gingerly, on tip toes, tried to look over a door to a horse stall. The horse inside neighed loudly, causing Anna to lose her balance as she jumped back in fright. So far Anna had refused to get close to a horse. When Maria had mounted her on a small pony for the first time, the pony had reared and Anna had slipped off the side before Maria could catch her. Anna hadn't cried a single tear, just stood up and backed away slowly before running for her father standing by the fence post. Since then Anna had developed a fear of the horses that she had been around her entire life. Maria would catch her there in the barn, studying the horses and jumping at any sounds they made.

"We have to get her back on," Maria said to her husband.

He replied, "She just needs some time. She'll have forgotten all about it in no time at all."

Maria could not stand by and do nothing. She could not bear it if Anna's small fear of horses grew into something bigger like a lifelong phobia of all things on four legs. Maria wanted Anna to love horses the way she did, wanted her to know what it felt like to ride a horse at full gallop and feel the rush of wind and fear and joy. It was like no other feeling in the world, and she wanted Anna to know that feeling.

Early one morning Maria woke Anna from her slumber, dressed her, and sat her at the kitchen table. She poured her a glass of juice, made her waffles, and did not say a word about what they were going to do that day. As she cut up the waffles into pieces, Anna reached for her hands and covered them with her own small ones as Maria brought the knife down and up over the waffles. Anna was always a calm, quiet child. Maria if she didn't know any better would have thought that her daughter was always pondering

the great mysteries of the world as Anna's eyes would stare off, a crease forming between her eyes.

Maria led Anna out into one of the paddocks. The same small pony was waiting for them. Anna cowered as the pony trotted up to them.

"Here, Anna, give him some sugar," Maria said, opening Anna's small fist to drop a couple of cubes of sugar into it.

Anna took the offered sugar, yet tried to conceal herself behind her mother. Maria held Anna's arm gently, guiding it away from her body and around her own legs. Slowly Anna's fingers uncurled, revealing the sugar that the pony, smelling immediately, scooped out of her hand with his tongue and hairy lips. Anna let out a noise that sounded like a cross between a giggle and a breathless sigh of relief.

"You want to try and ride him again?" Maria asked and Anna did not answer with a definite yes or no, so in a swift instance Maria captured her under her arms and swung her on the pony. Anna was up and on before she knew it. Slowly Anna relaxed as nothing happened and as she looked into Maria's eyes whose were even with hers, she smiled a smile of discovery and awe as her hands weaved into the pony's mane.

twelve. Anna

In her room, Anna goes no farther than the doorway.

What to take with her? Police lights flash around the room, highlighting objects first blue then red, stealing their real colors and shapes, casting shadows over the walls, making her room look strange and unfamiliar to her. She feels cold all over as adrenaline rushes through her, making her hands shake. Every part of her feels keenly alive and

throbbing. Her senses are strangely heightened as if her body fears that the fire will spring up at any moment in a quick burst of flames. It doesn't feel like anything belongs to her anymore. She is detached and floating. Nothing in this room she has always lived in belongs to her. From a distance she hears her father call her name and even that sounds not quite right to her, foreign to her as the room she stands in now.

She says to make herself move, "Take what you need, leave the rest."

Anna moves into this unremarkable room, leaves the lights off, sits on the bed as if her legs have just given out on her. She knows the history of every object in here, where they came from, what they were used for, how they were loved by her. She could recite the story of that darkened lamp, or the blue rug, or the buttoned plaid shirt hanging off the chair, and the person that owned them. But they would not be her things. It would be like telling a fairy tale, once upon a time, there was a girl named Anna, who loved horses, whose mother was stolen by an evil witch. She does not want any claim to them, to her own story as she knows that it will be easier to leave it that way. Anna stands up abruptly, pulls a suitcase from under her bed. She goes to the closet, pulls things off hangers with no regard to what she grabs, opens her dresser, takes an armful of clothes, and finally shoves it all into the suitcase, closes it, and walks out of the room with her suitcase. It is that simple.

But in the hallway, she catches a glimpse of herself passing in a framed mirror on the wall. She pauses and fights the urge to turn and look at herself. Breathing deeply, she turns with eyes closed. She lets the breath go, opening her eyes. And what she sees staring back at her is herself, Anna. Somehow that is not what she expected; she expected to look different, to be distorted, to be a stranger. But it is just Anna. Dark hair like her

mother, eyes like her father, chin like her grandfather, a nose that nobody could ever decide where it came from. It's a comforting sight, she thinks, that after all this she has still remained Anna.

In the kitchen, her father sits like a defeated king at the table. "I'm only resting for a moment," he says, his voice sounding rough. "You go out and help George, he's having trouble with Abacus, and you know how temperamental that horse is."

Anna makes a move for the door but stops herself, her suitcase held tightly in both hands. She steps up to her father and can only see his profile. She knows that he does not want her to see him crying. "It's just a house," Anna says. "Walls, a floor, a ceiling. It's okay to leave it behind, we'll still remember it."

### thirteen. Cecily

Cecily could not see, for the most part, the faces that approached her.

The faces were all blurred darkness and light. But she did not mind her poor eyesight much anymore as there was nothing in the world she cared about seeing more of. Cecily lived in a small room at a nursing home and there was nothing in that room that meant much to her, so it meant very little to her that she could not see it. Her son at first had insisted that she move in with him. He was divorced, with a grown son of his own. But she had resolutely told him no over and over again. She did not want to be a burden to him, and she knew, something inside her told her as clear as sunlight through glass that she would not be here for much longer. Cecily could not recall how long she had been there in the nursing home. Sometimes it felt like only a few days, at other times it startled her to think that maybe it may have been years. And sometimes she felt as if a permanent

kind of fire was burning before her eyes, not one made of flame and ash and white hot embers, but one made of select memories. Everything that mattered, everyone that mattered was alight with scorching firelight in her mind. She still saw a small piece of gold swinging from the fingers of a young man from New York, her sleeping son cradled in her arms, her husband carrying planks of wood that would become their home with sweat slowly tracing down his arms. She did not need her eyes to see these things.

Her son was visiting, she knew, his voice was a familiar tone to her ears, it changed so very little as he grew up, and she asked after their house.

“Ma, you know I don’t live there anymore. Emily lives there now, remember?”

A little girl with blonde hair and round eyes was pushed close to her; the face came into a hazy focus for Cecily. The child struggled to be released from her mother’s grip and succeeded in squirming off into a corner of the room. Cecily listened to the talk around her, heeding only half of the words; the voice of her son, her grandson and his wife, the little girl remained silent. A crash interrupted the adults and all turned toward Emily as she jumped away from a dresser, a broken porcelain statue of a horse rearing on its hind legs scattered on the ground. Emily’s mother immediately began to scold her, telling her that she was a bad girl for touching things that didn’t belong to her.

Cecily only shook her head, waving away the concern with her hands as if swatting away flies. Her voice reedy and fragile said, “No need, no need for harsh words. Emily, come here, dear, come here.” Cecily opened her arms for the child, feeling her as she slipped cautiously into them, shaking with compressed sobs and tears. “No need to get so upset, now. That statue was of little worth to me. No need to cry over such things, they’re not important at all. ”

Cecily looked down at the child in her arms and saw in a moment of bright clarity, dark eyes that she recognized as her own. She then reached up to the necklace hanging from her neck to remove it at last. She asked for help with the clasp. And Cecily felt hands at the back of her neck, brushing her thin hair back. As the necklace left her, she could still feel the gentle weight of it on her neck and against her chest. It flashed before her and she reached for it.

“Emily, you wear this for me now, will you? It needs someone who will take care of it.” Cecily then held it out, let the gold piece swing on the chain. A small hand reached for it and it was gone.

That night Cecily dreamed she was back in the wilderness. She was walking in the shade as trees were swaying above her, letting in patches of light. And then he was there, suddenly illuminated. Cecily, although she did not know it until then, was holding in a breath that she finally, upon seeing him again, was able to let out.

#### fourteen. Emily

Emily can now see the fire, a golden contrast to the black hills, from the balcony.

The flames are visible on the horizon; they glow red and orange, outlining the curves and ridges, the rise and fall of the hills that stand in their way. The city lights, normally beginning to dim by this time at night, are fully ablaze below her. Despite the destruction of the fire, the land it is scorching, the trees being turned to ash, the homes burning, she cannot help thinking that the rising smoke, the fire’s red burn, and the glimmering city are so beautiful.

She wants to share this with her son, but he is packing things haphazardly into his truck as if her house is already on fire. Papers from her desk, shirts from her closet leave the house, he stops to ask where the deed, her will, and important papers are, he takes some pots and pans from the kitchen, he pulls pictures right off the wall, the television and furniture are too heavy, he skips the things that are replaceable. She is the last thing ushered into the vehicle as he hooks a hand around her elbow and tries to guide her out of the door.

“I am not going,” she tells him, standing in her living room that looks as if it has been ransacked by a thief. Emily tries to make an imposing figure, she squares her shoulders, lifts her chin high, but she finds that her voice is wavering despite her will to make it steady. “I will not leave, I won’t,” she says, but she feels like a child, like she is a small girl again standing up against her father, not her son, the boy she raised. “I can’t leave here, son.”

“I’m sorry, Mom,” he says, shaking his head at her, but he doesn’t sound like he means it at all. He grips her by the upper arm again and she tries to resist, but her body betrays her and she has but the strength to weakly lean her weight away from him, to try and pry her arm out of his hand.

She finally shakes him free, yet she is already outside the house, and she is afraid to turn and look at it, imagining it already as burned timbers of wood and charred walls, a caved in roof.

As the truck pulls away from the driveway, she almost stops him, she imagines grabbing the wheel or throwing open the door, jumping out. From there she would carry

all the things back into the house, where they belong. It feels dreadfully wrong that some things are being left behind while others are being saved.

“Are they not just as important?” she asks out loud. Surely the picture of wild birds her mother painted tucked away in a closet is worth as much as the tax forms now sitting beside her in the cab of the truck? And the quilt her great-grandmother made for her has just as much worth as the few shirts in her lap? If her house should burn, it seems only right that everything that resided there should burn together.

But they are already pulling off the road that leads away from the house and onto the highway. There is traffic and they pull up behind a large horse trailer. It is irrational, she knows, but she is an old woman, set in her ways, too attached to a single spot of the earth that she has lived on her entire life, and she wants nothing more than to turn around, run back along the asphalt, back to her home, and burn with it, if that what is to come, how that house that stood for generations should be brought down at last.

Emily’s hand reaches for the small piece of gold hanging around her neck, she can only say to her son, “You don’t understand what it means.”

fifteen. Maria

Maria held on tight as the horse below her reared in a splendid, fearful, graceful arc.

When Maria hit the ground, the only thing she knew was that a hot white fire had somehow been set ablaze inside her skull. That was all her eyes could see; fire, there was nothing else. If she was still breathing she could not tell; her lungs had stopped expanding inside her. And she was not sure if she was still on the horse as everything around her felt

like it was flying past her. Her whole body felt like it contained a great force of momentum that had not yet been extinguished.

Her thoughts began to catch up with her like a torrent of water released downhill. She had fallen, she was on the ground now, and she needed to make herself take a breath again. Around her she heard the heavy footfalls of horses and people.

A voice from far away was saying, “Maria! Maria! Are you okay? Open your eyes? Can you talk? You’re bleeding, oh my God, Maria.”

Maria was still seeing white, but other colors were beginning to bleed in around the edges of her vision.

Then a different voice, which she dimly recognized as her husband’s, said, “Someone get Anna out of here, she doesn’t need to see this.”

At her daughter’s name, Maria forced herself to speak, relieved to hear her own voice issue from between her lips: “Oh, okay, I’m okay.”

Her vision returned, and what she saw was the tear streaked face of Anna being carried away in someone’s arms, her small face poised with feared, appearing over the man’s shoulder. She was helped up into a sitting position, the world continued to spin, but it subsided gradually, and her husband was there to help her stand back up.

His voice was shaking as he said, “Quite a fall there, Maria, quite a fall. I told you that horse was too wild, even for you. Thank God you’re okay, thank God.”

“I thought I had him there for a second,” she said with a soft laugh with no humor in it. Her husband then braced her back as he walked her back to the house where she was told to lie down. Her husband cleaned the cut on the side of her head and

bandaged it up. He kissed her in a desperate way after and she told him, “Don’t worry, I’m *fine*.”

Later that night, Maria woke aching with waves of nausea flitting through her. On her way downstairs to get an aspirin, she stopped in the doorway of her daughter’s room. Anna was fast asleep, her even breathing filling the room, her face relaxed and calm. Maria could not rid herself of the image of Anna’s face as she was taken away. What a thing for a child to see; their mother knocked to the ground, bleeding, not getting back up after falling. Behind her eyes, a pressure was growing to an intense pain. What a thing to do; to make a child believe that they could lose a mother. Something was wrong, Maria knew, something in her head was about to burst so she made her way downstairs, stumbling down the steps. That was not how Maria wanted Anna to remember her; a sprawled figure thrown from a horse. She did not want Anna to think badly of horses now. It was her own fault, she had pulled the reins too sharply, kicked him too hard, startled him. Maria could only hope that Anna would remember the good things about her; the times it was just the two of them in the morning when Maria made her breakfast, the times that they rode together in the wilderness, the way she was there every night to soothe her to sleep, and the way she was so loved by her mother.

#### sixteen. Anna

Anna watches the beauty of Abacus as he rears wildly, in panic, in splendor, on his hind legs.

George, the ranch hand, is cussing loudly, something he would not normally do in front of her. His hat is askew on his head, tipping back so far that it is in danger of flying

off his head. His face is taut and stretched, and he says, “Damn horse, do you want to burn?”

Abacus rears again, neighing loudly, kicking his front legs uncontrollably, nearly grazing George’s head. Anna sees the reins suddenly flare up in the air like two whips. And then Abacus is free and galloping away.

Anna sprints after the horse, who is trying to get back to the barn, back home. He reaches the barn far ahead of her and the doors are eerily thrown open in abandonment, like no horse has resided there for years. Anna follows Abacus inside, the only sound is that of his metal shoes echoing around the empty space that was once full of the sound of horses neighing and clomping and huffing and clacking. Abacus has returned to his own stall. Anna is reminded of the day he was born in that stall, how she held her breath as his shaky legs brought him up off the ground. He turns himself around in the stall and eyes her with fear, making a move to come at her or rear up again.

“Whoa, Abacus,” Anna says, holding up her arms. “Whoa, there boy, it’s just me.”

Anna slowly reaches for her pocket and pulls out sugar cubes. She walks in measured steps towards him. Her hand is outstretched, palm up while she speaks to him in a calm steady flow of words: “Hey there, Abacus, boy, you’re alright, you want some sugar, you’re alright, now, don’t be scared now.”

The horse tosses his head, neighs loudly, but he can’t resist the cubes in her hand. As he scoops up the lumps of sugar, she cautiously reaches her other hand down, letting the reins gently swing into her grip. She runs a hand over the flat front of his head repeatedly in a calming fashion, the way she did when he was still young and he still let

her. Anna takes his reins tight in her hands, ready to pull him out of the barn. But when she looks at him steadily in his dark eyes, she can clearly trace the fear in them. And it is a fear that she understands as it is a familiar fear for any creature, she knows; the thought of leaving loved things behind.

“I understand,” she tells him softly.

As she leads Abacus out of the barn, her father and George are securing the other horses. The last trailer is empty, waiting for Abacus. Anna leverages her weight against the weight of the horse, pulling Abacus as hard as she can until finally his head is pulled forward, his neck and the rest of his body following as she walks him into the trailer at last. She does not bother to look back at the house as she secures herself in the cab of the truck, waiting for her father. When he gets in, he starts the truck, puts it into drive, but he pauses for a moment as if there is something he is forgetting.

Driving down the road leading to their ranch for perhaps the last time, Anna imagines what will happen when the house burns down, how it'll start from the outside, scorching the grass in the paddocks, devouring the stables before reaching the main house. The outside walls will feel it first, the kitchen window will break from the heat, glass shards flying onto the floor, the curtains will catch fire, and the gas stove will explode. Further into the living room it'll travel and the old couch her mother picked out, the picture of wild stallions over the fireplace that her mother hung, and the photo of her mother holding a newborn Anna will all be no more, all turning to ash.

Maybe the fire will pause for a moment before entering that room that is no longer Anna's, wonder who left all this behind. But Anna knows that fire doesn't care at all about those things that people leave behind; it can't tell who that person was or what

they loved or why they're no longer there. In the truck, Anna rolls the window down, sticking her arm out with her hand held open. She glances back at the horse trailer, sees the outline of Abacus' neck through the slats of the trailer, smoke is choking the air, and in the rearview mirror she thinks she can see a golden glow spreading in the sky.

## The History of Dead Things

It is only after a life is over, Abigail is learning, that one can begin to assemble the pieces together to invent its narrative. Abigail can work her way backwards through her grandmother's life. There are the things she knows for sure: her name was Louise, she had only one child, she was a native of Kansas, she passed down to Abigail her dark eyes, her laugh was quiet and full of echoes, she died on a sunny day, her hands were fragile when she held Abigail's when she was a child, she loved a good country song, she was married only once. These are facts that she knows about her grandmother, although the truth of them she is now beginning to question. Because there are other facts that she isn't able to meld with what she knows. There is the suitcase. There are the rosary beads. There is the postcard. And there is also something inside the suitcase that remains unnamed, yet it is impossible to deny its existence.

The task had been appointed to Abigail by her mother to begin the process of cleaning out her grandmother's attic. Her mother worked downstairs, boxing up the rest of the house. Abigail's grandmother had died in late April, and now in the beginning of May the house had to be emptied so it could be sold. Climbing into the attic for the first time, Abigail had paused at the amount of stuff boxed up and stacked up and left just to gather dust. The attic was a collection of items that her grandmother obviously couldn't

be parted from, an accumulation of belongings built from the ruins of her previous houses.

Abigail, now sitting downstairs, remembers thinking that it was strange and sad that this was all that was left of her grandmother; this collection of junk and old, decayed things. She asks her mother, “Why would she leave that up there for us to find?”

Abigail’s mother says, “Tell it again,” as if she hopes for a different answer, although she has seen it, too.

“I didn’t even know where to start cleaning things out,” Abigail says. “There was so much stuff up there. Boxes and things. I started going through them. It was in one of them, way in the back. I thought it was weird. Why would she put that in there? A suitcase, tucked in a box? Then I opened it. I couldn’t know what was in it. It was just a suitcase.”

For all of her twenty years, Abigail had thought of her grandmother’s house as her second home. She did not believe that there could be anything in that house that she did not know, could not connect with some memory. Abigail runs her hand over the rough material of the sofa and remembers falling asleep with her head on the armrest with her grandmother next to her. They were watching some old movie in black and white, her grandmother’s favorite, but Abigail can’t remember the name of it now. On the wall, hang school pictures of herself through the years, pictures of her mother with dated hairstyles, pictures of her grandfather in uniform, one of her grandmother on her wedding day. She broke that vase on the coffee table running through the house once and had tried to glue it back together herself. Her grandmother had come in and laughed at her crude

attempt to piece it together, not caring a thing about the vase. Abigail looks around and tells herself she knows all these things.

The suitcase in the attic was old and worn like everything else up there. Abigail had weighed it her hands; it was not empty. She traced the faded stickers with her fingers, the names of places in large letters, announcing the different locations it has traveled to: New Orleans, Dallas, Kansas City. She placed it on an empty spot on the floor, flipped the two latches and two clicks sounded in the dense, dusty air. She opened it. She found a string of prayer beads lying on top of old, yellow newspaper; the date reading May 12, 1971. There was a Bloomingdale's ad that announced a sale. Tucked into a pocket was a postcard from New Orleans. Abigail flipped it over but nothing was written on it. Then there was something she cannot name, even now.

She closed the suitcase. She couldn't feel her heart in her chest. Her hands were going numb. She put her head in a garbage bag and threw up her breakfast, then came downstairs to sit on the couch where her mother found her. Abigail could not tell her mother what was wrong, couldn't prepare her for what she would find when Abigail told her that there was something up in the attic. Abigail had watched her mother climb the stairs, had wished she could call her back.

After Abigail finishes the story for the second time, she wants to ask her mother how there can be something in this house that neither of them knew anything about. Instead, she asks, "What do we do with it?"

Her mother says, "I don't know, Abigail. I don't know."

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For some time, Abigail and her mother remain silent about it. They finish cleaning out the house; they leave the suitcase up in the attic. And life for Abigail continues on as it would have, except for the absence of her grandmother and the new knowledge about her she carries inside. She finds a job at a bookstore for the summer; wanting to save money before college begins anew, wanting to have something to fill her time up. Her father had been sending her a small allowance at school but had stopped as she was returning home. She had been looking forward to coming home, and then her mother had called with the news of her grandmother's death. She asked to take her finals early in order to help her mother with the funeral arrangements. There is nobody left in this town she can talk to about the suitcase, about anything; her friends from high school are not coming home for the summer except for short visits, and she has lost touch with most of them anyway.

Her first day at work is a week after she finds the suitcase, and suddenly she finds her life has been divided into a time after she knew about the suitcase and a time before. She spends the day shadowing a coworker as he teaches her the register and different procedures. He looks about her age and she wonders how long he has been working here; it didn't seem like he was there just for the summer as he was up for an open manager job.

At the end of the day he says, "You know, I couldn't place you before, but I think we went to high school together. I was a couple of years ahead."

Abigail looks at his face with a frown. There is nothing even remotely familiar about him. She doesn't think that she ever knew a Michael in high school. "Yeah, maybe," she says, trying to smile at him.

“I remember we had an advanced math class together or something,” he says.

“Yeah, that’s probably it,” she agrees. But she finds it unsettling that she can’t remember him when he remembers her.

After work she drives around the streets she knows, not wanting to go home and see her mother. All the shopping centers and houses look the same still, and she reminds herself that she hasn’t been gone that long. She thinks about driving to her grandmother’s house, maybe going inside, up to the attic, but as she nears the entrance to the neighborhood, her palms begin to sweat and a cold chill comes over her, so she drives past it. Rolling down the window, she lets fresh air enter her lungs, breathing deeply, trying to calm her fast beating heart.

Before she can face the suitcase, Abigail thinks that she must understand the story behind it first. And how did this part of her grandmother’s story begin? It must have been love. And tragedy. Those are the elements that make a story great. Make it epic. Tragedy is the thing that makes love epic. Otherwise, love is just ordinary. And there cannot be anything ordinary about her grandmother’s story. Her story has all the elements to make it an epic story, if only they could be told in the right order. If there was love and tragedy, there must have been one moment that brought those two things together. Abigail tells herself, *love and tragedy is how it all began*. So she traces through a history of what is known and unknown about her grandmother, and tells herself a story.

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“A deer?” Louise asked the police officer standing in their small living room as if she had never heard of such a thing. “What do you mean *a deer*?”

What she knew for sure was there was an accident. There was a deer. There was her husband. And both of those things were now dead.

Late at night when sleep would not come, she closed her eyes, and it happened like this: The car heater wasn't working. It never did when they needed it to. She had told him time after time to get it fixed, he never listened, insisted on fixing it himself, but he only made the problem worse. His fingers were starting to get stiff and numb from the cold. He wished that he had listened to her. He turned the radio up loud to distract himself from the cold, changed the station to find John Prine singing him his favorite song: *Make me an angel that flies from Montgomery, Make me a poster of an old rodeo.* He sang along loudly, off-key and completely unashamed. *Just give me one thing that I can hold on to, to believe in this living is just a hard way to go.* A deer glowed brightly in his headlights. The windshield shattered. Glass was everywhere, on the icy road, on the dashboard, on the seat next to him, in his hair, on his clothes. He tried to stay awake, but it was so cold, he shut his eyes, thought of her.

But in the bright light of day, it happened like this: The heater was thankfully working. He planned what he would say to her when he got home, teasing her for her lack of faith in him, as if he couldn't fix a car heater. Underneath all the layers of clothing he was getting a little hot. The radio was off. The silence in the car was comforting in the darkness. He rolled down the window a small crack, cold air entering the car, swirling around him, he shivered. He never saw the deer. It leapt out from the edge of the trees. It forcibly struck the hood, shattered the windshield. The car veered off the road. But he did not, nor would he ever, know what happened to him. He hit his head on impact, he did

not think about his bad luck of hitting that deer or of trying to stay awake, and there was no thought of her at all.

The days immediately following his death as morning sickness hovered her and she threw up in the bathroom, it happened like this: He saw the deer in time, thank god. The shock of seeing something standing in the middle of the road frightened him and his heart catapulted itself into his throat. He yanked the steering wheel wildly to the left, hit the brakes hard, and skidded to a halt. The deer ran off into the trees. He breathed in the freezing air, steadying himself, dimly over the radio he was aware that the beginning strands of his favorite song were playing. He came home, told her the story still shaking a little, a bit light headed, but feeling the kind of euphoria you can only get by escaping death, and for years after they laugh about that time he almost ran over a deer. But the truth was it didn't happen like that at all.

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Abigail picks up more shifts at the bookstore as the weeks move along. The job fills her days, and she searches for things to do at night so she can avoid being home. For a while she haunts the movie theater, seeing films that she otherwise would never even want to watch. But that begins to make a dent in her paychecks. She wanders the local mall until it closes at night, buying coffee she doesn't finish and browsing through clothes she doesn't buy. She sits in the food court for hours, watching people passing by or eating dinner, and she wonders if they, too, hold onto secrets like her grandmother did.

When she does come home, her mother is usually shut in her bedroom. Abigail has tried several times to talk to her about the suitcase, but to no avail. Her mother is determined to wipe it out of existence through sheer force of will. But Abigail has so

many questions for her mother. Did she have any idea? Did her grandmother ever hint about it? Are any things in her grandmother's history that could explain it? All those questions die on Abigail's lips as her mother inevitably turns her head and leaves the room if Abigail begins to bring it up. So with her mother, Abigail plays her own game of pretending the suitcase does not exist. When she is outside of her mother's house, she can then turn her thoughts to what is inside the suitcase and how it came to be there.

Abigail spends one night out with some of her coworkers from the bookstore. Michael is there, and he spends a good portion of the night trying to reminisce about their high school years together that she still doesn't remember. She lets him go on about how good those days were; when he was a star on the baseball field, and the trouble he and his friends got into. But she is only a year removed from it, so she can't share in his nostalgia. He mentions that he thought she was cute back then, even if she was just a freshman. Abigail senses that remembrance of his high school days are all Michael has right now. He tells her that he tried community college but it didn't really work out for him. She understands that he is stuck here now, while she is transient, just stopping for the summer. They make out in his car after everyone calls it a night. It was only out of pity, and although Abigail doesn't say that to him, she imagines that he knows. And for those few minutes in his hot car, Abigail is able to half forget about the suitcase.

When she arrives home, the cat greets her at the door, rubbing against her ankles and purring. Her mother is waiting for her in the living room. "Where have you been?"

Abigail feels annoyance build in her as she answers, "Out."

"Have you been drinking?"

“Jesus, no I haven’t,” Abigail says. She leaves her purse and keys on the front table.

“No need for that tone, Abigail. I have a right to ask. You’re still a teenager, even if you’ve been away at college. There are still rules in this house. You can’t just keep disappearing all day and night without telling me where you are. I worry about you,” her mother says.

“How can I tell you anything when you’re locked up in your room all the time and you won’t speak to me?” Abigail says. She realizes how angry she sounds, so she tries to make her voice even. “If you would just talk about the suitcase, if *we* could talk about what is in it...”

Her mother interrupts her, “Abigail, please...”

“It’s still there, up in her attic,” Abigail says, walking in front of her mother. “Don’t you want to know why she kept it? How the thing got in there? Why she put it there?”

“I can’t Abigail,” her mother says, getting up. “I just can’t right now.”

Abigail watches her mother leave the room; she does not follow her, though. Abigail sits in the vacant spot left by her mother, and the cat jumps up to join her. She pets him as he stretches across the couch, and she wonders how much longer they can go on like this; living with the uncertainty and the silence and the secrets that were left for them.

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At work, Abigail tries to avoid Michael. She thinks she may have led him on. He tries to ask her out on a date alone, but she dodges the question, makes excuses about

why she can't go. She tries to understand why she is so averse to the idea; he is perfectly nice and polite, he's not bad looking, and even makes her laugh sometimes. But something about him holds her back. Michael seems so ordinary somehow; too ordinary to be someone she could love, someone she could marry, or have children with. She stops there and asks herself when she started to think about things like that.

The children's section of the bookstore is being rearranged, and Abigail is tasked with boxing up the inventory. She and Michael spend an uncomfortable night in silence, going through the shelves and placing books into boxes. Abigail comes across books from her childhood that she has forgotten about. And once again she is reminded of her grandmother, and how she would take her to the local library to pick out any book Abigail wanted. She remembers riding in the car with her grandmother, reading a book aloud to her as she drove them home. Even now Abigail can see her grandmother's profile, her hands on the steering wheel. But even then, Abigail thinks as she places books on a shelf, even then it was there.

Stories go round and round in Abigail's head; stories that could explain to her why her grandmother did what she did and stories that explain who she was.

If only Abigail had said to her when she was alive, "Now tell me a story that is nothing but truth."

And her grandmother would have said, "Once upon a time there were these things: a girl, a boy. And well, there was nothing else really as that's all you need in the end; only a girl and a boy and love. There's nothing left to tell after that. And everyone knows that all stories end in death, so it's better to leave the rest out."

Abigail would have answered, "Absence is a form of lying, you know."

“But they both knew that I loved them. I gave up everything I owned for them. I never lied about that,” the grandmother in her head reproached her. “It’s only that no one ever asked me. I would have told you the truth, if you had asked me, Abigail.”

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Louise pawned the necklace her parents gave her for her sixteenth birthday. A gold heart etched with flowers and an ornate ‘16’ engraved on it. It was not worth what she expected. It broke her own heart to hand it over to a stranger. She pawned his guitar; it was worth exactly what she thought it would be. Next to nothing. If he had been there, he would have told her that its value was not something that couldn’t be counted in currency. A guitar’s only worth was in the music that came from it. And she would have told him that was a load of bullshit, but secretly would have admired his spirit.

The thing that stung the most, though, was the engagement ring. It had belonged to his mother and her mother before her, so on and so on. A small diamond set on a gold band. It was the only inheritance he had received when his mother died. And it was the only thing that he had left her that was worth much. She did not want to imagine what he would have said to her; pawning it off as if it meant nothing more than the few crinkled bills she received in return for it. The man behind the counter, she was sure, pitied her, and he probably gave her a little more for it than necessary. She was sure her desperation and weariness was painfully obvious not only to him but to everyone. Here she was only eighteen and pregnant and already a widow and without knowing it yet she was soon to be a grieving mother as well.

So in the end, it was enough, with a little bit left over. Outside on the street, she shivered. It was the middle of winter. She had nowhere to go but back to a cold, empty

house on the outskirts of town that she could not afford to rent for long. When she would bury her second husband forty years later, she would sit with her daughter and small granddaughter in the hospital, and say to them the same thing that she thought on this street after pawning valuables to pay for her first husband's funeral, *the problem with the dead is that they don't bury themselves.*

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Coming down the stairs in the morning, Abigail notices that there are feathers on the floor. Tiny feathers, gray and white, the once downy coverings of a small bird litter the floor. They blend perfectly in with the tile. Abigail can only discern them as she walks further into the living room and they rise gently on the air as her footsteps disturb them. The cat lurks around the scene of his crime, expecting praise for his catch, purring loudly, rubbing ever so gently across her ankles.

Leaning down, she balances on her feet to look at the bird. "It's so small," Abigail says quietly as if she has entered holy ground. Abigail isn't sure how long she kneeled there but her mother soon came down the stairs behind her.

She halts when she sees the bird, saying, "Jesus, that damn cat." She can't look at it, Abigail notices. She shields her eyes as if she was looking into the sun. "I'm going to get something to clean this up."

Abigail returns her attention to the bird. Its wing is broken, its neck is set at an unnatural angle, its feathers are bent and frayed, and its blood splatters the floor in small droplets. She forces herself to look at it, the dead bird on their floor, surrounded by its own feathers, to see it as it really is. It worries her to think about what happens when you do not look at the dead. If you ever only turn away from death, it will remain in the

periphery of your life always. Her grandmother must of thought have the suitcase every day. It had to have haunted her. It would be impossible for something like that not to.

*Life is so fragile*, Abigail thinks, *Why do we always forget that?* Abigail knows that her grandmother would understand this. The thing in the suitcase was fragile, too fragile. Is that why she kept it? Was she compelled to take care of it, even in death?

Her mother comes back with paper towels, cleaning supplies, and a black trash bag. Abigail helps her sweep up the feathers and wipe away the blood. The cat prowls around at the edges of the living room, not disturbing them. Finally, Abigail stands and watches as her mother carefully lifts the bird up, placing it in a paper towel as if dressing it in burial clothes, and allows it to disappear within the bag.

Her mother looks slightly shaky as if the dead bird is a tremendous weight to hold. "It's only a bird," she says as if to convince herself.

"But it died in our house," Abigail replies.

Her mother tries to answer, but she is suddenly crying. And it is the first time Abigail has seen her cry. Abigail takes the bag with the bird inside from her, setting it down on the floor. She hugs her mother, and her mother wraps her arms around her tightly. Holding on to her mother, Abigail feels like a child again, although, she thinks, it should be her crying, not her mother.

"I know, Mom," she says. "It's just a bird. Just a bird."

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Abigail hasn't spoken with her father since her grandmother's funeral. He had moved to New York after the divorce. He flew in for a few days then had left, saying he couldn't be out of the office long. He came despite her mother, who did not forbid him

from coming, but did not acknowledge his presence either. Her father calls one evening, asking her about what she has been up to. She mentions working at the bookstore, how boring it is, although the pay is alright. She thinks of Michael and that ill-fated night; she does not mention that to her father. But she wonders why she holds back. Maybe he could offer advice on how to deal with Michael now? She thinks all this, but she dismisses telling him. Of course, it would be awkward to talk about with him; she is sure her father wouldn't want to hear about her making out with some guy.

He then asks how her mother is holding up. She answers that she is doing fine and that she kind of shut off for a while there. And her father sighs into the receiver, and says that is how her mother deals with things. Closes off just like that, he says, but then he goes quiet. She wonders if that was how their marriage ended. If her mother just went silent and shut him out.

Abigail understands that the endings are easy to know, to figure out, because after the end there are the things which are left behind. After her parent's marriage was over things were left behind: some of her father's clothes, half empty bottles of his cologne, his favorite coffee still in the grinder, and a fading oil spot from his car in the driveway. All those things spoke to the end of a marriage. Abigail, too, felt at times as if she had been left behind. But what Abigail wonders about is the beginning of things. The first moment. The first look. But she believes that those moments of firsts can only be understood after they are over, and only then can one count backwards towards them.

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The first time Louise saw him happened like this: It was her first college class, an English Literature course. She had moved away from home, from the town she had lived

in her entire life. She had never really dated a boy before. None of the boys she knew back home held any interest for her; she had known them for so long that there was no chance of falling in love with them. She found it impossible to love something that she knew so well. At seventeen she had only gone out with one boy, but just before she dodged his kiss, she remembered the way he had cried on the first day of elementary school and could not take his advances seriously after that.

He sat next to her during class. He was cool and aloof. He was pale eyed and dark haired. He smiled at her briefly, too briefly, she thought, and turned to talk to a friend. Love was a gradual type of knowing for her. He made her feel uneasy. He kept sitting next to her for the rest of the semester, even though they barely spoke. She knew that when she sat next to him, she could not keep her limbs still, her hands moved on their own, smoothing her skirt, tucking away a piece of hair, her legs felt weak as if she had just sprinted a mile, and her eyes would drift toward him without her realizing it until she caught herself staring. She fell in love in small steps. For his part, she imagined that he knew exactly what he was doing. Knew that he had her already and all they had ever shared was a seat next to each other in English class as she would see him looking at her, knowing.

The first time they kissed happened like this: They were at a party together. She went outside to escape the crowded house; he followed her. They talked about small things: her classes, his job, the night air, and the dull party. Recklessness came over her, the desire to make him something more than just the boy who sat next to her. To herself she thought, *He's something that I want to make mine*. She was done with moving slowly, of waiting for him as he moved slowly. And it was not even a thought, no

decision was made, nothing calculated as she with one hand brought his face close and kissed him. With strange clarity and with a perfect sincerity after he kissed her back, he told her this: “We are going to break each other.”

When she meets her second husband for the first time, she will know that she will marry him the instant he says hello to her, if only because he would be the first man that did not remind her of her first husband in the slightest.

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So mother and daughter keep the secret, although Abigail imagines that it is harder for her mother. It is one thing for a granddaughter not to know her grandmother, an entirely different thing for a daughter not to know her mother. But it also makes Abigail question how well she knows her own mother. There are gaps in her knowledge. Things that she can't account for. How is she supposed to know about the things that came before her? It occurs to her in a way that it hadn't ever before that her mother had a life before Abigail had existed.

Abigail notices a light on the porch. She opens the front door to find her mother smoking in the dim shadows of evening. Her mother looks up sharply upon hearing her, takes a deep breath full of smoke.

“No complaints about this,” she says, indicating her cigarette. “I think I'm perfectly justified in having just one.”

Abigail answers, “I wasn't going to say anything. Even though you really shouldn't. You were doing so good.”

Her mother only shrugs in response. Abigail searches her face. As her mother inhales, dull light flickers over her features. She has never seen it before, but it comes to

her that her mother looks remarkably like her grandmother, specifically recalling a photograph of her grandmother in her twenties. They have the same sloping nose and high cheekbones. It's uncanny. The same shape of the eyelids, the same small bottom lip that often disappears under the top. Abigail tries to recall her own face. It must look like theirs, she is sure of it, although she used to be convinced she looked more like her father.

Finally, after the silence becomes uncomfortable, Abigail says the thing she came to ask her mother: "How did you meet Dad?"

Her mother knits her brows. "What's that?"

"I've never asked," Abigail says. "I never *thought* to ask before how you two met. I think I always assumed that you had always known each other. That there was never a time when you didn't. Never a time when you were strangers."

Her mother eyes her before answering. Abigail wonders what her mother sees in her, a hint of her grandmother, maybe. "I knew his brother first because your uncle was my age and your father was younger than me. We met at a party at their house," her mother says.

"Love at first sight?" Abigail asks.

"Hardly," she answers. "He was a more than a little full of himself then. And well, now too. One reason we are no longer together."

But she pauses; a small, gentle laugh comes from her. Abigail can tell that she is back at that party. Abigail can see it. Her father lounging on a sofa, his head nodding in rhythm with the music, a cigarette dangling loosely in his fingers, the smoke unfurling in the precise way her mother's is now, his face is clean shaven, gone is the moustache he started growing after she was born, he is lean and muscular, his hair is full and dark. He

would have been more than aware that he was good looking, but he would not have cared. That is the thing that her mother first found attractive about him; not his eyes or smile, but the carelessness that spoke to her about freedom and self-assurance. Only later would she begin to take that careless attitude as selfishness. But at the beginning there was only this: a careless young man, sitting on a sofa, looking like he could own the world if he wanted to, and a girl who spent the rest of the night watching him out of the corner of her eye, refusing to laugh at his jokes, delighting in the way he seemed off put that she paid him no attention, and wondering as she left when she would see him again.

“He was so young then,” her mother says. And Abigail needs for her to say nothing else.

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Abigail’s mother asks her why she thinks her grandmother put it in the suitcase. It is the first time that her mother has brought it up. The first time she has allowed herself to speak about it. Abigail is able to hide her shock as she ducks her head down and continues to wash the plate in her hand.

“I don’t know,” she answers. “And why did she put those other things in with it too? The rosary? And that postcard?”

Her mother says, “They must have meant something to her, I guess. The rosary makes sense, in a way. But the postcard, I don’t know what that could mean.”

Abigail hands the plate to her mother and she dries it off before putting it away. Abigail asks, “Did she ever mention New Orleans or traveling or anything?”

Her mother stands still and Abigail can see her mind searching, searching for a long lost mention, maybe a time when her grandmother let slip, anything, even the allusion to some memory.

“She never mentioned anything like it,” her mother says. “She never liked to travel, always refused to go anywhere. My Dad used to take me to visit his mother and she would never go with us. I never thought it was odd. It was just the way things were.”

Later that night, Abigail imagines if she would have asked her grandmother to tell her about the places she had been. Abigail would have asked, “What sights have you seen? What landmarks? What cities? What do you know of the world beyond this town?”

Her grandmother, with a smile, would have answered, “I’ve never been anywhere but here.”

Abigail would have presented her grandmother with the postcard and said, “But clearly you were not always here. You had to begin somewhere, even if you ended here.”

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In New Orleans, he bought Louise a postcard as a souvenir, which was all they could afford. It was a bird’s eye painting of Canal Street with small cars driving up and down it. And even tiny people walking the street. The buildings on either side of the street varied in size, some tall, some small, and large signs and advertisements hung off the sides of the buildings. Far in the distance, the blue of water could be seen. It was nothing like what she had seen of the city. The perspective was all wrong and the colors were too bright and the primary reds, yellows, and blues didn’t match with the colors she saw from her view from the sidewalk. The city in her mind was far more gray and white, like an old photo.

The motel room was small and dirty with shag carpet the color of concrete and heavy striped curtains. They had spent a week there on their honeymoon and only had enough money for one more night. Her parents didn't approve of him. She knew that by marrying him, she was losing them. They didn't have any plans beyond right now. *Beyond*, she thought. It was a feeling she was coming to love; the feeling of the unknown stretched out in front of her. A simple word, *beyond*, had become her life, the way they lived together. A world yawned open before her that she had not known was even there before.

He was already asleep when she crawled into bed next to him. She intertwined her legs with his, counted the breaths he took. Maybe, she thought, they could just stay here for a little while longer; there was no one calling them back home, no place that couldn't wait for them. He would be easy to convince, she knew, just a few more days, she would beg, and he would do anything for her. His skin was warm against her cool skin, and that was what she fell asleep thinking about.

Months from this moment, she would hate herself for not staying awake longer that night, for not making different plans, for not remembering how he felt next to her, for thinking the unknown a desirable thing. They spent a couple extra days in the city, sleeping in their car at night, and wandering the streets during the day. But life was calling them, dragging them forward. He called a friend of his who had offered him a job up north. And if only they had stayed right where they were that night in New Orleans, if only she could have changed their plans, told him not to take that job, he would still be alive. But always that road and that deer were waiting for him to arrive.

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Abigail sits in the car with her mother. They are parked in front of her grandmother's house. It is time that they put it on the market, something that her mother has been putting off because of the suitcase. But she can't afford the mortgage payment anymore. This is the closest that they both have gotten to the house since they moved the last furniture out two months ago and shut the door to the attic, leaving it up there alone. Her mother said she was finally ready to go back in there. But Abigail knows, as they have been sitting in the car for some time, that perhaps her mother isn't as ready as she thought.

"I'm thinking about quitting the bookstore," Abigail says to take their minds off what is waiting for them in the house.

Her mother turns towards her. "Why is that? I thought you were going to work up until you leave to go back to school in August. You'd be giving up a month's worth of money."

"I know," she says. "That's not really what I'm worried about."

"Then what are you worried about? I thought you didn't mind working there?"

Cool air blows on Abigail's face from the vents. She hadn't planned on telling her mother about Michael. Abigail had never been very open about things like that. Maybe out of embarrassment or from wanting to be secretive, she never talked to her mother about boys she had crushes on or boys she had kissed.

She says, "It's not the work itself so much as the people I work with. Or this one guy I work with it." And then she pauses, not really sure how to go on as words jumble around in her mouth. She suddenly feels hot in the face. She wonders why it is so hard sometimes to just be truthful, to let things out. "I kind of kissed him this one night when

we were out together,” she continues. “It was a mistake. I didn’t even really like him. I felt sorry for him. And I don’t know. I was thinking so much about the suitcase.”

“And what does the suitcase have to do with it? With this boy?”

“Nothing, everything,” Abigail answers, not sure how to explain herself. “I feel like if I had never known about the suitcase, I could have just been with him for the summer, had fun, and I would never have thought twice about it.”

Her mother is frowning at her, trying to understand. “But why can’t you do that now? Have fun for the summer? There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“But I was so careless with him, Mom. I knew he wanted something more from me that night, but it wasn’t something that I wanted. I just wanted to spend one night without thinking about it. I used him. Why would I do that?”

Her mother sighs. “Abigail, it’s not as if you set out to hurt him on purpose. I’m sure it just happened. And you weren’t really thinking straight. We were both in shock, I think.”

“After the kiss, I just kept thinking, what is the point of wasting time with him if it comes to nothing in the end? If I only barely liked him, then why bother at all?”

“You want to hold out for something more,” her mother says.

She wants a love like the one she imagines her grandmother had, something epic, something bigger than a summer fling. “Yeah, I guess I do,” Abigail says.

They sit together in the silence for a little while longer. And neither of them make a move to get out of the car and finally her mother says that maybe she is not ready after all. And Abigail tells her that it’s all right, and they will try again soon.

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Abigail quits her job at the bookstore. She tells Michael that she's giving her two week notice, but he tells her that isn't necessary. They have enough people to cover her shifts. He looks so relieved when she tells him that Abigail wishes she had quit earlier, ended the awkwardness sooner. As she leaves at the end of the day, she glances over to see him ringing up a customer. He does not look up at her and she leaves without saying goodbye, but she thinks it best that way. She has felt better about things after talking with her mother. She feels like she has released a breath she had been holding for far too long. It makes her think about the secret her grandmother kept, wonder if that is what it felt like for her all those years, like she was holding her breath for years. Abigail wonders, too, if her grandmother ever came close to telling someone, if she ever wanted to.

Abigail imagines the ways in which her grandmother would have told her the secret. Her grandmother would maybe have sat her down as a child, handed her a picture to color, and told her about the first love of her life as she knew that Abigail would never understand what she said. Or maybe when Abigail was older and found out what disappointment was for the first time, and her grandmother could have started the story in this way: "When I was a young girl, I fell in love..." And if her grandmother was still here, when Abigail could reassure her that she could indeed understand, she had experienced heartache and knew loss, her grandmother would tell her, "There are some things that must remain. There is no story for them to tell."

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The suitcase was there in the back of the closet, the perfect size. It was the only thing Louise could think of to do. She was tired, her body was weak and all her thoughts were dull and half formed from the pain and the shock. There was nothing else to bury

him in, but she could not bury him anyway. What was she to do, even if she could make a hole in the frozen ground, bury him like a dead animal? The rosary beads she received from her grandmother, she sat on top of the newspaper before she closed the lid, though it felt like a hollow gesture. She tucked the postcard in a pocket on the lid, something from his father that he could keep. She opened a window in the bedroom and the shock of cold air on her face numbed her mind even more. Drifts of snow fluttered in, landing on the carpet. She then sat the suitcase on the bed, and locked the door behind her, forgetting to close the window and through the long months of a long winter, she never went back into the room. And she almost froze in the house alone and did little more than pray for something she could not quite find the words for.

But she survived the winter, wasted away from lack of food. And the suitcase and the thing inside remained still and frozen and preserved by the cold. In the end she couldn't bear to look at the suitcase, but also couldn't bear to be far away from it.

Years and years from then, when she would feel her chest begin to hurt and her head begin to feel hazy, she would think back to that night, wish that she would had told someone about it, told her daughter at least, what a thing to leave as an inheritance. She would pray for more time, time to explain that she had no car to get to the hospital, the phone had been turned off weeks ago, there were no neighbors for miles, there was two feet of snow outside, there was nothing she could do, she had prayed he would not come this soon, months too soon, he never made a sound, never drew a first breath. But she would die alone in her house, her thoughts on what she kept always above her in the attic.

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It's what happens after that Abigail feels she will never understand. It is the known parts of her grandmother's life that now feel the least real. But the suitcase still remains; a tangible thing, a piece of a story, a thing capable of haunting.

Her mother says, "There's nothing else we can do with it."

She has decided at last where the suitcase will be moved: into their own attic. Abigail helps her move it. Her grandmother's house is eerie in its emptiness. The weight of the suitcase is surprising, so light as if it carried almost nothing. Abigail wonders at how such a small thing, so weightless, could weigh so much more on a person. But she feels relief at the fact that, unlike her grandmother, she does not have to bear it alone and neither does her mother. They at least have someone to tell the story to.

Abigail sits with her mother at the kitchen table. Her mother's face is drawn and pale.

"I keep wondering," her mother says, "who she was, how she could keep such a thing hidden for so long. There was always a remoteness to her that I couldn't ever explain to myself. I would walk into a room sometimes and she would just be sitting there, staring at nothing. When she noticed me she would frown at me as if she couldn't make out my face, like she didn't know me at all."

Abigail remains quiet, knowing it's something that she can't answer. All she can really do is tell her mother a story: Abigail's mother's mother fell in love with the right sort of guy, respectable and honest. They found each other when they were still in college. She was young and a little bit reckless, just the type to convince him to runaway with her. They married. They stopped in New Orleans for a while then moved to Nebraska. When she found herself pregnant, they were both filled with joy. He was

driving home one night and hit a deer and was killed. The grief was too much for her, the baby was born premature, and that was all.

If her grandmother could have told her own story it would have happened like this: She fell in love with a loving, honest man. They ran away together, took a road trip around the country. He proposed in an old motel room with a ring that had belonged to his mother. A month later she got pregnant with their first child, a son. Later, they had a second child, a daughter. Her two children grew up together; she and her husband grew old. They knew nothing of tragedy or secrets or dead things kept in suitcases.

But the truth is her story didn't happen like that at all.

## The Writing of *We Once Lived in Caves and Other Stories*

### I.

While writing a majority of these short stories, I was not aware that they would become a cohesive collection. I was simply writing one story, meeting workshop deadlines, and then moving on to the next. I had always planned on writing a novel of some kind for my thesis, but short story ideas kept getting in the way of that. One after one, short story ideas would inevitably come to me, and the more I wrote the further from that novel I got. And the short story form itself was something that I felt I was getting closer to understanding with each new story. Not that the writing of the stories became easier, but with each story I learned something new about writing itself, and what makes a good short story. In one story I would learn something about writing characters, and in the next I would learn something about structure. In the end, I am not at all disappointed that I never got around to starting a novel as now I have all the short stories in this collection.

Although these single stories were not written with the idea in mind that they would one day be a collection, I realize now that they all contain echoes and parallels to each other. It wasn't until I started thinking about the story order for the collection did I learn that the stories that I once thought had no similar themes or ideas or voices actually did share things in common. The ordering of the collection came quite naturally for me.

The first three stories (“We Once Lived in Caves,” “Love & Black Holes,” and “The Pretty Fall”) all share a similar voice and tone and use magical elements. The middle two stories (“Cerberus” and “when we still had the rest of our lives”) act as a bridge between these fairy tale influenced stories and the more traditional stories of the second half. While these two bridge stories contain fairy tale, mythical, and almost magical elements, they on the whole are more traditional, realist stories like the final three stories of the collection that focus more on the theme of family (“The Outlaw Cordelia Powell,” “When the House Burns Down,” and “The History of Dead Things”).

The larger theme that emerged in the collection is the theme of story itself. For me, the backbone of this collection is the idea of how stories and storytelling in all their different forms fill our lives. My characters have the desire to tell their own stories, while others long to know the stories of their families. In other stories, story in the form of fairy tales and myths echo the events happening in characters’ lives. In a short story by Sherman Alexie entitled “What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona,” the character of Thomas Builds-the-Fire functions as the tribal storyteller, a role he has given himself. Yet the characters in the story, especially his former friend, Viktor, find him and his storytelling obnoxious, and they refuse to stop and listen to him anymore. The main action of the story centers on Viktor and Thomas Builds-the-Fire traveling to Arizona to retrieve the ashes of Viktor’s father. Thomas Builds-the-Fire, through the stories he tells about Viktor’s father, is able to help Viktor deal with the death of his father as well as his issues about being abandoned by him. At the end of the trip, Thomas Builds-the-Fire asks in return that Viktor stops and listens just once to a story. Explaining his need to tell stories, Thomas Builds-the-Fire says the following:

We are all given one thing by which our lives are measured, one determination. Mine are stories which can change or not change the world. It doesn't matter as long as I continue to tell the stories. ... I have only my stories which came to me before I even had the words to speak. I learned a thousand stories before I took my first thousand steps. They are all I have. It's all I can do. (384)

The idea present in Thomas Builds-the Fire's words here and in the rest of the story touch on not only the importance of listening to stories, but of telling stories. I myself feel a kinship to Thomas Builds-the-Fire; I too feel that telling stories is a part of me. Thomas Builds-the-Fire has been tasked to tell stories, even in the face of people who do not believe in their importance. But I, like him, believe that telling stories is important, not only to the individual, but to the great wide world. Through the act of storytelling we gain knowledge. By telling stories, we learn things about ourselves. We learn the truth about our own beliefs. And by listening to stories, we learn something about the one telling it and hopefully, if we listen closely, we learn something new about the world itself. In this collection, either big or small, the concept of stories and storytelling factors into every piece. As I go through each story in the collection, I will touch on the different ways story functions in each story.

## II.

The opening story of which the collection is named for is called "We Once Lived in Caves." The idea for the story grew out of a news program I had watched some time before. It was a story about a group of people who would sneak into peoples' homes when they left for work. I have a clear image in my head of one scene in which a girl hid

behind a bush as a car pulled out of a driveway and when the garage door was closing, she slipped inside. I found the idea that someone could be living there in your house without your knowledge both intriguing and disturbing. My intention with the story was to take a practical approach to how someone could really get away with this, so the “you” voice emerged in which I could create a narrator-type voice that could inform the reader about what to do and what not to do when living in someone else’s house. The voice of the piece was also influenced by the Kelly Link story “The Girl Detective.” Although the story is told in first person, the narrator is allowed to exist outside the story, acting as omniscient storyteller. Link does not fully develop the narrator, instead the reader is given sparse facts about the narrator; that he had a relationship with the girl detective, that he likes food made by other people, and that he now follows the girl detective. The narrator from this distance is able to tell the story of the mysterious girl detective:

I am detecting the girl detective. I sit in a tree across the street from her window, and this is what I see. The girl detective goes to bed hungry, but she eats our dreams while we are asleep. She has eaten my dreams. She has eaten your dreams, one after the other, as if they were grapes or oysters. (242)

Link creates an imaginative, magical feel to the story through this voice. Through the narrator’s description of the girl detective, the reader can only get glimpses of her, can only know parts of her. And the narrator affords the girl detective with magic, like in the quote above when the narrator believes she eats dream, so the reader views her in the same way. I wanted to use the same effect in this story, but with a third person narrator that stands a little bit above the action of the story and is able to be something of a

storyteller. This way the narrator is able to offer information about Amelia, that may or may not be true, and can narrate the action of the story without being a character in the story. The omniscient narrator in my story also imbues Amelia with a sense of magic as it feels like they are situating the reader in a fairy tale of some kind.

With the idea planted about the premise of the story, the character of Amelia emerged. The first information I wrote about Amelia was the “Facts about Amelia as we know them” section. Even though she is present in the opening paragraphs of the story, I wanted to keep her at arm’s length from the reader to mirror the idea of someone unknown living in their house. Amelia is a character that they know is there, yet there is still some mystery about her. The “Facts about Amelia as we know them” section functions as character development in some ways, but the intention was to also raise more questions from the reader in regards to who exactly Amelia really is. The one trait that emerged from Amelia that really served to define her was that she was lonely. Living unknown in other people’s houses was essentially like not existing at all, and to accentuate that idea Amelia needed a parallel in the character of Peter. Although he does not live in someone else’s house, the way he lives is similar to Amelia. There is an instant connection between them, but it is only when Amelia starts living in his house does she recognize the same loneliness in him that is in her.

I believe that every story in some way needs for something to change, whether that is a change within a character or a change in the situation of a character. For this story the change comes from within Amelia as for the first time she feels the desire to let herself be known and to more importantly tell her own story. When she paints the images on Peter’s wall, it is the best way she knows how to tell the story of who she is and what

she does. She draws a figure of a girl and places that girl into a house. I think that in all of us there exists this desire to tell the story of ourselves, to let someone know and understand us. The change in Amelia comes in the form of storytelling. She breaks the most important rule of living in these houses unknown by making herself known. And she does that through telling Peter her own story.

“Love & Black Holes” was the last story to be written for the collection. A previous version of the story was written with the character of Penny as a child in which a black hole forms in her closet. However, this first draft was not working on many different levels. Its biggest flaw was that the metaphor for the black hole was sketchy at best. But while writing that early version an idea occurred to me: What if Penny was to push someone into the black hole? This idea never manifested as it seemed wrong to me somehow for a child to be pushing someone into a black hole. While I gave up on the first version, I was determined to write a story about a black hole with someone being pushed into said black hole. But I also wanted the story to be about love. So Penny became Penelope, the adult who was now in a relationship with Oliver, which wasn’t going very well for either of them. The black hole then became the metaphor for this damaged relationship.

A story that I wanted to model “Love & Black Holes” on was “The Rememberer” by Aimee Bender. A woman’s boyfriend, Ben, undergoes a process of reverse evolution in the story. The narrator explains that her boyfriend one day had become an ape, then the next he was a turtle, and by the end of the story he has become a salamander. In explaining Ben’s character, the narrator comments that Ben was always sad and that

sadness pervaded their relationship. Beneath the metaphor of the reverse evolution, the story creates another layer, which is that this relationship is not a healthy one. At the end of the story, the narrator releases Ben the salamander into the ocean and says,

This is the limit of my limits: here it is. You don't ever know for sure where it is and then you bump against it and bam, you're there. Because I cannot bear to look down into the water and not be able to find him at all, to search the tiny clear waves with a microscope lens and to locate my lover, the one-celled wonder, bloated and bordered, brainless, benign, heading clear and small like an eye-floater into nothingness. (7)

She is not strictly talking about just letting go of Ben the salamander but is expressing the idea that she has to let go of the entire relationship. “Love & Black Holes” is meant to work very similarly to “The Rememberer.” There is never any question in the Aimee Bender story that Ben is suffering from reverse evolution, and in mine I did not want the reader to question whether the black hole was really there; it is. The story then becomes about not if these magical things are happening, but why they are happening. Then underneath the magical element of the black hole, there is the undercurrent of what the black hole means for Penelope; the end of her relationship with Oliver.

Although “Love & Black Holes” is not outwardly about storytelling like other stories in the collection, there was a conscious move on my part to have an allusion to the character of Penelope from *The Odyssey* working within the story. The most obvious allusion is to how Penelope in *The Odyssey*'s keeps her suitors at bay by promising to marry when she finishes weaving Odysseus' burial shroud, yet she undoes every night the work she has done by day. My Penelope engages in a similar act, this time undoing all

the knitting she has done on a blanket she planned to give to Oliver once he came home. Allusions by definition are references to other stories, and what those references do is add another layer to the present story. Allusions enrich the story being told as they inherently carry their own meaning. In this case, the allusion to Penelope of The Odyssey adds another layer to Penelope of “Love & Black Holes.” By using the same name and same detail of the unweaving, my Penelope is enriched by the Penelope that came before her. The waiting that my Penelope undergoes is not simply a girlfriend waiting around for her boyfriend to come home from tour, but carries in it the story of another Penelope, bravely waiting for her own husband to come home from war. However, I did want to subvert the original story of Penelope and Odysseus to cast a different meaning on to it. In “Love & Black Holes” my intention was to show the sadness and desperation in the simple act of waiting. It is not questioned in The Odyssey that Penelope does the right thing by waiting and undoing her work; in literature she is the symbol of the ever faithful wife. Yet for my Penelope, waiting and undoing her work is not the right thing for her to do. I always thought the story of Penelope in The Odyssey was a sad one; she is a character that must remain stagnant, neither able to go back or go forward as she is tasked to wait. And that was something I wanted my Penelope to be; a character that is unable to change her life or herself and ends up literally trapped in a black hole where nothing can ever change.

“The Pretty Fall” began with my desire to write about circus life in some way, although I did not want to write about the typical circus atmosphere of big top tents and elephants. Instead, I settled on the idea of the tightrope walker as that figure was able to transcend that circus environment while still capturing the magic of it. When the

tightrope walker steps outside of the big top, they carry with them the magic of the circus, yet all a tightrope walker really needs to perform is the rope. I wanted to capture a similar feeling that Peter Carey's story "The Last Days of a Famous Mime" has. Carey's story is able to avoid all the clichés that come with the idea of a mime and their performances. In the story the Mime is able to mime incredible things such as love and laughter and regret. In one he is "asked to describe death" and "he busied himself taking photographs of his questioners" (52). The story also takes on a mournful tone as often the Mime's performances fail and do not live up to expectations, yet the story also has a humorous tone that balances that sadness. Finally, he is "asked to describe a river" so "he drowned himself in it" (53). In the story, the humor is there to hold the sadness in sharp contrast. I wanted to capture a similar tone in my story. I think that by mixing humor and sadness, it makes the sadness easier to bear in some way. An example is the first paragraph of the piece that focuses in on The Tightrope Artist's ankles. I was able to add some humor in the sense of naming her ankle bones by their scientific names and listing the names of the Gods that "you" is praying to, yet that light tone is tempered by the fact that The Tightrope Artist has already begun to take her long fall off the rope.

I began writing the story in second person, although I was not settled on how the "you" would function in the story. It wasn't until I reached the middle of the story when The Tightrope Artist leaves her husband over her belief that he wants to stifle her art by having a normal life that the "you" began to emerge as not just a narrative element, but a character also. I realized through the writing of the story that the "you" was actually The Tightrope Artist herself. Through numerous revisions, I have had to give the readers the clues they need to figure this out, without coming out and stating it for them. The dual

character of “you” and The Tightrope Artist function as a comment on the nature of the relationship between an artist and their art. The “you” in my story created The Tightrope Artist and was eclipsed by her. While the “you” loves her art, loves walking the tightrope, she gives up parts of herself in order to better serve that love. And I leave it up to the reader to decide whether her choice of art over the love she has for her husband and family is the right one. The “you” is able to invent her own story, which is a form of storytelling itself. In the section about her origins, she tells of learning to walk the rope while living in a commune of Hippies, but in reality as it is hinted at in the piece she had a normal childhood in Kansas. Her art form is not only her ability to walk the tightrope, but her ability to create a second self.

The structure and tone of the piece was also modeled off “The Girl Detective,” which I have previously discussed. That story is told in sections with heading that do not simply act as titles but add to the voice of the piece:

**The girl detective is looking for her mother.**

The girl detective has been looking for her mother for a long time. She doesn’t expect her mother to be easy to find. After all, her mother is also a master of disguises. If we fail to know the girl detective when she comes to find us, how will the girl detective know her mother? (251)

The headings help narrate and focus the story, which is made up of these different sections that touch on different aspects of the girl detective’s character and her quest to find her mother. Besides adding structure to the story, they also add a lighter tone to the story as in the above example the headings humorously interact with what comes after. In “The Pretty Fall,” I wanted to achieve the same effect with the headings. I wanted them

to add another layer to the story in terms of tone and humor instead of just marking transitions from one section to another. The headings also serve to give the piece a narrative voice that has some distance from the story itself as the headings act as observations sometimes about the Tightrope Artist and are able to give insights into her.

### III.

Beginning the bridge of the collection is the shortest piece, “when we still had the rest of our lives.” This story has a multitude of beginnings as it is a story that was created out of bits and pieces of writings that I had abandoned. I had a piece entitled “when we still had the rest of our lives” that was never completed, which was about a woman whose husband, a soldier, is injured and is now in a comma. Originally in a longer version of the story, the wife does a lot of driving to and from the hospital, which dragged the story along at a slow pace. A suggestion I received from workshop was to either make the story longer or shorter; I really liked the idea of making it shorter as that would allow me to pace the story differently. So I went through the story cutting the filler of the wife driving here and there which left vignettes of more striking images: the lighthouse, the billionaire and his plane, the cave, and the haircut.

I set the story in upstate California in the real place of Crescent City. Having never been to the west coast, I ended up googling images of Crescent City itself and places around the area like Cave Junction that appears in the story. I came across a photo of a lighthouse located in the city; a lonely looking building situated on a juttied little piece of land. It seemed the perfect place to establish their relationship and the situation the couple was in (about to be married, the husband about to be deployed) as the

lighthouse paralleled the loneliness and desperation of that the couple would soon experience. The scene in the cave also served to reinforce the isolation of the couple as he is now lost to her, and she is lost to him within the silence of his comma. The element of the woman dreaming of the billionaire in the experimental plane existed before the main story. It was a couple of paragraphs that never went anywhere about a woman linking the event of the billionaire's plane crashing to something that happened in her own life. I never got around to figuring what exactly she was linking the plane crash to, but then reading over it with the story of this couple in mind I knew what that second event was; the husband's helicopter crashing a world away. As for the hair cutting scene that, too, was an unfinished, half-formed idea; that of a couple being forced to separate against their will. That theme carried easily into the story I was putting together, and the hair cutting scene served to add the idea that these two people were going to be changed by his deployment and his injury against their wills.

The structure of the story is somewhat influenced by Tobias Wolff's short story "Bullet in the Brain" in the sense that in that story a man, Anders, is shot in the head, yet the story carefully chooses details that illuminate Anders as a character. I was aiming for a more image driven effect, but I intended for the story like Wolff's to have an almost episodic feel to it. Wolff's story traces through all the things that Anders does not remember and in the end settles on the one thing he does: "This is what he remembered: Heat. A baseball field. Yellow grass. The whirr of insects, himself leaning against a tree as the boys of the neighborhood gather for a pickup game" (161). More than anything, Anders remembers the way a cousin of his friend's says, "'Short's the best position they is'" (161). As the bullet travels through his brain, Wolff writes that it will "leave the

troubled skull behind, dragging its comet's tail of memory and hope and talent and love into the marble hall of commerce," although "for now Anders can still make time. Time for the shadows to lengthen on the grass, time for the tethered dog to bark at the flying ball, time for the boy in right field to smack his sweat-blackened mitts and softly chant, They is, they is, they is." (161). Wolff spends more time on this moment as it is the most important in the story. And the beauty of the moment is seen through Wolff's language here, which is more poetic than what has come before. And the moment itself is one of beauty as it is the one moment in Anders' life where he found pure joy out of just hearing two words. In "when we still had the rest of our lives," I wanted to achieve the same sense of beauty that is found in simple moments that also carry a sense of dread with them. The moment of Anders remembering the moment of hearing the boy say "They is" is marked with the dread that the bullet will quickly be ending his life and this memory. In various scenes, my characters have moments of foresight. The woman says, "You'll write me a letter about this day three months from now. You'll be somewhere that's nothing but sand and ash and you'll long for the ocean and lighthouses ... and a time when we still had the rest of our lives and we lived on the verge of things only, not in the midst." And the husband has a similar moment in the caves when he comments that he will think of that day while in the hospital. These moments are meant to be ambiguous in nature. I wanted the reader to wonder whether those things were really said then or are something that the couple has added to their memories of the events. Overall, like Wolff's story, I wanted mine to both contain moments of beauty marked by the reality of something darker.

The story of “Cerberus” acts as another transition piece in the collection. While it is a more traditional story like the ones that follow it, it also plays off the ideas of fairy tales and myths like the stories that came before it. The origin of “Cerberus” was very simple. Someone told me a story about how when they lived in upstate New York, they had a dog that would bring them dead deer. With those words an image came to mind of a woman opening her backdoor to find a dead deer in the snow. I thought that it would be a small story that would center on that image. Yet, the more I wrote of the story, the further away I seemed to get from that initial image, although it would remain as the final scene of the story. I had a hard time beginning the story. I settled early on that Rebekah would be pregnant with a dead husband. As I knew a dog would be in the story, I wrote Rebekah’s disastrous first introduction to Cerberus, but then I stopped, not knowing where to go from there. After a lot of frustration, I decided to try a different direction, and I wrote the line, “Remember that old saying: Beware the wolf in sheep’s clothing; the many warnings in the Bible to beware the wolf amongst you.” Following that the strange dream of Rebekah’s with her husband pulling of a wolf’s head came into being, and I had what I needed to delve in as I now had a voice in which to tell the story. I began thinking of all the wolf references in literature and realized that there was a lot to pull from: Little Red Riding Hood, the boy who cried wolf, the Shoshoni legend, and Cerberus, the guardian of the underworld from which the dog’s name would come.

The use of these fairy tales and myths I found had many purposes. I set out to use the fairy tales and myths to first set the tone of the story, which is slightly ominous and dark. For example, Little Red Riding Hood in its original form has the great gory detail of the wolf being cut open and stuffed with stones. A similar tone is found in Anthony

Doerr's story, "The Hunter's Wife," which is able to mix beauty with the brutality of nature. After a harsh winter the Hunter and his Wife come up on a dead heron "frozen by its ankles into the ice. It had tried to hack itself out, hammering with its first at the ice entombing its feet then at its own thin scaly legs. When it finally dies, it died, upright, wings folded back, beak parted in some final, desperate cry, legs rooted like twin reeds in ice" (50). In this description, Doerr is able to capture a startling, dark image of a bird frozen dead in the ice, yet there is also something beautiful about it as his word choice paints it as a poetic image. That same mix of beauty and harsh reality is what the fairy tales and myths add to the story. The combination of beauty and reality, I find, serves to remind us that we are never that far away from tragedy, and that the line between life and death is a fine one. In Doerr's story, the Wife learns, "there was a fine line between dreams and wakefulness, between living and dying, a line so tenuous it sometimes didn't exist" (61). In the end, that same beauty and death found in the fairy tales and myths seeps into the main story as Rebekah struggles with the death of her husband, Cerberus presents Rebekah with the deer head, and Cerberus adds a level of violence to the story. I wanted the fairy tales and myths to parallel what was happening in the story proper, too. So Little Red Riding Hood helps to develop Rebekah's fear of being pregnant as she dreams she is the one being stuffed with rocks. They also serve to situate Cerberus as a mystical figure himself as he is a part of a long line of stories about wolves. The fairy tales and myths further ask the reader to decide whether Cerberus is as evil as those other wolves in the stories or whether he, like some wolves in those legends, is treated poorly.

I wanted the relationship between Rebekah and Cerberus to drive the piece. In the beginning, Rebekah is a new widow and is still very much encompassed in grief, so at

this point I wanted Cerberus to have more control in the relationship. Cerberus, thinking he is in charge, does what he wants, and Rebekah fails at any attempt to get him to do what she wants him to do. Slowly, however, their relationship begins to change as Rebekah gains more agency. Cerberus begins listening to her commands and takes more of a submissive role as she begins to accept her pregnancy and the death of her husband. I knew from the beginning that Cerberus couldn't and wouldn't stay; he was always going to leave that deer as a final parting gift. In order for Rebekah to move on completely, Cerberus had to leave. I see his role as something similar to that of his namesake; he was the guardian of the underworld, deeply connected with her husband, and waiting at the gates to the underworld is a place that Rebekah can't be.

Another theme I wanted to develop in the story was that of family building. In an earlier draft of the story, there is no John, and Rebekah in consequence spent a lot of time alone. I felt that Rebekah needed someone to interact with, so John entered the story. I imagine that they did not have a close relationship when Rebekah's husband was alive. They are thrown together now out of some kind of obligation to each other and Rebekah's husband. And what I wanted to explore through them was the idea of what do you do when things don't work out the way that you had imagined. For both of them, the death of Rebekah's husband leaves them struggling with what to do with their lives. As Rebekah thinks in the story when watching John and her mother put together the crib, "It was not what was supposed to be, but it was what she had." What Rebekah and John then build together is a family of their own making.

#### IV.

“The Outlaw Cordelia Powell” started with the idea of two brothers getting into a fight. Before beginning the actual writing of the story, I thought a lot about which perspective I wanted to tell the fight from. I felt telling the story from either brother’s perspective didn’t offer enough ambiguity or complexity. If either brother was the main character, then the story would be too focused on the fight and explaining the character motivation behind it. What I needed was a character that could experience the fight, but a character that I could also keep at a distance and that is how the character of Cordelia came into being. Cordelia allowed me to explore the idea of the two brothers fighting, but she also gave me the opportunity to open up the story. With her as my main character, the story could be about her witnessing a fight between her father and uncle, but it could also be about other things.

I remembered a story by Anthony Doerr called “So Many Chances” in which a young girl, Dorotea, moves to a new town with her mother and father. The heart of that story lies in the relationship between the daughter and father, although Doerr does not focus exclusively on that relationship. Instead, Dorotea develops a relationship with a city boy and a local fisherman. Her relationship with the city boy and her father mirror each other as they both let her down in the end; the boy leaves and Dorotea learns that her father has been lying to her about his job as a janitor as she thought he was building ships. On the other hand, her relationship with the fisherman offers her agency as he teaches her how to fish. All these different relationships add up to give Dorotea a better understanding of herself. With “The Outlaw Cordelia Powell” I wanted Cordelia to experience different relationships that all somehow give her a greater understanding of

herself. So not only does Cordelia struggle with the relationship she has with her father, she also enters into a romance with Nathan. Like Dorotea, I wanted to surround Cordelia with masculine relationships that could help her figure out her own role in life. As she hasn't had much contact with her father, her main parent relationship has been her mother, so she is thrown into this masculine world. In the end, while Cordelia doesn't come to understand her father completely or why the fight happened, she is able to change the way she reacts to her father. In the final scene, she communicates with her father and forms a connection with him.

When writing Cordelia's relationship with Nathan, I wanted to avoid all the clichés and stereotypes of a teenage romance. Ron Carlson's story "Keith," while being about a teenage boy with cancer that courts the popular girl in high school, is able to transcend the stereotypical teenage romance clichés. One way he does that is by taking familiar characters and putting them in unfamiliar situations. The familiar characters then become unique as the unfamiliar situations bring out nuances of their characters. For example, as a date Keith takes Barbara to the hospital where they change into pajamas and walk sadly down the hallways, only so they can buy a pack of gum in the gift shop. When they get back to the truck, they kiss for the first time. Their physical closeness is a result of sharing this strange moment in the hospital. But Carlson's story, while having comical moments, contains a lot of heart and sadness as well. In real life, my grandfather did actually manage the Dalton Gang Museum in Kansas and I specifically set the story there in order for Cordelia and Nathan to go there. Not only does it give them an interesting, slightly strange place to interact, but also through the story of Dalton Brothers it has resonance to Cordelia's struggle to understand her father. The story of the Dalton

Brothers is meant to add layers in the piece, which is what the addition of stories within stories can do. For one, it gives Cordelia some insight into the relationship between brothers, which is something she is only just starting to understand. It also allows for character development with Nathan as his admiration for what the brothers did for each other speaks to his desire for that kind of relationship with family, which he doesn't have, hence his signing up for the army in order to belong to something. I set another scene at a small cove, where the jump of a small cliff, also a real place. Overall, the setting where Cordelia and Nathan's relationship happens allows their story to be more unique.

“When the House Burns Down” evolved from an earlier story that is quite different from this final version. In that story, two sisters mourned the loss of their mother and there was a wild fire. That story, however, wasn't working on many different levels, but I had written a great final paragraph for that story that I didn't want to give up on. At the same time, I had only ever really written stories with one main character, so I wanted to attempt a story that focused on more than one character. The story I thought of was the Ron Hansen piece “Wickedness,” in which a brutal snowstorm affects the lives of numerous characters. Hansen is able to create striking images and characters in a somewhat limited amount of space as in almost every paragraph a new character is introduced and the way they experience the harsh snowstorm is always different. But that snowstorm links all these characters together as they all suffer from it in one way or another. I wanted to achieve a similar effect with “When the House Burns Down,” so the two sisters became two unrelated characters, one a young girl mourning the loss of her mother, the other an older woman mourning the eventual loss of her house. The wild fire

became the thread that linked these two characters, yet I wanted them to react differently to the impending fire. I intended for the story to feel episodic in the same way that Hansen's story is. I look at each character section as a sort of vignette. And I wanted each section to be very visual in a way that played off of the wildfire, so I choose to describe things in colors of red and gold. I was inspired to set the story in California after looking at pictures of wildfires. There were beautiful images; one an orange sun set against the glow of the fire and one in particular of a horse darkly silhouetted against an orange sky. In earlier versions of the story, Anna and Emily were the only characters, but something wasn't quite working within the story. The themes in the story I wanted to work with weren't coming across as much as I intended. Mulling the story over, I knew that I wanted it to not just be about this wildfire, but about how the generations that came before us affect our present day lives. It was then I had the idea to actually show those past generations as real characters in the story. It was an obvious choice to bring Anna's mother to life by giving Maria her own story. To understand Anna's grief and why she is so ready to give up her home, understanding the relationship or lack of relationship she had with her mother was important. And since Maria is known to be dead through Anna's sections, there is an inherent poignancy and tragedy to Maria's story as the reader already knows what will happen to her. Maria allows the reader to understand Anna's love for horses, but more importantly gives insight to how Anna is affected by the wild fire. Having experienced loss before, it is easier for her to let go in some respects; for her the ranch is just that, a ranch, it's what she carries in her memory that is more important.

On the other hand, there is Emily, who is more attached to her house. To further explore why she is that way I introduced the character of Cecily, Emily's great

grandmother. Through Cecily the reader learns that the family has a long history in that place and they can then better understand why Emily refuses to leave because of that history. But I did not want Cecily and Emily to be similar characters. For me Cecily is more like Anna, ready to let go of things, knowing that everything has an ending. While Emily and Maria have more in common, both wanting to hold on to things they can't; Emily and her house, and Maria and her life. In terms of story, I view family history as a type of story in itself. We are at times so marked by what came before us and we are in essence a part of a long story that stretches back generations. In "When the House Burns Down," I wanted the reader to get glimpses of the history of the characters and actually tell the stories of multiple generations.

Last in the collection is the story "The History of Dead Things." The idea for this story was born out of a real event. Some years ago there was a news story about a woman who found a mummified baby inside a suitcase in her mother's storage locker, which the woman had no idea about. I remember hearing the story and asking myself, What would bring someone to do that? And in an earlier version of the story that is the question that I sought to answer, but the story was lacking after that draft. But while writing it, I realized that the story really wasn't about the baby in the suitcase or how it got there. So in further revisions, the story became less about the baby and more about the idea that we can never really know someone's story unless they tell us. In that first version the mother was the main character, dealing with finding out this secret her own mother had kept from her, and the daughter was thinly present. But I needed more distance from the baby in the suitcase, so I decided to make the daughter, Abigail, the main character. Not only could

Abigail deal with the revelation about her grandmother, but she could question her own relationship with her mother; having Abigail as the main character also allowed me to play with the idea that we can't really know who our parents were before they had us. While revising the story, I was reading the Steven Millhauser's story "The Room in the Attic," which I found helped me with Abigail's character. In the Millhauser story, a boy meets the sister of a friend who lives in a darkened attic. Throughout the story is the mystery as to whether or not that girl is real as the boy never sees her and only touches her fleetingly. The boy is soon obsessed with the attic and the girl to the point where he loses interest in his friends, family, and job. As he says,

At times it seemed to me that I inhabited two worlds: a sunny and boring day-world that had nothing to do with Isabel. And a rich night-world that was all Isabel. I soon saw this division was false. ...No the real division was between the visible world and that other world, where Isabel waited for me like a dark dream. (63)

The boy's life is divided into these two things: his life outside of the attic, and his life inside it. When revising "The History of Dead Things," I wanted Abigail to experience that same level of obsession with the suitcase that the boy has for Isabel and the attic. Like the boy, Abigail loses interest in her own life and the suitcase becomes all consuming, affecting her relationship with her mother and the other characters in the story. Like the boy in Millhauser's story who while being a fully realized character, remains somewhat vague, I didn't want to delve too far into other aspects of Abigail's life beyond the suitcase.

Perhaps more than any other piece in this collection, “The History of Dead Things” is about storytelling. Abigail throughout the story is struggling to find a way to tell not only her own story, but the story of her grandmother. The sections that tell the story of the grandmother are coming from Abigail, although I do not explicitly reveal that. The bits and pieces are Abigail’s way of writing her grandmother’s story as she can never know for sure how the baby ended up in the suitcase, why her grandmother kept it, or what lead to her grandmother having the baby in the first place. Her grandmother’s story is lost unless Abigail gives her one, whether it is true or not matters very little. But the finding of the suitcase also makes Abigail question how well she knows her mother’s story. A pivotal scene in the story is when Abigail asks her mother how she met her father. It highlights the importance of asking others to tell us their story, but also the importance of telling others those stories.

V.

For the longest time, I felt uncomfortable calling myself a writer. The word ‘writer’ was a distant concept, the names on the front cover of a books and the creators of classical literature. ‘I’m not a writer,’ I would say, ‘I just write,’ believing there was a distinction. It wasn’t that I thought I was bad at writing, although I’ve had my fair share of doubts and lack of confidence that any writer is bound to experience on occasion. Not being able to apply the word writer to myself went deeper than just lacking the confidence to call myself that. Naming yourself as a writer is defining what that heart of you is. I think that more than anything the thought of being a writer frightened me. I understood that being a writer is not like any other profession or job. It’s not something

that you slip in and out of. It is who you are, not just what you do for a living. I knew that there was nothing easy about being a writer, no guarantees of success or recognition, and the act of writing itself is hard work. So why on earth would I want to be a writer? But the answer to that was very simple. It was because there is nothing else that I would rather be. And when I knew that, I knew it was time to overcome all those fears and reservations, and call myself what I am.

I write because I live in the world and it gives me such great things to write about. Ideas come from everywhere. I am always open, on the lookout for anything and everything that has the potential to be turned into a story. When I think back on where certain stories came from, what the initial spark was, it's always different. "Cerberus" came from a single image, "The History of Dead Things" from a news story. Every time that something strikes me as beautiful, odd, or disturbing, something that I want to explore or understand better, I need to write about it.

I write, too, because there are things in the world that I don't understand yet. In an interview, J.K. Rowling touched on this idea that writers write to understand: "And I think that, this is probably true of all writers, but sometimes I know what I believe because of what I have written. Oddly, if you'd asked me before I wrote it 'what did I believe' I maybe couldn't have told you." The things I know for sure in life, I have learned through writing. I have learned what grief is through Rebekah in "Cerberus," and I have learned that we must tell our stories through the grandmother in "The History of Dead Things," and I learned how wrong love can go through Penelope in "Love & Black Holes." Writing for me is a constant movement toward understanding not only myself and what I believe, but understanding the people and the world around me.

And I write because I simply love telling stories.

I realize now that whether I could call myself that or not, I've always been a writer. Looking back, I marvel at how long it took me to come to that revelation. I'm a writer. I can say it now as it's something that I've always been. It's what I've chosen to be. Writing is ingrained in me. And even if I wanted to, I can't ever stop being a writer. It's a compulsion. I must write. I must write because I'm not happy when I'm not in the process of writing something. I must write because I have an overactive imagination and need an outlet. I must write because nothing challenges me in the same way. I always want to be writing, whether it is starting a brand new story or revising an old one. I constantly need my brain to be working and thinking, inventing characters, arranging sentences, piecing together dialogue, building images with words. I must continue to write because there are still so many things out there I want to know.

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