UNCLEAN SLATES: STORIES

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*Unclean Slates: Stories* is a collection of seven short stories that comments on the nature of family ties, and how such ties help form a sense of identity. Each story focuses on a separate protagonist, all of whom strive for a new beginning or an escape from some aspect of their current lives. The short story cycle of this collection is held together not by place or characters, but ultimately by the theme of wishing for a new beginning: they share a desire to fix some dissatisfying element of their lives. Mostly from the point of view of blue-collar characters leading mundane middle-class lives, these stories provide commentary on what it means to run from the conditions that make up one’s sense of identity. Most of the revelations formed throughout these stories lead to a sense of acceptance of these conditions, and an understanding that family and history make up part of human consciousness. While the specific locations presented in these stories are not necessarily the same, each story seeks to focus on a location that proves to be fundamental to the makeup of the protagonist. The cities and geographic locations themselves are not as important as the specifics: the schools, diners, lakes, and so forth where these characters find themselves contemplating their disillusionment about where their lives have brought them. Facing everything from post-partum depression to simply missing out on a career opportunity, these characters all experience a sense of loss that brings them together in a way that is recognizable to the reader as the collection progresses.
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MAKINGS OF MOTHERHOOD

Discovery Garden Montessori looks quiet from where Connie sits in the manufactured heat of her SUV. The red brick structure stands alone, aside from a scattering of parked cars in the faculty parking lot and a few large, leafless pecan trees, their limbs blackened from the cold and damp. Connie is the only visitor. She re-tucks her scarf into her windbreaker. Thin bits of snow float down from the morning's gray sky like dust. The building's glass front doors tease with the promise of light and warmth and primary colors. She thinks of the child inside, hesitates. The land behind the school slopes out of sight and eventually reaches Lake Taneycomo, a manmade reservoir that uses water from the White River. It was on this lake that she learned to fish for trout with her father the year they moved to Missouri, where she and her husband Rich shared their first kiss, and where she lost part of her foot in a boating accident ten years ago. The hole it leaves in her boot is replaced with a prosthetic and a lopsided walk she has never been able to shake. Though she can't see the water now, she can hear it in the distance: a low gurgle, like hunger, followed by an echoing sigh.

But once inside, behind closed doors, the sound of the breathing lake is replaced by muted laughter behind closed doors. Connie wishes too late that she could turn around, back to the car, back to her empty home and the smell of coffee and newspaper print. By the time the thought has truly manifested itself, she has already announced that she is there to pick up her son, Noah. She follows an intern to a room near the back of the school. The Nido, or baby room, is for children under a year old, whose siblings are usually in the preschool or kindergarten programs. Connie has no other children.

There are only four toddlers in the baby room today. Noah is the easiest to spot because his wispy red-orange hair matches the plush fire truck he holds. The back right wheel is in his
mound. Across the floral rug, a woman sits cross-legged, holding an ambiguously gendered baby. She smiles when she sees Connie and the intern, who asks where Hanna is.

“Oh!” The woman, who stands, has a voice like the trill of a birdcall. “Ms. Hanna and I traded so that she could take the kids outside. I was feeling tired, so.”

“Well this is Connie, she's here to get Noah.”

When the woman steps forward, baby still on her arm, to shake hands, Connie notices how small she is. Her forehead is level with Connie's mouth, her fingers feel like cold, dry twigs as they tighten around Connie's hand. She wears a pink t-shirt and pearls; her hair is falling out of the knot on her head. She looks like a little girl in her mother's jewelry.

“Jan,” she says, “I'm an assistant teacher for the older kids, usually.”

When Connie looks back, the intern is gone. Jan gently places the baby in a floor seat next to her. Then she looks at Noah, who has rocked onto his back and is holding his foot, toy abandoned.

“There he is!” Jan's faux-excitement makes Noah smile. Connie watches the assistant teacher lift the child, her nurturing instincts palpable. Her chest constricts at the thought that she will have to hold the baby in front of this woman, this girl, who seems to be more of a natural mother, despite Connie's seniority.

“What is he, four months?” Jan bounces the boy. He giggles.

“Almost five.”

“Well,” she holds him out in front of her by his solid torso, “he's just the sweetest.” Jan seems unable to keep her voice normal while looking at Noah. She says to the child, “You want Mama?” and Connie flinches instinctively before reaching out and taking the thing she laboriously brought into the world. The child's weight is substantial for something so small, its
distribution of limbs awkward to hold. He smells like diaper cream, unnatural even when clean. She can feel Jan's eyes on her, watching, critiquing. Jan probably sees the discomfort as clearly as Connie feels it. It's like there is a sign on her face, a mark for other mothers to detect: I don't love my baby.

The members of the support group she attends like to talk about how hard it is to say “Postpartum Depression” out loud. Like they are ashamed not of the symptoms or the pain, but of the sickness itself, as if they'd caught it from some sin of their pasts. Connie, however, likes the name, likes assigning her apathy as a symptom. The name means it's a phase, one that will surely run its course and die out, like a virus.

“Are you taking the rest of the day off work or something?” Jan asks, not unkindly. “Usually Noah is here 'til five or so.”

She attempts a vagueness that doesn't create more questions. “The company I work for is giving me some time, you know, to sort some things out.”

“Oh, well that's nice of them.”

Connie makes sure her eyes crinkle at the corners when she smiles.

Darrell, the head of the marketing management company for which Connie had spent years making sales calls, called her into his office last month, said he wanted to talk. He stroked the hair on his swollen face and looked at the paperwork on his desk while he said with projected confidence that Connie seemed distracted ever since the baby had arrived. Surely the best option for everyone was for her to take some time. Time, yes, time to bond with little Noah. He frowned
with forced caring and concentration when he told her this, and closed the file in front of him, finalizing the interaction.

But she didn't use her given time to bond with Noah. For days she listened in the mornings to Rich tell her how happy he was with her, with the baby. He touched her hair, held her face in his hands, looked into her eyes. He saw the makings of a family that, for her, didn't exist. Each morning, she waited until she knew he was well on his way to the office before strapping Noah into his car seat and driving him to the Montessori, where they looked after him. This is what she had done for the first few months, when she was working. Now that she had time to spend with Noah, she was afraid. Hurting him wasn't her fear—that would be too nurturing—but rather disliking him. She was scared that her lack of connection with the child was not caused by her exhaustion as a working mother. Perhaps it was caused by her failure to love, to have a soul.

Connie knows that Jan's stare is a form of scrutiny, waiting for her to betray signs of bad parenting.

“I've got Postpartum Depression,” she says now, so the girl will do what the other women do and look away, embarrassed. Jan's thin brows pull together in what appears to be genuine concern. She looks from Noah to Connie.

“I'm so sorry,” she says, “I didn't know.”

Connie doesn't like standing with Jan in a room full of babies, but she hates the thought of being alone with Noah more. The desire to walk out, to leave the kid behind, rings in her ears and grows louder, like rising panic.
Then Noah starts to whimper, and soon a little girl rushes into the room. She looks maybe four or five, and has golden curls that bounce around as she practically slams into Jan's leg. She pulls at the woman's clothes, as if she doesn't already have her full attention.

“Ms. Jan, Ms. Jan,” The girl says, her voice clumsy and panicked. She's not crying, but she looks like she might start. “We can't find Ivy Belle, we've lost her, we've lost her!”

Jan looks at Connie, then back to the girl. “Lost?” Her voice is slow and deliberate, “Remy, sweetie, who had her last?”

Connie starts to imagine a missing child, but upon seeing her face Jan says “that's the guinea pig.”

“I don't know, one of the boys!” Little Remy's voice breaks as she says this, and Noah's face contorts ominously. Connie bounces him in a desperate attempt to keep him from screaming.

Jan appears calm despite the obvious effect this event has had on one of her students. She leans down and touches the girl's shoulder. “I'll help you look for Ivy Belle, okay, Rem? It'll be okay.”

The girl looks to Connie now, tears sparkling in her eyes so perfectly that it seems almost deliberate. “Help us look for Ivy Belle,” she almost whispers. Jan looks as though she is about to speak, but Connie nods in agreement, unwilling to disappoint someone so small.

It wasn't until nine days ago that Connie decided she needed to seek real help. She took Noah to the school just like she did every day, returning home with the hope of finding peace in the silence. But the truth was, she hadn't felt anything in weeks. Nothing, then anger at feeling
nothing, then sadness from the frustration of feeling angry about nothing. An infinite loop. She needed to give herself something to look forward to.

The thought wasn't something she took seriously at first, running away. Teenagers ran away, refugees, people with something to run from. New mothers in suburban homes, women going on seven years of comfortable marriage, those people didn't want to escape. Those people didn’t need a clean slate. She clicked around on her computer, looking at flights and prices and terminals. Just up the mountain was the Branson airport; she could get there in fifteen minutes. It wasn't, after all, like Noah and Rich would be unhappy without her. They existed apart from her, like she was watching them from the darkened wings of a stage. The child wasn't old enough to understand neglect yet, letting him down now would be easier. She would have to buy a ticket in cash, otherwise they would be able to find her. She could take the money from the family account and use her credit card once she reached another city. It didn't matter where she went, so long as it wasn't near anyone she knew.

Having the ideas alone might have been something Connie could excuse, like she had tricked herself into entertaining the idea out of curiosity or restlessness. It was the fact that she actually tried to leave—that she tried to create this clean slate—that caused the breakdown. All of it seemed a little like it never actually happened. It only existed in the future, and then in the past. Like someone else had done it for her: withdrawn one thousand dollars, packed light, started driving the sloped, winding roads to the airport. It wasn't until she noticed the piled ice on the side of the road, nearly to the airport, when she realized what she was doing. She thought of car accidents, of death, of a motherless child, of how unclean her ideas had become, and seemed to blink into consciousness. The tires screeched when she pulled abruptly onto the shoulder, her heart in her ears.
The classroom for the older children has a lot more to look at than the Nido. While they check the cage for the guinea pig, Jan tells Connie that the room is designed to inspire learning and creativity. It looks as though the children are currently learning about aquatic life: posters on the walls label different kinds of sharks and the finger-painted art drying on the floor, though most of them look like nothing in particular, seem to resemble coral reefs. Connie feels a strain in the crook of her arm, where the majority of Noah's weight rests. She carefully moves him to the other arm, focused on his face, which seems to have accepted this new journey unquestioningly. She can't seem to get him in a spot that feels comfortable close to her body. He bends and moves his limbs about as though determined to be a burden. Jan, on the other hand, touches the heads of the older kids, even briefly lifting some of them, in a way that makes her seem years older than she did in the baby room. They laugh and say her name, ask her unrelated questions that she gracefully addresses one by one, all the while looking around, presumably for the missing pet.

When the class begrudgingly prepares for their nap, Jan begins to whisper. “Guinea pigs are too big to lose,” she says with a smile, “one of the kids must have done something with her.”

Connie wants to be helpful, feeling an unexplained personal investment in finding the creature. “Do you think they took it outside?”

“Hopefully Ms. Hanna would have noticed. I mean, it's practically the size of a small dog.”

They are silent for a moment, checking cubbies and under coats. Remy, who refused to nap, looked with them, always checking places immediately after Connie or Jan did, as though
they might have missed it. Remy doesn't ask Connie about her limp, for which she is surprised and grateful. Perhaps she is too upset about her missing animal.

“Anytime you want someone to take care of Noah,” Jan whispers, folding a tiny blue sweater inside one of the cubbies, “I would be happy to help.”

“Thanks,” Connie says, then almost inaudibly, “I should be spending time with him.”

“Taking care of yourself is most important,” Jan says.

Connie wishes they could talk about something else, but likes that this woman somehow makes putting herself over her child seem less selfish. She watches the assistant teacher more closely as they wander from one corner of the classroom to the next. The dark circles under her eyes are thinly covered by cheap concealer. Her nails look chewed on. She sounds burdened when she whispers or laughs, permanently out of breath.

Connie finds the guinea pig in a lower cubby hole on the east wall. The thing is bigger than she expected, even from Jan's description. It's caramel colored, with a white spot on its face and belly. Rigor mortis hasn't set in yet but the creature is cold and still. Connie checks to see if Noah is looking at the animal—he is not. When Jan sees it she squeaks at a pitch so high Connie thinks for a moment the rodent must have made the sound. This gets Remy's attention, who starts calling out “No! No! Ivy Belle!” And crying at an increasing volume that is sure to wake the other children. Jan rubs the girl's back, quieting her with a calming shush sound, though her eyes stay on the guinea pig. When she stands and pulls back, she steps on Connie's prosthetic foot. Noah shifts, stretching his arms.

“Oh, I'm sorry!” she chirps.

Connie waves her off. “It's made of silicone anyway.”

“What?”
“My foot, it's a partial prosthetic.”

Jan looks at the foot, quiet. Connie thinks she must be deciding whether or not to ask questions. After a few seconds, she turns back to the guinea pig. She checks for breathing or heartbeat before pronouncing it dead. She exhales slowly, then hiccups. Connie wonders how many, if any, deaths Jan has experienced. Noah starts to whine again.

Connie was twenty-one when she lost part of her foot, on a boat on Lake Taneycomo with her college friends for spring break. There were too many beers and not enough life vests for the four of them, but Connie grew braver with every sip, ready to take on the water, which was still too cold for comfortable swimming.

She jumped off the boat, broke the surface of the water. The same flame swelled in her chest that she had felt with her father her first time on the lake. She felt invigorated, euphoric. Her body shuddered from the chill and adrenaline. But all of that was a cursory feeling, evaporating as soon as it had come. Even the combination of alcohol and the frigid lake couldn't numb the pain she felt when her foot came into contact with the boat's propeller.

After a chaotic rush to the hospital and several hours she couldn't remember well, Connie was left to cope with the fact that she was missing three toes and a chunk of her right foot. What summed up to a small pile of flesh and bone suddenly felt like all she had ever known, the sense of loss immeasurable. She grieved and wept and hated the foot-shaped mound of rubber with a ferocity she didn't know she possessed.

Where was that passion, that attachment, when a pile of flesh and bone was taken from her body a decade later? Why was she able to ache so deeply for the loss of a few toes, but
incapable of feeling anything more than a twist of fear and confusion upon first holding the blue
eyed creature she had meticulously carried inside her? For months when she would carry Noah
around the house she noticed the slightly off-balanced way she walked, the smacking sound of
silicone against the kitchen tile. She touched the child's soft cheeks as she placed him in his crib
at night, then the texturized rubber of her prosthetic as she removed it before bed. Perhaps
motherhood was a hoax, she thought. Perhaps the baby was an extension of her in the same way
as the false foot: bearing a resemblance of what it should be, but unfeeling and detached.

Remy insists that Ivy Belle needs a funeral with the same earnestness she possessed when
asking that they look for the rodent in the first place. Connie thinks this little girl might have too
much experience getting what she wants, but neither she nor Jan is willing to tell a four-year-old
that her pet doesn't deserve a proper burial. Jan puts the dead guinea pig in a shoebox and straps
on the lid with a large rubber band. After their naps are over, she tells the kids to say goodbye to
Ivy Belle but won't let them open the box to look at her. Connie wonders how many, if any, of
these children understand the concept of death.

“I'm going to bury her out back by the lake,” Jan's gaze stays on the shoebox when she
speaks.

“I'll join you,” Connie says, less from hesitancy to take Noah home this time and more
from a rising sense of worry about the apparent frailty of this woman she barely knows. Jan
slumps, seems smaller and weaker now than she did when Connie first arrived. Perhaps she
wasn't paying attention before.
Outside, gray scales of snow have continued to fall and a light layer covers the black earth that stretches all the way to the lake, which still takes quiet breaths. Jan holds a small gardening shovel from one of the indoor plants. Connie thinks the burial process isn't going to work, but doesn't say so. She realizes once they are out there that the cold can't be good for the child on her arm, and hates that she didn’t consider Noah until now. She rubs her baby, who starts to cry, quietly. Awkward and uncertain, she rocks him, which seems effective enough. Jan picks back up the conversation about Postpartum Depression once they are out of earshot of the children, finding a proper gravesite as she asks questions. Somehow even the most personal of her enquiries don't seem intrusive. The frozen air and falling snow dulls Connie's brain, and for a moment she forgets they are strangers.

“Are you getting professional help, then?”

“Yeah. Last week I started my medication and support group.”

“How is the support group?”

“Odd. I feel alone in a circle of people who are also alone.”

Noah starts to cry again, and Jan wonders how women don't go mad from this. He quiets a little when she shushes him, still watching the woman with the DIY casket and the shovel. Jan finds a spot she seems to approve of, kneels on the wet ground. She shakes so badly that the guinea pig clatters noisily around within the shoebox.

“You know,” she says, regurgitating the same message about Noah. “If you ever needed an extra set of hands or eyes, I love the boy. I would be happy to help.”


“I mean, I would even babysit if you needed me to. My offer doesn't stand with the school alone.”
Connie stands, watches the girl struggle on her knees. Jan doesn't seem to be making any headway with the digging. The ground is too cold. An icy breeze curls around them, feels to Connie as though it burns straight through to her spine.

“Lucky little bastard,” she says, speaking of the rodent. “Too dead to feel this wind.”

“I'd rather be cold than dead.” Jan says through clinched teeth, the effort she puts into her digging makes her cheeks red.

“Do you have kids, Jan?”

“No.” The shovel hits the frozen ground with a clang that sounds as though it might break.

She doesn't need to ask if Jan wants to have children—she knows the answer. She suspects Jan would take Noah, if she asked her to.

“You're made for it, you know,” she says, watching the girl. She thinks Jan will take this as a compliment. Instead, the kneeling woman lets out a shout of defeat, too shattered to be for the guinea pig's burial alone.

“The ground is too cold,” she says. Then she starts to pick up small ice-crusted rocks with her bare hands.

“What are you doing?”

“Weighing down the box,” she says, and takes the rubber band off and removing the lid.

“I'm going to drop it in the lake.”

Connie doesn't see how this is more respectful than throwing her in the dumpster. She looks for rocks to fill the shoebox.

“I'm not made for having children.” Her voice wavers and she places a hand on her stomach. Connie looks sideways at her. Jan sniffs, her expression distant.
“You can't have kids?”

She shakes her head no.

Connie raises her eyebrows in surprise, but Jan isn't looking at her. She wonders how many people know this. What the girl must think of her, a mother who doesn't want her child, while she clings to the idea of producing children herself, her organs incapable. Connie imagines trading bodies with Jan, taking the woman's feeble frame as her own, giving away the ovaries and childbearing hips she was born with, whatever it was that Jan was missing. Together, they have the makings of a perfect mother. As it remains, they are both unfit.

Once the box is filled with rocks, Jan replaces the lid and rubber band and they walk out on a nearby dock. Connie flinches at the surprisingly definitive splash the shoebox makes when Jan drops it. The lake is bigger from this angle than it has ever looked before: still and quiet, without its usual sighs. It swallows the rodent and Ivy Belle's casket disappears into the depths. With a rush of vertigo, Connie clutches tightly at Noah's sturdy body, afraid for a moment that she will let him follow the dead animal into the dark water.
Rex had just situated himself at the otherwise unoccupied L-shaped bar of Long Branch Cocktails when his sister Julie called. He scowled at the humming cell phone, then looked to the stool beside him, which was laden with his sagging coat and a now nearly-empty insulated shoulder bag that hours earlier had contained the day's shipment of winter black truffles he sold and delivered to local restaurants. Hoping for a short conversation, he left his belongings and stepped outside.

The siblings had agreed some months ago that both of them would aim to drink less, stop using the comfort of a bar as a crutch for their troubles. This, of course, was Julie's idea, but he had agreed amiably, since he knew she would have no way of checking up on him from another state. He searched bitterly for some lie of where he might be.

His sister spoke quietly, more breathing than speaking, when she told him their mother had died. Rex thought, at first, that he had misheard her. With two middle-aged children, his mother was certainly not young, but she'd never had any real health troubles, and Rex imagined her unchanged since they last spoke six years ago.

Julie explained in a surprisingly steady tone that their mother had passed away the previous evening in her home in Oklahoma. There had been an apartment fire, and four people had died. Smoke inhalation. The police, or maybe the fire department, had called Julie to identify the body.

“They found her in her bed,” Julie said, the phone line gurgling in the background. Maybe she was listening to music. “Probably so doped up on her sleeping pills that she never knew the place was burning down.” She laughed humorlessly.
Still near the front door, Rex leaned his back against the cool concrete of the building. In his pocket, he could feel a mint wrapper from last night's takeout. He fingered it mindlessly. Why, he wondered, would they have called Julie about the body? He was the eldest son, the next of kin. Wouldn't they call him? Perhaps they knew somehow that Julie was close by, and that the coroner wouldn't be willing to wait for someone to make the drive from Florida.

“You saw her?” he said.

“Yeah, don't ask. I need a drink.”

It had started to drizzle, and Rex blinked against the tiny raindrops prickling his face, the wind making him shudder. He should've brought his coat outside.

“I'm dealing with this, you know.” Julie wasn't specific about what she was dealing with, but Rex knew it was not a reference to grief. She added, “It would help, though. If you showed up.”

He didn't respond to this, and eventually Julie exhaled against the receiver before continuing to talk. Her tone implied it was more to herself than to her brother. It seemed to him that the longer she spoke, the more her voice resembled his mother's. Out of breath, ungracious, without thought. Just noise.

Long Branch was one of the only bars in Lake City, Florida that didn't crowd with the traffic of passers-through. The town was located at the crossing of Interstates 10 and 75, which made it the stopping point for tourists on their way to Orlando or the coast. Most of the locals had taken their business to the Applebee's—preferring the late night wings and the bustle of drunk college students on their way to Daytona Beach—but Long Branch had cocktails and an
old jukebox and bartenders like you see in the movies, ones who wipe down the bar and nod at
the customers' tales of lost love. Rex liked the chink of coins as they slid into the jukebox, and
the stillness of the place, the way it felt as though the warm electric air was sealed into the
building, suctioned like Tupperware. The conversation with Julie had apparently stretched out
long enough for a number of people to arrive, the groups at the bar bumping against his bag and
coat. Climbing back onto his stool, he found the tighter space irritating. He embraced the
frustration, a much more accessible emotion than whatever he felt about his mother and an
apartment fire, and huffed through his nose, eyeing them all.

A cluster of buzzing tourists played darts in the corner, an iced bucket of beer bottles on
the table beside them. A few loners hunched over their glasses, people he recognized but never
addressed. Someone coming back from the jukebox parted the tourists and hopped onto a stool
near him, pecking at her phone with an index finger. He recognized the woman as Marge, the
online-dater.

Rex and Marge never spoke, but he felt he knew her well. He often let the ice melt in his
glass late into the evening, listening to her dates, all of them firsts, so he had her get-to-know-
you facts memorized, as well as some of her repeated jokes and crutch phrases. She said “sort
of” in places where those words didn't belong. She was mildly pretty, though perhaps bland, with
round hips and thick thighs that made her clothes much tighter on the bottom half than in the area
around her narrow shoulders. Rex guessed her to be ten years his junior, maybe thirty-two or
three, though the shallow rift between her eyebrows that remained even when she stopped
frowning suggested she might be older.

He knew her dates were with men she had met online because she had a paisley scarf that
she draped on the back of the seat next to her, whether it matched her clothes or not, and the men
always said her name as a question when they approached, as though they were wandering in the
dark and needed to know they'd found who they were groping for. Some of them even
pronounced it wrong—“Marg?” with a hard G—and she kindly corrected them as she removed
the scarf and placed it back in her purse. Tonight she had chosen the stool between her and Rex
to bear the paisley welcome-flag. He hoped that his close proximity to the date would serve as a
distraction—perhaps he could overhear an awkward conversation, enjoy the misfortune of
someone else’s life—but the chair remained unoccupied, and by his third gin-and-tonic, Rex
found himself fully buried in memories of his mother.

He mostly considered her an awful person, wispy and breakable in frame but with a hard
and untouchable heart. As a child in rural Oklahoma, he had thought his mom glamorous, like
the women in the old movies, sipping clear liquor and laughing without changing her face much.
His friends thought she was funny, the way she heckled the other players at his little league
games until she was asked to leave. It wasn't until his college years, when his dad divorced her
and she started asking Rex to help pay her rent, that he began to find her childish, selfish, an
adult who needed babysitting. In his childhood she often bought food or clothes the family
couldn't afford. Even after the divorce, and after his father had died, she would answer the door
of her crumbled and sagging apartment in sparkling zirconium jewelry, picking bleu cheese
stuffed olives with her fingers out of a plastic container.

One evening when he was not yet a teenager, Rex's mom shuffled into the kitchen and,
on the round table where the family ate their meals, placed a white Styrofoam container the size
of a toolbox. Her eyes glittered at them: Rex, young Julie, and Rex's father, who looked blankly
at the mystery object as he set the table with bowls of buttered spaghetti.
“Guess what's inside,” she said. The box reminded Rex of something within which hospitals might ship a human body part, where hearts or eyeballs are iced down, the ones needed for transplants. Not awaiting response, she opened the box like she was displaying something for an advertisement. It was a brownish grey lump about the size of a golf ball. It looked dirty, and Rex wondered if his mom was trying to prank them.

“It's a truffle,” She said to the static silence, as though this should be obvious. Then she recited that they were like mushrooms, that they came from France. “They are pound for pound the most expensive food in the world.” She said this with a heaviness in her voice, a deepening. Her eyelashes fluttered.

Rex looked at his father to see what his reaction might be. The man didn't move, but some of the color had drained from his face. He didn't ask how much she had spent on the mushroom. Rex wanted to ask, but before he could, Julie propped herself onto her elbows, craning over the table. “We have to eat that?”

Though Rex hadn't liked the fungus, scraping grainy, brown shavings off his pasta when his mother wasn't looking, a curiosity lingered. His mom’s enchantment with the dirty little mound of tasteless fungus was the type of interest he always wanted from her, but had not yet achieved.

The tourists in the corner of Long Branch changed the jukebox to a twanging country tune. When resentment for his mother threatened to shift into guilt, he turned again to watch the online-dater. She still sipped conservatively at her first cocktail, looking back and forth between her phone and the entrance, the line between her eyebrows becoming more pronounced. Usually
Rex didn't look directly at her, but stared at the bar in front of him, while in his periphery the men she met with fussed about their dull lives and pulled at their unironed dress shirts. Every one of them, he noticed, thought it necessary to tell Marge of all the victories they had ever accomplished, in chronological order, as though reading a résumé. She would nod easily, kindly, sipping her tequila sunrise—one of his mother's drinks, he now considered—and let them hobble through the list of their successes. There was a time when Rex would make note of all the ways in which he could do a better job than these men, be a better date to this woman. He liked her laugh but found the jokes that created it unworthy. But nights passed and the more he listened, the more he objected to how easy this was for her, how rehearsed. He began to feel sorry for her dates. They weren't in their comfort zone, giving Marge the upper hand. One man apologized only half an hour into the conversation for visibly sweating through his shirt. Another spilled beer on his sweater and excused himself to use the hand dryer in the bathroom, probably disappointed to find that the bar only offered paper towels.

“Poor fool,” Rex often said on these occasions, to which the bartender smiled.

This time, though, her date wasn't going to come. Rex was sure of it now. Marge slid the end of the ribbon-like belt of her dress back and forth between her fingers, growing nervous. He tipped his drink back until the ice knocked against his teeth before leaning forward on his elbows. He called to the bartender and pointed into his glass.

“Mind if I move over one?” He gestured to the spot between them, surprised at his own assertiveness. He usually didn't have this much to drink.

Her eyes rose from her phone, and for a moment she appeared stunned. “Oh,” she said, looking at the seat like she'd never seen it before. “Sure, for a minute. But I'm waiting for
someone.” She reluctantly removed the paisley scarf from the back of the stool and draped it over the back of her own.

He scooted clumsily to the closer stool. His stomach, empty of anything but liquid, squirmed. For a moment he felt giddy, as though he had been anticipating this interaction for some time. “Whoever stood you up,” Rex said, hearing the cliché and wishing he could take it back, “doesn't deserve your time anyway.”

He didn't expect her to smile, but after a beat she did and it looked genuine. “Well, thank you. He's getting it anyway, my time. I've been sitting here forever. He might show up in a minute.” She paused. “You come here a lot, right? What's your name?”

He introduced himself and let her do the same, thinking it better that he didn't tell her he already knew who she was. As the bartender arrived with another drink, she lowered her voice while confessing that she met the no-show through a matchmaking site. Quickly deflecting attention from herself, she asked, “You come here after work?”

Rex noticed she was looking at the insulated shoulder bag, now two seats away.

“I'm a truffle manufacturer, and salesman.” It sounded important even to himself. He imagined his mother, who called them the “crowned jewels” of all food, assuming an elegant posture as she ate them, swirling and sipping her wine between bites. Marge seemed impressed. Rex was starting to realize that he wanted this—wanted to impress her. He assured himself it wasn’t her necessarily, but someone. He wanted to impress someone. Sure, she was just the online-dater, but if she could see him for his accomplishments, maybe she could be more than that.

“Fancy,” she said playfully.

He nodded. “They're pound for pound the most expensive food in the world.”
“So do you have your own farm? Or do you just sell them?”

When he lived in Oklahoma, Rex really did manage a truffle orchard, for a time. His father died in the year preceding Rex's college graduation, and left him the few acres of land on which he and his sister had grown. The land had remained somewhat unused, its original purpose of breeding and selling ponies losing traction before Rex was born. Using the property as a springboard, he considered that while the winter black truffle his mom had once presented had been from France, there was no reason why the fungus couldn't grow in North American soil.

Upon the orchard's creation, however, he discovered that truffle cultivation was not as simple as it had once seemed. The winters were too cold in Oklahoma, the summers too hot. His first truffle, the unearthing of which was witnessed by himself and two college friends who had vocalized an interest in the business, was such a treasure to hold that he let it go bad before he could sell it to a neighborhood restaurant. If he'd known that not many truffles would follow, he might have handled it less, might not have made the half hour drive, truffle in the passenger seat, to his mother's apartment, determined to prove his worth.

He lied to Marge about this now, as he did with every sale. As more restaurants expressed curiosity but fewer truffles formed in the dirt, he learned of other ways to profit from the ugly little lumps. Chinese truffles, which he could import to his farm at around the same price as regular mushrooms, looked exactly like the ones from France and the few that formed on his land. The only difference was the taste. But like Rex, most people in rural Oklahoma—and Lake City, Florida—didn't know what they were supposed to taste anyway.

“Must be nice,” Marge said, lips close to her straw, after a lengthy description of a place back in Oklahoma, one that didn't exist—dense soil, rustic fences surrounding men with dirt-caked fingernails and well-trained dogs. The clean shipments arriving at his door.
Rex felt heat rise to his neck and face. He allowed himself the thought that this might be going well. She saw his victories, he decided, in a way that his sister and his mother refused to. His offer to buy her next drink was accepted with a giggle and a nod.

He would realize, later, that he never asked Marge any questions about herself, but in the moment he didn't think to. He knew she was a project manager for some kind of corporation, that she lived with a roommate whose company she didn't enjoy, that she didn't drink coffee. He had learned from her previous dates, and forgot that this fact was unknown to her.

After a couple of hiccups, Rex held his breath in hopes of extinguishing them. Marge offered something about herself for the first time.

“I'd like to do that. Be my own boss, I mean. Hell,” she laughed quietly, “I'd like to get out of the gateway to Florida.”

That's what everyone called it, Lake City. The gateway to Florida.

“Where would you go?” Rex said, releasing his contained carbon dioxide.

“Well, in the gate I guess.” She laughed. The beach, he assumed, was where she dreamed of living. He tried to imagine her with lighter hair, with freckles on her nose. She said, “Living in the gateway is sort of like purgatory, isn't it?”

The tourists in the corner broke out into a swelling volume of cheers, a drunken response to something insignificant, maybe a bullseye.

Six years ago was the first and only time Rex's mother had paid her son a visit in Lake City. The day before she arrived, she left a voicemail on Rex's phone announcing that she would be passing through on her way to the coast—she had plans to meet some friends in Destin. Rex
nearly deleted the voicemail before listening to it, assuming she needed something that he wasn't willing to give. Curiosity overcame him, and for the rest of the day dread swelled inside him, unable to sleep for fear it would make him burst. It might be awkward, he told himself, to deny her a bed for the night. He would be forced to accept.

There wasn't a restaurant that he saw fit to impress her, so he cooked risotto and added some of his imported Chinese truffles as a finishing touch. At a quarter to nine, she pulled into his driveway in an old Lexus he didn't recognize, and for a couple of minutes, sat in the car with the engine turned off. Rex watched through the dusty blinds of his front window. He couldn't see what she was doing, and thought perhaps she was finishing a phone call.

Inside, in the lamplight, she looked different from the woman he bitterly pulled from the crevices of his memory. She was still small in the wrists and legs, but her belly had swollen, and she wore an overlarge sweater in an attempt to cover it. The look of the sleeves on her bony limbs gave her the appearance of an old leather wing bat. Her face was wrinkled, though meticulously covered with make-up. Her hair seemed deflated somehow, sticking closely to her head.

“Your town, it would be charming,” she said regally, “but I swear it smells of gas, too many filling stations. All the people on their way to the beach. It's one big filling station.”

Rex asked if she was hot or cold, to which she replied that she was quite warm, so he adjusted the thermostat accordingly. He offered her wine, and asked if the car she arrived in was new.

“Oh no, it's Stephen's,” she said, not offering an explanation of who Stephen was. She talked a lot about her plans at the beach, saying the names of two women he found vaguely familiar. The few times she asked him about his own life, he gave minimal answers, and she
didn't seem to mind. When she finished her wine, she stopped in the middle of a story to request more, advising that he keep an eye on that kind of thing with his other guests. She said, “An empty glass means a bad host.”

The subject of dinner never arose, only her desire for wine, but he had already prepared their meals and so Rex insisted they sit and eat. Half way into her risotto, he asked if she liked it. She nodded, her first nonverbal response of the evening. He told her it had truffles stirred in without mentioning his own orchard. Lying to his mother always frightened him, and he suspected she knew without asking that his business endeavor had failed.

“Oh?” She uncrossed and recrossed her legs, chewing slower. “I don't taste it, I'm afraid. You might need a different wine pairing.”

He watched her across the table, the hypocrisy of it all. It seemed to him, as he eyed the large fake jewels fastened to her aging neck, that she belonged here. He thought it violently, accusing. She fit in with this place, with tasteless truffles and filling stations. But she would never, he was sure, see herself as anything but above it.

She was right, of course, about the truffles. All they did was add a gritty texture to the risotto. He picked miserably at the unsuccessful meal. Despite his mother’s lack of gratitude, she scraped the plate with her fork, eating every bite.

Marge the online-dater appeared drunk now, rotating her straw and noisily sucking the air out of the bottom of her empty glass. There was a vacancy to her gaze, a heavy-liddedness she didn't possess before. She frowned at her drink. Rex wondered if she was still thinking about purgatory. Maybe all her dates were first dates for the same reason he lied about his truffles.
Maybe they both just wanted to see a reflection in someone’s eyes, a false reflection, one they
could try to believe wasn't quite so distorted. They lied to others in an attempt to trick
themselves. Feeling a strange closeness to this woman, he posed a question aloud.

“If you had the option to become a new person, would you?”

She blinked at him, confused. “What?”

“Like, if you could start your life over. New identity, clean slate, all that.” he waved his
hand between them. “Would you?”

Marge’s eyes narrowed in thought. She was still looking at him. “I don't think so. Would
you?”

“Why not?” He said.

“I don't know. It seems like more trouble than it's worth.” A measured response. A
disappointing one.

Rex chewed ice while Marge recalled an article she had once read, what she called a
“bogus” blog post on a website centered around conspiracy theories. A specialist, as the man
called himself, wrote about the probability that a small percentage of deaths in every horrible
accident are faked, used as a way to start over. As an example, he discussed a woman who had
died in the 9/11 attacks, one who, the writer was certain, was not really dead. She hated her life,
the man had declared—her failing relationship, her unpaid bills—so when she was reported as
missing, she abandoned her life in the city, relocating to a small town in Pennsylvania. The best
part, Marge claimed, was the nearly convincing photos for comparison.

“It's like those weight loss before and after pictures,” she said, and pulled the hem of her
dress down over her thighs. “You know, where they pick people who are like siblings or have the
same haircut.”
Rex didn't respond, letting silence lapse between them. Remaining unharmed after an accident seemed like an unfair advantage for these so-called new-lifers. He remembered again that his mother was dead. How long, he wondered, would one have to burn before they were unrecognizable? Could it be that Julie was too traumatized to actually look at the charred woman on the metal slab?

Knowing the thoughts were ridiculous, he let them linger anyway. He spoke in a way only partially directed at the online-dater. “Faking death. New life. Do you think people are capable of such a thing?”

“Sure,” Marge said, an exhale. The way Julie had spoken to him. “I guess, maybe. But you'd have to live without like, a sort of social security number or a driver's license.” She sifted through her purse with her fingers. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

Surprised, his eyes went to her hands, which retrieved and opened a pack of cigarettes. It appeared as though she wasn't waiting for an answer. She put one of them in her mouth, and added, “Want one?”

It took Rex a moment to understand why he felt physically struck, why his ears were hot. Marge had never smoked, not on a single date that he had witnessed. She drank plenty, and she often changed the song on the jukebox. Sometimes, on bad dates, she yawned conspicuously and excused herself at an early hour. His wondered suddenly what she saw in this interaction. Was this a date? He had been distracted all evening, he thought to himself—he wasn't on his best behavior. But hadn't he bought her drinks? Hadn't he made himself available, told her of his life? Now she was asking if she could smoke, something she had never done before. Thinking back on it, she didn't lean toward him while he spoke, as she did with other men. She hadn't touched his
wrist in thank-you for yet another cocktail on his tab. Marge didn't see this as a date at all, it
seemed to him now.

Smoking her cigarette without apology, she studied Rex's face. “What's up?”

The urge to laugh rose in him unexpectedly, and he tightened his lips together, a dull
burning in his temples from the previous drinks. He thought of the men Marge lured in, of the
lies she probably told online. They were con artists—Rex and Marge. Losing at their own game.
Both of them continued to try the same thing over and over, expecting each time a different
result. Hadn’t he read somewhere that such behavior was the definition of insanity?

Rex meant to shake the ice that remained in his glass, but forgot that somewhere along
the way, he'd ordered a new one. Clear, cold liquid sloshed generously over his lap and shirt.
Some of it hit Marge as well, and she started as though he'd shouted at her.

Marge put out her cigarette into a nearby ashtray. “Thank you,” she said abruptly, no
gratitude in her voice, “for the drinks. I need to go home.”

“Back to purgatory,” Rex mumbled, too tired to try to save the interaction. The cigarette
had proved it was already too late for that. And though he knew that he should apologize, he
couldn't bring himself to do it. He felt victimized by the whole interaction, by the whole night.
Surely, he thought, he was owed an apology more than anyone in this bar.

She stood, and he watched her clumsily put away her paisley scarf and thank the
bartender by name. When she looked back to Rex, he sensed it was with distaste, the fold
between her eyebrows apparent.

“Have a good evening.” Her voice was forced, without inflection.
After paying the tab, Rex slid heavily off the stool and wandered to the restroom to dry himself. Looking for a hand dryer first, he grimaced and slowly cranked knob on the paper towel dispenser until the brown paper stretched to the sticky cement floor.

The thick paper absorbed the liquid slowly, spreading in spotted patterns like Rorschach blots. He rested his forehead against the wall in front of him, closed his eyes. Once, Rex had imagined what Marge's second dates must be like, for those who made it to round two. At a lobby bar, he had considered, maybe at the Hampton Inn or one of the other hotels in the area. She probably wore a different dress, a nicer one, drinking a martini with an olive in it, the tantalizing idea of the hotel rooms above her filling the air between the pair of them. This fantasy had come to Rex before his mother died, before Marge smoked her cigarette and didn't touch his wrist. There would be no second date with her now. Not that he wanted one, he told himself firmly. The paper towel he pressed against his shirt began to deteriorate.

The night his mother had visited, Rex lay awake in the dark, angry with her, sleeping in the next morning from the exhaustion of his thoughts. She left without waking him, without leaving a note, and he was glad of her departure. So glad, in fact, that he felt sick with worry the whole week—he feared she might stop by again, on her journey home. Just to be sure she didn't, he had sat on his front porch, in the thick Florida heat, with his phone in his lap, watching unrecognizable cars pass.

Anger and intoxication subsiding a little, he moved through the bar to the parking lot outside, one of the only patrons remaining in the bar now. It was earlier than he had thought. Still drizzling. All the lights of Long Branch were still on, the open sign sizzling quietly, once visible from the street. Now there was some kind of scaffolding covering the front of the place, for no particular reason. He stood under it, protecting himself from the weather. The scaffolding had
been there for months. The property owners, a bartender had told him, wanted to sell the building, but couldn't legally kick them out. Almost smiling, the bartender had predicted that Long Branch was not long for this world.

He didn’t remember unzipping his truffle bag, but when it slipped from his shoulder and fell to his feet, it fell easily open. Perhaps Rex had intended on showing Marge one of the two remaining truffles from the day’s haul. The knobby little red-brown wads rolled from the insulated bag onto the parking lot, into the rain. When he crouched to get them, cold spatters of rain fell on his neck and hair. Marge, though he hadn’t noticed her standing under the scaffolding, squatted beside him, reaching one of the truffles before he could.

“Are they ruined now?” she asked, and when he looked at her, he saw she was half drenched, holding a new cigarette.

“No. They were already ruined.” He took the fungus from her hand, and they both stood. Dropping them back into the bag, he knew telling her wouldn’t matter; she wouldn’t understand. “They’re fake. They aren’t even good truffles.”

They moved back to the security of the scaffolding. Marge took a drag from her cigarette, frowning at him—more out of curiosity than dislike. He was surprised that she didn’t seem mad from their interaction before. She exhaled smoke and spoke again.

“Rough day, huh?”

After considering it for a moment, he decided not to mention his mother. He shuddered, chilled from his moment in the rain.

“Just a normal day, really,” he said. Marge laughed, though he wasn’t sure why.

Rex eyed the building, the place where he brought all his failures, all the crimes against him. Maybe he needed to find a new drinking spot. Maybe, he considered reluctantly, he should
do what Julie had said months ago, and stop using the bar as a crutch. Maybe he should go to the
funeral. Maybe he should stop lying about the truffles he sold. Squinting out past the parking lot,
he noticed it was raining even harder now than it had been moments ago. He looked at the
woman standing next to him, who sucked on her cigarette without looking at him, but didn’t
seem averse to his presence. No longer holding on to the illusion of accomplishment, Rex let his
bag squish against the wet ground with something like relief. He crossed his arms over his chest
and inhaled Marge’s secondhand smoke. Under the scaffolding the two of them waited, probably
in vain, for the rain to clear.
When I was six, I found a bloody needle on the glossy, pale blue linoleum floor of my parents’ bathroom. It didn't look like much to me, then. It was only the blood, the tiny beads of brick-colored blood, that served as a sign not to touch it. To wait until Dani was awake, and ask her about it.

Dani was my best grown-up friend, my sister. Born from my mother’s first marriage, she was thirteen years my senior, taught me long division, and allowed an entire bag of Skittles after school when my mom tutored adults for their GED. My father went where work was available—to Hawaii or Denver or Orlando—bringing home stuffed toys and books that Dani would read to me in animated voices.

She didn’t wake up from her nap that day in time to explain the significance of the needle. The heroin that had been inside it now simmered in her veins while she slept. My mother got home first, so I asked her instead.

As my mom shook Dani awake, I knew I had done something bad. I had snitched, just like I snitched on the girl in art class for chewing bubblegum and sticking it under the desk. Dani was spread-eagled, each of her long, delicate limbs pointing a different direction. Still in her jeans and boots. The back of her hand, which hung limply off the bed, was covered in blood spotted Band-Aids.

When she opened her eyes, my mother spoke. Low and stern and final. She told Dani to leave. She said she didn't care where. She told her not to expect forgiveness this time, and never to approach me again. Dani left without looking at me, without questioning. Guilt painted the pit of my stomach, acidic. For hours I waited, first at the front of the house, then in the confinement
of my room when scolded for staring at the driveway through the glass door. When Dani returned that evening, she seemed blissful and sleepy to the point of stumbling, and my mom spoke in a splintered voice about calling the police. I wanted to follow Dani, to hug her goodbye, but my mother's hand held firmly onto my shoulder, shaking so violently that my body rattled in my shoes.

Earlier that afternoon, over ceramic bowls of frozen yogurt with whipped cream and chocolate syrup, Dani had mused aloud that it was someone's job to taste new flavors of ice cream.

“Someone gets paid to eat this shit,” she said. Somehow the image clicked, and I attributed this profession to her. Unemployment was something I was too young to consider. All adults did something during the day, and my mother frequently reminded Dani over the dinner table that she was “an adult now.” So when she would leave after lunch—off to parked cars in supermarket parking lots on Rosedale Street—part of me pictured her taking spoonfuls of things sweet and colorful and frozen. Ice Cream Girl. The Forever Kid.

Twelve

When I was in middle school, Dani and I used to wrestle. When I was a child she could ignore me, holding my body away from her when I tried to charge. But now, if I struck her at the right moment, I could get her to snap.

We looked alike: both of us like our mother. Strangers, neighbors, and servers in restaurants all loved to tell us so. We were like Russian dolls—replicas of each other in different
sized. Hollow cheeks, high cheekbones, identical eyes and eyebrows. The comments particularly
bothered Dani, who told me once that the idea emphasized how young she appeared—so similar
to a girl who hadn’t reached puberty. When someone would mention our similarity, she would
cross her arms over her underdeveloped chest, tuck her chin, and resort to the angst of her
adolescence though she was well into her twenties. My mother would respond cheerfully
enough, but I was the one who really liked it, blushing at the thought of resembling Dani:
striking and sophisticated, applying dark mascara and ruby lipstick every morning at the vanity
in her bedroom.

An older man at the grocery store commented on our similarities one Saturday morning,
and I noticed her usual slouch and scowl. While my mom unloaded produce from brown paper
bags into our refrigerator, I moved behind Dani and pulled back the snap of her bra, releasing it
so it popped loudly against her skin.

“Ow!” She turned, rounding on me.

“Itty bitty titty committee!” I called childishly, thinking it would make her chase me.

It did. I was small and pliable back then, rug-burns permanently placed on my elbows,
scabs re-opening on my knees before they had time to heal and fall away. She caught me as I ran
into the hallway, turning a sharper corner and shoving me to the ground. My slaps and kicks
were more curiosity than hostility. He was right about us—the man from the store. Dani’s limbs
were mine, but long; her hair was mine, but beautiful. Touching her skin was like touching my
own—like touching your foot after it has numbed, past the point of pins and needles.

My mother called out for us to quit and we ignored her. I pulled at Dani’s hair. When she
shouted that I was a bitch, I laughed, dragging her arm over the point on the floor where carpet
and tile met, where the little staples that held them together stuck up like land mines in the
battlefield that was our home. She shrieked, her skin tearing, and I was almost surprised that I couldn’t feel the pain as my own. Even the constellations of freckles on our arms were the same. She was still mad at me that evening when my mom found her slumped over the toilet.

Pants at her ankles, boxers on, needle hanging out of her leg below the knee. She wasn’t breathing. I followed the sound of my mother’s gasp, and watched as she felt for a pulse. When she saw me, she told me to call 911. Dani’s hands were white, her face splotched like a rotten fruit, shades of black and blue. I ran to the phone, returned to the bathroom, and put the dispatcher on speaker, who told my mom that they were sending an ambulance, but we should attempt CPR. Her eyes moved from the phone to my face, and a kind of shadow crossed her face, a thought that I somehow knew was about me.

“Cat, sweetie,” she said, “I need you to help me.”

Together we moved Dani on her back on the bathroom floor, counting down from three to lift and lower her, like rearranging limp, uncooperative furniture. The man over the phone told my mother to breathe into her mouth.

“Her tongue is in the way,” she said to the phone, and stuck her fingers in Dani’s mouth before the dispatcher could tell her not to. Dani bit, and my mom sucked air through her teeth and pulled away, shaking her hand. Then she laughed, a foreign sound in the silence of crisis.

Once she blew hard enough for Dani’s tongue to move, she shoved on my sister’s chest to release the air. She switched back and forth between these things.

“Is it working?” the dispatcher said.

“I don’t know.” My mother said, her tone not unlike someone discussing weather predictions. I just held the phone, staring at Dani’s discolored face, wondering if she might
cough back into consciousness like nearly-drowned characters in movies. Then I thought, just for a moment, that I was looking at a corpse. The skin on her arm was still broken from our fight.

When the ambulance arrived, so did the cops. I couldn’t remember if my mother had said anything about an overdose on the phone, but I knew it was, and somehow the police did too. In the front yard an officer told us that Dani was going to be okay. The sky turned the color of a blood orange, the emergency vehicles shifted to silhouettes. I wondered if she would go to jail now, if my mom would be sad, if my dad would be relieved. I frowned at my feet and crossed my arms to still my quaking body.

“Is she going to have brain damage or something?” My mother asked the cop, and I thought this was the kind of conversation she wouldn’t want me to hear. When I started toward the house, she stopped me, and squeezed my hand tight enough for the tips of my fingers to grow cold.

Two

I don’t remember the way Dani first looked at me. She wasn’t the right age, at thirteen, to have a fascination with babies. With anything, really.

My mother almost never spoke about my baby years. Once, though, after an interaction with the cops, my mother sat beside me on the couch and spoke about the first time Dani called her from the police station. Tapping a fingernail rhythmically against her wine glass, dark shadows crossing her face from the flickering television screen, she told me Dani was in high school, and I was a toddler.
Dani and her friends, my mother said, would pour shots from their parents’ liquor cabinets and replace them with water. On a weeknight, with nothing but a driving permit, Dani and those friends used my father’s car to meet up with some college boys in their dorm room a few blocks away. She spun the car out of control—there was no collision other than the curb she rolled over at some high speed, which flattened and contorted all four wheels. No one was hurt.

When the Fayetteville police department called the house, I started to cry. My mom brought me with her—strapped me into the car seat in the back—and rushed to save her daughter, assuming Dani would be terrified.

She wasn’t. Drunk and laughing, she twisted her body in the passenger seat to look at me, interrupting my mom’s chastising, to point out the baby.

“Look at Cat,” she said, and smiled a clown-like smile in an attempt to make me imitate the look. “Babies are weird. If you look at them, they’re kind of like drunk adults. Weirdly shaped, bald, drunk adults.”

My mother asked if she was even listening. While the argument continued, Dani kept her eyes on me, laughing as I mirrored her every move.

Thirteen

In an effort to protect my preteen innocence, my father made up lies about Dani’s jail time. He said things like “the farm” and “out east,” like when a family dog passes away. My mom knew I’d witnessed too much, that protection was too late, but she didn’t say this to my dad. After she was released, she worked in retail, lived out of a matchbox apartment in Siloam
Springs. I was in junior high when I saw her again, and had reached my prime awkward years: braces and coke-bottle glasses and hair so long I could tuck it in the back of my jeans.

Since she wasn’t welcome to parole to our house, something I’d heard my father say, I saw her when she came on a Saturday night, several weeks after her release, for a celebratory dinner. In the half hour leading to her arrival, I stood in the bathroom, worried about the swollen, sensitive skin around my eyes. A boy from class had bullied me through instant-messaging, and the worst thing Dani could possibly learn about me was that students at school made me cry. I stuck my face under the running water of the sink, trying to lessen the swelling but crying harder instead, thinking of the way boys had always looked at Dani, and surely would never look at me.

At the table, discomfort hung around us as thickly as the smell of our oven-baked lasagna. Dani looked just as she did before, but smaller. Less solid. Her eyes were still dark, still bloodshot, squinting nearly to the point of shutting them when she smiled. Large teeth, pinched nose, and hair that fell, soft and nearly without pigment, around her shoulders. She bore scars she didn't have before—deep white grooves down the insides of her forearms. Pockmarks at the creases of her elbows. her knee bounced next to mine, disturbing the tablecloth.

During dinner, she and I made conversation. At the time I thought perhaps she had missed our camaraderie, unwilling to assume she simply didn’t want to speak to her mom, or stepdad.

“Used to be me,” she said, indicating my seat in the corner, of the large indoor plant behind me that tickled my neck when the air conditioner turned on. “Good to know they're m-making it a rite of passage, that st-tupid tree.” She stuttered, her voice loud. My parents watched their plates as they ate, my dad occasionally looking to my mother, who didn’t look back.
We were washing dishes—Mom rinsed, I dried—when Dani disappeared. My mom muttered to herself, scrubbing forcefully. When Dani returned much later, my mother demanded she admit that she was high. She did not.

The trash bag held carefully away from my body fell absently to my side when I reached the porch and noticed Dani on the steps. Her back was facing me, but I could still see the orange prescription bottle I associated with strep throat in one hand, the other palm open. She held a significant pile of large, white oval pills that looked painful to swallow. Out loud, she counted the pills into the orange bottle and—it was obvious from her fractured voice—she was crying.

“Are you okay?” I asked, and Dani nearly jumped to her feet in surprise, a few pills skipping down the porch steps. She turned and her eyes narrowed at me.

“Scram!” she said. Her eyes were swollen, like mine had been before dinner. “I’ll come back in a minute, okay?”

She got on her knees to look for the fallen pills. Her behavior, so teary and panicked, made me think of bullying—the way her knees crunched against the dirt, the way she cried. Wanting to help look for the pills, I stepped closer, but her head snapped up to glare at me in warning.

Sixteen

After two treatment centers in six months, it wasn’t so much trust as blind hope that let my mother allow Dani to pick me up from school on Wednesdays and take me to the moldy duplex she rented, where I doodled moodily in my world history textbook until I could go home.
for dinner. My mom never knew that by the third week of school, Dani asked me to take the bus to her place. At the time she also didn’t know that Dani had a boyfriend, Mac: a stocky, red faced man who worked at the used car lot on Sycamore—the one with the blue tinsel banners and prices written on the windshields with window marker.

I didn’t like that she drank, and I knew she did. What bothered me more was that she never talked to me when I visited her. Dani and Mac moved around the house with dead stares, like sleepwalking. She didn’t even talk to Mac, unless they shut the door to her room. She told our mother that things were great, better than ever. She signed up for kinesiology classes at the university, and one of them was fencing. Her voice over the phone, which Mom put on speaker, was chipper and enthusiastic, and she begged for me to get one day a week with her. To learn some fencing stances, and maybe get some driving practice in her car with my new permit. I looked around her apartment for university textbooks, but couldn’t find any in the clutter.

Mac talked to me sometimes. He brought me suckers with chewing gum in the center, and always managed to meet me in the narrow hallway when I was in a bath towel from using Dani’s shower after school. He would smile, breathing near me. His face reminded me so entirely of a shark’s face that I was surprised his teeth weren’t filed down to points.

One day in December I took the bus home, ice flakes falling silently against the hand-printed window, only to find Dani’s door locked and the lights off inside. I sat on the porch and shuddered for ten, twenty, forty minutes—until my fingers turned blue and my lungs felt chapped from the inside out. Dani’s neighbor was home, and let me thaw in her kitchen while she called the number on her refrigerator, which was for the dealership.
Mac didn’t offer me a shark smile when he picked me up, and I knew he was mad at Dani for making him leave work. He told me we were going back to the dealership, and I didn’t respond, watching outside as the sleet piled up around street gutters.

In his parked car, surrounded on all sides by run-down, paint-peeled cars and glittering blue tinsel, I stared forcefully at the hand written price on a windshield and felt the damp warmth of his hand on my thigh.

“Your sis can be a real bitch sometimes, you know that?”

I focused on keeping my breathing quiet, as though he might forget my existence. A knock on the passenger window made both of us flinch. Something like guilt rattled in my chest.

Dani pointed to the window crank, which I churned awkwardly until it was all the way down.

Dani’s eyes looked strange, sunken, as if they absorbed rather than reflected the light. Her arms resting on the base of the open window, she looked across the car to Mac, then to me.

“What’s going on here?” She asked, and her voice was dull, though not slurred.

“You left your kid sister, the neighbor had to call the fucking dealership.” He got out, slammed the door behind him. Once he was indoors, she looked back at me.

“What was the deal?” she asked, nodding to my lap to show me what she saw.

“Your boyfriend is a creep.”

Using the outside handle, she swung the door open and pulled me out by the front of my shirt before I had time to realize what was happening. My back slammed against the car, forcing the air out of my lungs. In an almost out of body experience, as if seen from outside the interaction, my sister grabbed me in some way (the arm? The waist?) and I heard, rather than felt, myself hit the slushy ground with a thwap, an ungraceful collapse that brought down some
of the ice trapped in the crevices of Mac’s car. Two bruises formed, later: one on the ball of my hand, the other on my hip, both the color of red wine.

Twenty

The first piece of apartment-living advice, before the cardboard boxes had even been carried to the recycle bin, came from my father: Don’t let Dani stay here.

When she first came to visit, she wore a sundress—a solid peach color with lace on the sleeves—and brought a glass vase of spider lilies as a housewarming gift. A thin girl by nature, her bones now looked as though they were trying to escape her skin. Knees protruding, shoulders sharp. Unsettled by her new look, I let her in without question. She pulled at the skin around her nails and told me she was better.

“Don’t I look better?”

I told her yes, that I was proud.

When she proposed that I let her stay, the idea was that she needed one more credit check before she would get approved for her new apartment in Bentonville. I didn’t believe her—I never believed her. But the lilies were fresh and bright green, and when I touched them, she said they were my favorite color, which was true.

The apartment was in a huge complex, a red-brick building in the middle of other red-brick buildings, and our unit was on the second floor. I took the bus to my classes at the university, and came home in the evening to find Dani asleep or out. We didn’t see each other much.
The day I skipped class and took the bus home in the afternoon, Dani was out by the street when the bus squeaked and hissed to a stop. She wore my sweatshirt, an old one my dad got me in New Mexico, the thick sleeves pushed up past her elbows. She used a long, thick branch to poke the leaves of a tree high above her head.

Fall in Arkansas produces webworms: tree worms that live in thick, webbed nests in the trees like pale grocery sacks clinging to the edges of branches. They crop up in late summer, and by winter the caterpillars turn to moths, the white gauze-like substances disappearing when they transform. They were a part of the season, like heavy, lazy mosquitos in the spring. Dani’s stick, which was thicker than her arm, poked at a sack of webworms.

Stepping off the bus, I walked around the tree to see her face: manic, determined, her eyes wide, her teeth grinding in concentration. I didn’t even get to ask what she was doing before the nest broke.

The jagged edge of the stick tore the gauze and pulled, opening the nest from the bottom and releasing thick, gray worms onto Dani’s head. Her yelp was belated, as though she didn’t realize what was happening until it was over. She held her arms out and her head down, like someone just doused in water. Tightening and releasing one of the straps of my backpack, I watched with the others getting off the bus, most of them college students. The ones who hadn’t looked at her before had turned in curiosity at the scream, and some of them were laughing now. I grimaced at the scene, but sick pleasure churned in my gut—pleasure that would turn to guilt later. Caterpillars curled and stretched in the grass at her feet and in her hair, and she trembled in disgust but made no attempt to shake them off. She didn’t look up until I stepped closer, took her hand, pulled her away from the tree and toward our apartment. She hadn’t seen me get off the bus, but followed me without reaction.
Dani joined me on the balcony when the sun was nearly down, her hair wet and clean and her eyes considerably clearer than before. She back on the iron railing, arms crossed, looking at me. Cross-legged on our only piece of patio furniture, I picked caterpillars out of the folds of my sweatshirt. I had pulled it over Dani’s head once we got to the apartment, instructing her to put her arms in the air—like undressing a child.

“I don’t know,” she said, before I could ask. “I thought all the white stuff in the tree was ugly, I wanted it out.”

“You knew there were bugs in there,” I said.

“I don’t know,” she repeated. Looking from the sweatshirt in my lap to my face, she started to smile. It was contagious.

I tried to look stern. “Did you have to be wearing my hoodie?”

The streetlights made her almost a silhouette. She looked like my mother.

Pointing at me, she said, “I hope you vacuum those fuckers up—the ones that got inside.”

“We’ll find them in the cereal boxes next week.”

She shuddered, more for my amusement than real revulsion. “Worst thing that’s ever happened to me,” she said, and her eyes were crescent-shaped, grinning now. When I held the article of clothing toward her, she flinched playfully. “Get that thing away from me.” She went indoors, the door clicking softly behind her.

In the street, the last bus of the day groaned into motion. I watched it pull down the street and around the corner, thinking that she would have to leave, once I found the drugs. I wouldn’t look for them, but something would show up eventually, under the sink or in the laundry.
Eighteen

Dani left for another treatment center during my last spring break as a high schooler. I’d visited Hendrix college in Conway with my dad, who wanted me to stay in Fayetteville but kept relatively quiet about it, understanding the hypocrisy of wanting me around. Before I put my bags down I found my mother in my room, rifling through the desk.

“Hey!” I shouted, my teenage concept of privacy sensitive and violated. My mom started, bolting around to face me.

“Jesus, Cat, you scared me,” she said.

“What are you doing in my stuff?”

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I need Dani’s keys.”

Coming in I had noticed Dani’s car in the driveway, the parking job crooked enough that my dad left his by the curb in front of the house.

“Oh,” I said, confused. “Well they wouldn’t be in here. She can’t find them?”

My mother’s face twisted into one I’d seen before. “I’m so sorry, Cat,” she said, and I put my bags down with a resigning thud.

The story wasn’t any different or less dramatic than it ever was. Except that she was selling this time, which, at least to the family, was considered news. Dani had fallen asleep on the couch the day before when some clean-cut college boys in backwards caps came by the house. Looking anywhere but my mom’s face, they claimed to be friends of Dani’s.

“Your sister is too old to be hanging out with frat boys,” my mother said. “That’s how I knew.”
Kicking the bedpost, I accused Dani of leaving during spring break on purpose, so she wouldn’t have to say goodbye. Nausea sloshed in my stomach. My mom looked into my face but I didn’t look back, angry with her.

“Anyway,” she said finally, “I need her keys and I can’t find them. I think she hid them from me. I want to find anything that might be in her car, so she doesn’t run right back to it, you know.”

“When is she coming back?”

“Oh,” she stood, stepped toward to the door. “I don’t know. But she will. She always comes back.” Her voice cracked at the end of her sentence. Already out the door, she added, “She said she would call you tonight, Cat. Only if you want to hear from her.”

The Hendrix pamphlet, which lay on my bed beside my backpack, had smiling faces all throughout it. I opened it to a picture of two boys in baseball caps, textbooks under their folded arms, and wondered what those guys at the door had thought about Dani.

That evening I helped clear the dinner table before lying to my parents, telling them I needed the space for homework. The kitchen was the best spot for phone calls, even though the phone in there had been my grandmother’s and made a consistent crinkling sound over the receiver. It was the farthest room in the house from my parents’ room, and the walls and counter formed a nook in the corner that made you almost entirely closed off from the rest of the house.

Dani would call soon, and she would want to talk to me. I pulled out homework from weeks ago and sat on the chair by the indoor plant. My shoulders were tight, my elbows on the table, digging deep into the loose woven tablecloth. The old fashioned yellow landline in front of me like an opponent in one of the fencing lessons that, looking back, Dani probably never
attended. Prepared as I was, the sound of the phone ringing—a hollow clanging that bounced off the kitchen tile—startled me.

Twenty-Eight

My daughter, Lauren, was four by the time Dani finally met her. Rehabilitation centers, hospitals, halfway houses, and prison for ten months made Dani hard to reach. Her letters were short—our conversations stripped of anything personal. Just updates, mainly about our mother, and a half-hearted interest on her part about how “the baby,” as she called it, was doing. She called my daughter “the baby” even when I wrote about Lauren’s fourth birthday.

The day Dani came to visit, I sat Lauren down to explain who she was about to meet. That summer Lauren wore her salmon-colored rain coat every day, even when Fayetteville hadn’t seen rain in weeks.

“Lauren,” I said, my voice measured. The little girl on the chair in front of me swung her legs and looked around the kitchen like she’d never seen it before. “Lauren, honey, are you listening?”

“Yeah.” Still not looking at me.

“You’re going to meet your aunt today. You’ve never met her before, but she’s been gone. She went somewhere bad, okay? But she’s back now. She’s a good person, Lauren. Are you listening?”

My daughter looked nothing like me, even as an infant. She came out of the womb with a pile of black hair. In her first year, I spent a lot of time feeling grateful that she didn’t fit the
mold of every woman who came before her. She was not the smallest piece in our set of nesting dolls.

She nodded, looking at me. “What’s her name?”

“Dani. Her name is Aunt Dani.”

“That’s a boy’s name.”

I smiled at the direction my four-year-old had decided to take this discussion. The conversation felt important: like I could get it wrong, like I could say something wrong. But Lauren didn’t have any other aunts or uncles. Perhaps she was too young to question the idea that I’d waited four years to mention my sister.

“I know,” I said. “It’s your great-granddaddy’s name, but spelled differently.”

“Why did Aunt Dani go somewhere bad if she’s a good person?”

Lauren was so small—dangling her legs from the wooden chair at our kitchen table. Squatting down next to her, I had no answer to this question. Any explanation would just confuse Lauren more.

“Good people make mistakes too,” I said. After Lauren nodded, I stood, but added a final thought. “If you see her doing anything funny, you should tell me, okay? Even if it’s something you don’t understand.”

When Dani arrived, it was afternoon. Lauren sat, still in her rain coat, eating steamed carrots at the kitchen table. More carrots were piled on a second plate beside her.

“Door,” she called, though the knock was so faint I hadn’t heard it. Sunlight fell on every surface through the open windows. The contents of my stomach twisted in anticipation. Dani wore a cotton sweater and ill-fitting blue jeans. One of her running shoes was untied, the laces white and clean. Her smile seemed hesitant.
“Hi, Dani.” I spoke first. We hugged, the embrace calculated. For someone so thin, Dani’s body was surprisingly solid, her frame harder and more present than I expected. I stepped backward into my house, holding out my arm as an invitation.

“Wow,” Dani said, her eyes raking the walls and furniture. “This is nice.”

My daughter, visible from the front door, waved at us from her chair.

“Come here, honey,” I told her. “It’s polite to greet guests at the door.”

Dani made a swatting motion with her hand and moved to the kitchen.

“You must be Lauren,” she said. I was surprised to hear the name, almost expecting Dani to call her the baby.

“And you’re Aunt Dani.”

Dani smiled. I could see straight through her thinning hair to her scalp. “You ready for some rain, Lauren?”

Lauren shrugged. I explained that she would sleep in the jacket if I let her. When Dani sat and pointed to the second plate of carrots—“Are these for me?”—Lauren assured her that they were not.

“They’re for Atlanta, not you,” Lauren said.

“The city?”

Lauren giggled. I doubted Lauren knew that Atlanta was a city. “No,” she said. “My best friend.”

My sister looked to me; I mouthed imaginary, and she nodded. Neither her eyes nor her fingers shifted like they once had. After Dani popped a piece of carrot into her mouth, laughing at Lauren’s disapproval, I let myself breathe, and walked out of the room. I left Dani at the table...
with my daughter, assuring myself that it meant something for Dani’s fingernails to be clean, for her to smell like detergent.

That evening Dani and Lauren ate ice cream in front of the television. Leaning against the doorframe between the kitchen and living room, I watched them for a moment. It was a familiar image, though Dani was no longer a teenager, and Lauren sat as far from her aunt as possible. Then, while they talked over the exaggerated sound-effects of cartoons, I went outside to Dani’s car—a rusty, used sedan with a scented Christmas tree hanging from the rearview mirror. I shielded the outside light with cupped hands, peering into every window. There was nothing in the car, not even crumpled receipts or a thermos in the cup-holder. I checked twice to be sure.

Dani was clean now, it seemed. Leaning back against the car, I closed my eyes, knowing it wasn’t enough. I knew that each time she visited Lauren, I would pretend to read in the bedroom, listening. I would smell her water bottles when her back was turned. I would check her pulse while she slept.
Two weeks after a doctor told me I was going to lose my hearing, I headed south. I had lived inland my whole life, my ear pressed to the large decorative seashell my mother bought when I was a little girl. Inside the sand-colored coil, the sound of the wind across the ocean’s surface had put the idea in my head that living by the water was like a whole other world, one where everything breathed.

The diagnosis—an eventual silent world—pushed me to mentally tally all I had accomplished. At twenty-three I lived with my mother, had 480 dollars in savings, and earned minimum wage selling no-slip work shoes and practical pumps at the shopping center in Morrilton, Arkansas—a town with no significance other than being the only town I’d ever known. The idea burrowed into my thoughts, swelled, and suffocated me. When I left I was down to 462 dollars in savings after filling my gas tank and buying detailed roadmaps of Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas.

I didn’t tell my mother I was leaving. I left in the morning, thinking my mom would still be asleep and I could slip my suitcase out without any questions. It wasn’t early enough to be dark, but my house was always dim and shadowy, with thick curtains and yellow dome-shaped light fixtures and dirty furniture that felt damp in the summers. When I dragged my duffel into the living room, however, my mom was already in the kitchen: still in her blue faux-silk robe, her hair clipped up in tortoise-shell patterned, plastic barrettes from her morning bath. She pressed a button on the coffee pot before shuffling her slippers across the dusty linoleum to the opposite counter and unzipping her handbag, which was covered in sequins.

“Good morning, Rosie,” she said, removing a single cigarette and a plastic lighter from her bag. She turned back to the coffee, and I hurried past her to the front door, hoping she hadn’t
noticed the stuffed duffel. The parlor was narrow and opened up to the living room and the kitchen, making her disappear and reappear from my line of vision as she puttered. I couldn’t see the television, but I knew it was on; it was always lit up when my mom was home, even if it was just muted, snowy pixels. A silver boxy thing with a built-in VCR, it emitted the usual static hum from corner of the room.

“Morning,” I said, and kept moving. If she wasn’t paying attention, she would just think I was going to work. I’d reached the front porch when she called my name sharply through the screen door. I winced.

“Yes?”

“Water the begonias for me before you leave, will you?”

Exhaling, I kept toward the car. “Make Martin do it!” I shouted behind me. Our neighbor, Martin, was only seven years my senior but often the target of my mom’s inappropriate flirting. Mostly when I used him to push away responsibilities delegated by my mother, she didn’t protest.

I didn’t hear a response, and shoved everything into the car before she could think of something else she wanted to tell me. I’d planned for a dramatic glance back at my house, but the narrow escape flustered me; I didn’t even look in the rearview mirror before I turned the corner on to Poor Farm Road.

The day I learned about my diagnosis, the doctor—a man with an overlarge jaw and a heavily cleft chin—had called me “young lady,” and explained a few details of my disease before giving it a name: Meniere’s. It sounded like a French dish or restaurant, though it was
more like spikes of temporary deafness and dizziness before potentially losing my hearing all
together.

The doctor was not one I’d ever visited before. I was young and healthy, and I’d had no
reason for a primary physician since I left my Arkansas Kids First pediatrician at eighteen. I
considered telling him this—about never needing a doctor—as though it had some relevance,
like I could get off with a warning this time. His brows pulled closer together and his voice
carried the hushed quality of one trying not to wake a sleeping person, and as he talked he
pointed out various pastel-colored sections of the inner ear on a laminated illustration of an ear
drum.

On the ramp onto the interstate, I stuck a finger in my ear, feeling the unremarkable,
waxy interior. I pictured it with the colors from the doctor’s drawing, but it didn’t help me
imagine what was going on in there.

I looked back to the map, unfolded on the passenger seat. I knew that by taking the
simplest interstate highways as directly south as I could manage, I would eventually get to the
water. It wasn’t the water itself I was aiming for, but the air that came with it. Even on visits to
the lake as a child, the wind felt fresh, colder, and I could hear the trees and the creaking, old
boats, permanently docked. We were always alone and yet everything seemed alive. On my
mother’s bedroom wall hung an impressionist-style painting of a little girl, face obscured by her
windswept hair, in a white dress with a bright red kite. Her feet were placed in the shallow water,
her head tiled back, looking up to the sun and the little red diamond, which has caught a breeze
that is understood, but not felt, from the dark master bedroom in Morrilton. Since I was the age
of the child in the painting I wanted to become the faceless girl.
The shadows in my car moved and stretched slowly, the experience of travel new to me and dishearteningly slow-paced. When I had broken the news to my mom about my disease, she’d asked if I could get a hearing aid—as though she could think of a simple solution that hadn’t occurred to me. Of course I could get hearing aids. I would need them, the doctor said, before too long. But that didn’t help deafness—the real kind. The doctor had described it as profound deafness. The word seemed so dramatic that I wondered if it was a technical label, or one he had used for effect.

My uncle Henry, my mother’s youngest brother, was totally deaf. I’d always seen him as sort of an outsider. My family—not an overly close group to begin with—loved him out of obligation, and considered him a dead-end: he would never marry and never have kids to join me and my cousins at the stained card-table where the kids ate holiday dinners. The children in the family were often imposing—all whines and screams and dirty fingernails—but at least they had futures.

Henry was poor, even by our standards. He lived in a mobile home that never moved, and worked for a Baptist church in Perry County, though I never knew what he did. Faded Hawaiian shirts—fleshy pink and brick orange with outlines of identical flowers—made up his entire wardrobe. When he spoke, his consonants were all filed down to the same sound, somewhere between a “d” and a “t.” I’d never thought to ask my mom how or when he lost his hearing, assuming he’d been that way from birth. I tapped my tongue to the roof of my mouth, imitating the sound.

Oklahoma was mostly flat land the color of burned toast. Perspiration from my palms made the steering wheel slick, and I turned up the car’s AC, wishing I had watered those begonias after all. There was no reason to ignore such a simple request. The potted flowers were
the only living things in our yard: summer in Arkansas left the air heavy and still and thick with insects. The only other plant on our land was a peach tree, and it was in the back yard. It was leafless and black now, only occasionally sprouting weak pink flowers, and even that was only in springtime. I hated the tree. The thought of leaving it made me smile.

The peach tree was lopsided with prickly, soot-colored bark and sharp edges that, as a child, had made it unpleasant to climb. In the summers up until I reached puberty the branches sprouted peaches. Most years the fruit was inedible: fuzzy and green and hard little things that never grew past the size of golf balls. But when I was five, the peaches miraculously grew into large yellow-and-rust orbs that I could smell from my bedroom window.

Until that point in my life, I’d never eaten a peach. One afternoon I stood in the backyard with my mother, and discovered the soft, sweet food for the first time. On my fourth bite I went for the bright red center. My mom’s eyes had grown wide, and she took my wrist and pulled it away from my mouth.

“Did you eat the pit?” She’d asked, her voice an octave higher than usual. I nodded, feeling the rough surface of the seed with my tongue. “Don’t do that, baby,” she had said. “Spit it out.”

I obeyed. It hit the grass with a tiny thud.

“What would have happened if I ate the pit?”

She took another bite of her own peach and chewed slowly before answering. “The seed in the peach becomes a seed in your belly. Seeds plant trees. So a tree just like this one would grow inside you.”

“Nuh-uh,” I’d said.
“It’s the truth. Up your throat and out your mouth, and you could never speak again. People would call you tree-girl and everyone would forget your name.”

I hadn’t believed the story, but when I’d looked at the remainder of the fruit in my sticky hand, I had crinkled my nose with distaste. My mother just laughed.

The tree had only fulfilled its purpose that one summer. Mostly it was all bare, knobby branches. Yawning and changing the radio station, I considered the average life span of peach trees. In my limited knowledge, I had no way of knowing if it was dead, or sick, or old, or just in the wrong climate.

Melodramatically I wondered if the begonia request would be the last interaction I ever had with my mom. What would she do when I never came home from work? I was an adult, it wasn’t like she could put my face on a milk carton. Not that she would want to, I reminded myself. Perhaps she would be glad for the space. The stuff that piled in corners—the decade-old mail, the unused, once brightly-colored exercise tools, the empty birdcage and dusty, broken electronics—would go into my bedroom, I thought. Maybe Martin would help her move it all some gray, soggy weekend afternoon.

At a gas station that smelled of processed meat and mayonnaise, I used a payphone to call the phone number that Tammy, a coworker at the shoe store, had scribbled on the back of a sticky bit of newspaper. I had thought too much and planned too little about this trip, I did manage to scrape up a place to stay the night on my way through Texas. Tammy was a student at the community college and the type of girl who blushed upon hearing swear words or anatomical terms. She was the only one I told about the trip, and the closest thing I had to a friend: our lunch breaks usually involved mushy sandwiches on the pollen-dusted park bench outside the store, her giggles shrill and scandalized at my mildly crude jokes. During an unusually somber lunch, I told
her my idea moving to the sea. Her sister Sunny, she told me, didn’t live by the water, but she
did live in Dallas. She wrote a number on the corner of her makeshift placemat.

The mechanical trilling of the phone continued for so long that I almost gave up,
inwardly tallying how much money I had left for hotels. Finally, a voice identical to Tammy’s
greeted me through the receiver.

“Hi,” I said, remembering from a story long ago that Sunny and Tammy were twins. “Is
this Sunny?”

“Speaking.” Her voice didn’t share Tammy’s warmth.

“My name is Rose. Tammy told you about me?”

“Oh yeah. The one who needs to crash.”

The line crackled distantly. I became suddenly aware she was thinking of refusing me.
She cleared her throat, exhaled into the receiver. Asked what time she should expect company.
When I hung the phone back on its hook, the ear that had been receiving Sunny’s information
began to whistle, a solid note ringing just beneath my eardrum. Pitched like an irritating alarm, it
rose from a whistle to a whine, and the world fell sideways. I leaned on the side of the phone
booth, slumping down against the skateboard stickers and key-scratched initials.

It had happened a few times now, the true loss of balance. It was the reason I’d seen the
doctor in the first place. Ten, twenty, sometimes thirty seconds of not knowing which surface
was the ground. The shrill sound in my ear, which usually only happened to one at a time, didn’t
necessarily signify dizziness. They often came together, but the whistle simply warned of
hearing loss, of silence to come. My legs suddenly awkward, like walking on stilts, I staggered
slightly back to the car, where I leaned over the car door, sucking up the hot, dusty air.
Sunny lived in a townhouse in some distant corner of Dallas, nowhere near the skyscrapers and blaring horns of the city. Tammy had said she was a model for catalogs, and though I knew they were twins, Tammy was unspectacular in appearance, so I’d expected someone beautiful. Sunny lingered in the doorway for a beat, sizing me up and chewing gum. The setting sun and lit interior made her a silhouette, me in the spotlight created by the overhead just inside the door. Startlingly similar to Tammy in the face, she was a thinner, stretched version of her sister, like a slinky that had been pulled too far. Unlike my friend, she wore excessive black eye makeup, her hair sawed off at the jawline. When she turned and started up the carpeted stairs, I only knew to follow her because she was talking.

“You can sleep on the couch up here.” Her gum popped between words. From the back the combination of her short hair and loose posture, the way her body moved with less restriction, made me reconsider her similarity to Tammy.

“I think this room was meant to be the master bedroom,” she said, “but the window faces the train tracks. Kept me up at night. So I switched the living room and the bedroom and I sleep down there now.”

A few paces below Sunny on the stairs, I looked at the backs of her bare legs. Long white scars stretched horizontally just below her blue cotton shorts, nearer the insides of her thighs.

I thanked her for having me, and she responded by letting me know that she had work early in the morning, eight o’clock. She pointed to the couch, as through I might have trouble finding it. I tried to picture her interacting with her twin. The lack of connection between Tammy and Sunny reminded me very much of my own family—during our talks at work, any
mentioning of Sunny seemed a bit distant, like two people who know facts about each other but have never met.

She wandered away slowly; I began to unpack my sleepwear and toothbrush with equal caution. Both wondering what more there was to say to the other. When she returned, it was only to tell me she had ordered pizza, and I was allowed to share.

The food arrived and she brought it to my temporary bed, which I had already put together with the sheets she had left across the back cushions. She turned the television on at a low volume. Thankful for the distraction from the current social situation, I took a piece of pizza and watched a shampoo commercial with unnecessary intensity. The food in our laps made the comparison to lunch breaks with Tammy unavoidable.

“So what’s in Texas for you?” Sunny asked without inflection.

I considered the question. “A fresh start, I guess.”

Releasing a single huff of laughter, she started to pick the pepperoni slices off her pizza and eat them one at a time. “Good luck,” she said, sarcasm thick. Then she asked, “Is it about a boy?”

My turn to laugh. “No.”

“I left Arkansas because of a boy. Well, because my parents were being huge assholes. But also because this guy was a creep and I needed to get away from him.”

“Assholes how?”

This, it was obvious even from my peripheral view while I watched the television, was the wrong line of questioning. Sunny uncrossed and re-crossed her legs, frowning.
“I don’t know. But it was all shit.” She started to eat the rest of her pizza. After a few minutes focused on the sitcom’s canned laughter, she stood and raised the volume considerably using the remote on the denim colored ottoman in front of her.

“You want a beer or anything?” She said, still chewing. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

“No, that’s okay.”

She crossed between me and the television to get to the stairs while I pulled apart dry pizza crust with my fingers. It wasn’t until the bread was the consistency of sawdust that I wondered why Sunny hadn’t used the upstairs bathroom, which I could see from my place on the couch. Sunny’s resemblance to her sister had made me trust her, made me feel, at least in some way, like I knew her. A coil of anxiety tightened inside me and I turned down the volume, listened.

Retching. I could hear it from upstairs. Eyes on the flickering lights of the convex glass, I tensed, nauseated from the guttural sounds, followed by the sound of spitting. The sink ran; she gurgled. I looked to the half-eaten pizza. A memory resurfaced, one of Tammy explaining the process of rehabilitation centers. When I’d asked how she knew about it, she’d said her parents once looked into it for a family member. The color rising to her face, she told me not to question any further.

When Sunny reached the top of the stairs again, her eyes narrowed in my direction. I’d forgotten to turn the volume back up. Moving wordlessly to the couch, she exhaled. Ground her teeth. I watched the silent couple on the screen shout across a kitchen at each other.

“Are you done here?” she finally said, touching the grease-stained cardboard box between us.

“Yeah.” My voice came out too cheerful, falsely so.
She padded across the carpet in her socks, turning back to face me halfway across the room.

“Could you not tell Tammy about that?” She moved the pizza box vaguely in the direction of the stairs.

I nodded.

“It’s just not your business.”

Nodded again. She blew her bangs out of her face with a huff before resuming her trip to the garbage. I brushed crumbs off my temporary bed. When she spoke from the doorway again, I started.

“Hey,” she said, her voice small. “can you hear me?”

I looked over my shoulder at her. “Yes. Why?”

“I know you’re going deaf or whatever. My sister told me.”

The pit of my stomach spun. If she wanted to punish me for figuring out about her bulimia, it was working. I examined her face, but she blinked blankly as if she hadn’t said it at all.

“Is that what you’re running from?”

“No.” I answered too quickly.

She walked closer and perched on the arm of the couch, her eyes on her socks. “In high school I went to this career fair out of town.” She glanced at me, continued. “And there was this deaf school there. I don’t know if it was an actual school or what. But they were all so quiet in their group—it was kind of creepy how quiet. So we’re walking through them and my friend Coleen is like ‘oh my god it’s so quiet.’ We were standing in the middle of a group and no one was talking.”
Unsure of how to respond, I said, “huh.”

“They talked to us though, like they could talk. They read lips or something. This guy wanted Colleen’s number so bad. She was really nice to his face and then basically told him ‘no way, Jose,’ behind his back. Loud and everything. But he couldn’t hear.”

Morrilton was a small town. I knew Colleen. She had bucked teeth and smelled like peppermint, and I had liked her. A story I would’ve once forgiven was too close now. Too frightening.

“Well that was rude,” I said.

“And then we saw them that night.” She swished her toes against the carpet, kicking absently like a child in a highchair. “Me and my friends stayed in Fayetteville that night and used our fakes and we saw them at this eighteen-and-up club. They were dancing, and we were like ‘how can you dance with no music?’” She imitated someone shouting over loud noise, straining and dragging her words.

“What did they say?”

“I guess they can feel the vibrations in the floor and pick up the beat.”

Considering this, enough of a silence lapsed between us for her to startle me again when she spoke.

“Well, the bathroom’s right there. Like I said, I’m leaving in the morning and I have to lock the door behind me.”

“That’s fine,” I said.

She turned out the light on her way down, but the open blinds on the window left bright blue stripes across the room from the nearby streetlight. Once the shushing of her socks against the carpet was all the way down the stairs, I took my flannel pajama pants and t-shirt to the
bathroom and changed. Lying on top of the sheets I’d spread across the couch, I listened as the air conditioning clicked on, and then off again. The strange claustrophobia crept in through the still air. The train outside howled. Closing my eyes, I tried to feel the vibrations of its movement, the way the room rattled, and wondered if, without the train’s noise, I would know of its presence at all.

In the morning I collected my things silently and in the darkness. Eventually a light came on downstairs, and a microwave beeped. Like a teenager sneaking out in the night, I listened for the squeaking of each step as I carried my bag gingerly down to the entryway. For a moment I considered leaving without telling Sunny, eager to move south.

“There’s coffee in here,” she called, violently breaking the silence.

I exhaled, and stepped into the light of the area where her bedroom and kitchen connected. I hadn’t looked at the ground floor of the house yet, and hadn’t realized what an odd set-up it created to switch the two rooms. Her bed was unmade, the floor covered in articles of dark clothing. The tacked up posters of various runway shows and models, along with empty solo cups and beer bottles, gave the room the distinct look of a college dorm. The light on her ceiling fan was off, but the kitchen light spilled into the room as though lighting a set on the stage. Sunny, who was standing by the microwave, had on pajamas that might belong to a child: a flannel set, sky blue, with cartoon illustrations of various states of the weather: a raining cloud, a lightning bolt, a rainbow. She yawned.
“I have Eggos, too,” she said, and lifted a rubbery waffle with her hand, biting into it without butter or syrup. Declining the offer of breakfast, I filled a large mug with black coffee and leaned against the counter beside her. The microwave read 7:38.

Sunny ate three frozen waffles in the time it took me to drink one cup of coffee, then excused herself to the restroom. I felt committed to saying goodbye, and waited awkwardly in the kitchen while she vomited ten feet away. She didn’t try to cover the sound this time.

“Kind of thought you’d leave,” she said when she reemerged.

Uncomfortable and wanting to busy myself, I started to pour more coffee into my mug before realizing I would have to stay long enough to drink it. She crinkled the paper towel she had used as a plate and tossed it into the trashcan below the sink.

“You know,” she said, her voice measured. “People are so ready to judge. They say, ‘you’re not even that skinny.’ And I’m not. It’s like hell, this shit.” She laughed, forced and humorless.

My throat burned, scorched from taking repeated gulps of too-hot coffee. I wasn’t ready for a conversation about hell, or anything like it.

Then, in a voice significantly more shriveled, she said, “I’m stuck in a body that’s rejecting me.”

I knew the words weren’t intended for me; she seemed too distant, the words too quiet. Still, a thin layer of guilt painted my insides when I set the cup down and awkwardly thanked her for having me in her home.

She blinked, as though remembering my existence, and said “It was fine, whatever. Good luck with your clean slate.”
In Sunny’s driveway, heat sealed inside the car, I spread the Texas roadmap over my lap and thought about rejection. I’d always considered myself familiar with the concept. I’ve been turned down by men, jobs, schools. My mother rejected me, in her way. The idea of a body's rejection, though, had never occurred to me; I thought the body more of a protector. At seventeen, after using my new fake ID to poison myself with alcohol, my body ejected the stuff from my stomach into the sticky porcelain of a graffitied bathroom stall. Even before that in a cold, damp tent with my first boyfriend, mentally resigned, my body had seemed to recoil from his touch, muscles contracting like reeling in slack from a fishing line.

Sunny had said her body was rejecting her, rather than the other way around. I wondered what it felt like, what it meant, for a body to reject a person. If the body is doing the rejecting, what is there to reject? The soul, I supposed. Raising my hand to my right ear, I rubbed the pads of my first two fingers against my thumb. The same to my left. One could hear the shushing sound of friction more than the other, as usual. Though whether or not the volume was decreasing in general, I couldn’t say.

While the original intent had been to stop in Austin for gas on the way to the coast, I took the wrong interstate—forty-five instead of thirty-five—and found myself near Houston instead. It wasn’t until I looked at the map again, unable to find the town of “Montgomery” near the capital city, that I realized what I’d done. For a brief moment I felt heat rising to my face, panicking from the mistake. But there was nothing here for me, nor was there in Austin. No one’s sister awaited my phone call. At this point in my plan, there was no plan. Down the street
from where I stood at that gas station, colorful stores and restaurants sat close together, with wooden awnings over clean, cracked sidewalks and wicker patio furniture. The rooftops, some of them with balconies and more wicker, all sported at least two flags: one for the state and one for the country. Wooden welcome signs on rusty chains creaked in the breeze, giving the whole town the look of an old western film, except the palm trees, which dotted the corners of streets. No one was at the gas station, and no cars moved on the streets, though it was nearly noon. The sounds of chiming laughter, chatter, people, skipped down the street with the wind like leaves. Parking my car at the fuel pump, I followed the welcoming hum, which grew less faint with every palm tree I passed.

The Montgomery farmer’s market, the size of which equaled a couple of blocks, occupied an open, grassy area beside—to my delight—a glittering lake. Card tables crowded with produce and art and flowers formed distinguishable but sloppy rows, some of the tables covered with canopies where flags and tapestries hung, flapping away from the water. Between these rows, residents wearing bright colors held the hands of their children. Some of the market goers, to my surprise, carried cameras and Texas maps or guidebooks, though I wasn’t sure what tourists would be doing in such a seemingly small town.

For all its verve and despite its color, something about the scene around me seemed disconnected, different. I stepped under a canopy of hanging t-shirts so not to stop the creeping flow of shoppers and looked out toward the water.

“Can I help you with something, young lady?” A graying man with acne scars stepped out from behind the cash box on his card table. Young lady. The doctor had addressed me the same way.
His table seemed an assortment of things—mostly tourist items like t-shirts and various sizes of flags, but some fruit and homemade jam piled in the corner, almost like an afterthought. The words printed across most of the hanging shirts said: Montgomery! Birthplace of the Lone Star Flag.

“The state flag was made here,” I said, finally understanding.

The man laughed. “Not from around here?”

I said no, and touched the fabric. The breeze gave the shirt the illusion of breath. Hung beside it and only available in tie-dye colors, another shirt read the name of the town, with the words “still strong” and a date. October 1994.

“What happened in October?” I asked.

The man came and stood beside me, looking at the article of clothing. “That was the flood. Came up from the water, there, and into people’s homes.”

I looked out at the lake again, and realized now that what seemed odd was the trees. All around the water, the trees were bare, almost smooth, and bent in dramatic arcs away from the lake, as though cowering from it. Some of the bends in the trees looked so intentional that, if it weren’t for the occasional break, I might have believed they’d just grown that way.

“Cool,” I said, unaware that the graying man was still listening.

“It wasn’t cool. People had to rebuild their lives.”

Because I was hungry, or perhaps from guilt about my careless comment, I paid with quarters for the best looking peach in the pile before wandering away from his canopy and back into the sunlight. The history of this place—while ironed on to tie-dyed clothing—was so clearly avoided by the residents and visitors of Montgomery. The air smelled like rain now, and I felt the
breeze on my face, wet and cool, wondering if—while I searched for moving air—the people around me prayed for stillness.

Outside of the farmer’s market, three children screeched by the lake, laughing and pulling at the heavy, wet clothes plastered to their bodies from kicking up the shallow water. A girl and two boys, all with piercing giggles. Every minute or so one of them would run back to one of the sloping trees where the branches came close to the ground and jump, climbing it backward, the top to the roots.

I scanned the lake’s bank for the parents, raised the peach to my face and inhaled. It smelled sweet and strong, and my teeth broke the velvet skin. Just a few yards from the shouts and splashes, an old woman sat by the nearest bent tree. She had newspaper-wrapped, cut flowers in her lap, and hunched at the same angle as the trunk, her hair a braided mess of thick gray wires around her head, like a silver bird’s nest. She blinked slowly, looking at the sun’s reflection on the surface of the water, clouds encroaching now. When the children shrieked—even when their feet slopped mud around her faded tennis shoes—she didn’t flinch or look at them or move at all. It was as though the children didn’t see her, nor did she see them. I took another bite of fruit.

The point of running away had been to have a fresh start. I wanted people to look at me and not remember my blood-stained white skirt in sixth grade, or that I snorted when I laughed, or my mother’s name. The woman by the lake closed her eyes sleepily, and I watched her as I chewed, considering hopefully that maybe when I couldn’t hear—if I couldn’t hear—I wouldn’t care how my voice sounded to other people. I wouldn’t mind being Uncle Henry. Perhaps I could be like this woman, I thought. Unaffected by the squealing children and the smell of rain. Even in that moment, though, I doubted the hope.
Their shrill laughter became a high-pitched droning in my head, a whistle. Deep in my right ear, the ringing began to swell, loud and sharp, until my eyes had trouble focusing on the suddenly swaying and shifting world around me. My palm collided hard into wet grass. I could hear my ragged breath in my ears above anything else, and then I heard nothing at all.

I was on the ground, on my knees, the base of one palm deep in the wet earth. I blinked, conscious of how bright the day had suddenly become, and looked to the bowing trees, grateful for their stillness. My left ear picked up a voice—someone asking if I was okay. The little girl was to my right, though the ear closest to her wasn’t receiving any sounds but the ringing, which was quieter now. I sat on my feet, as gracefully as I could manage, and smiled.

“Are you sure?” she asked. Her pigtails were crooked.

I nodded, shaky, and wiped my dirty hand on my jeans. The other hand still gripped the peach, my grasp crushing it slightly. I thanked her, though I couldn’t tell how loud my voice was. It seemed so distant and small. When the girl skipped back to the water’s edge, my eyelids fluttered shut. If it happened now, I thought—if I went deaf now—maybe the world would go away when I closed my eyes. The sun burned red beneath my eyelids. The water splashed; one of the children cackled.

I wouldn’t stay in Montgomery. I would continue south that afternoon, the short drive landing me on Galveston Island early in the evening. The interstate, called Gulf Freeway, would turn into a multilane bridge, endless murky water on either side. On the beach, the wind would be forceful, thick and salty, the sky and water both between green and grey—not disappointing, exactly, but nothing like I’d imagined the little girl in my mother’s painting, the one with the red kite, would feel. The wet and grainy air would be heavy both on the beach and in the motel, my skin grimy, as though covered in a layer of wax that didn’t come off in the shower. Staying until
the money ran out, I would return to Morrilton eventually, and speak to my mother again. I
would get married, then divorced. I would lose my hearing.

I looked to the peach, the juice of which was now dripping down my wrist and onto my
shirt sleeve. My mother always romanticized the tree in our yard. The year the peaches grew ripe
had become several years in her memory; one cobbler had become dozens. I blinked at the fruit,
exhaled. In a little Texas town with arched trees, I was thinking of the tree in my backyard. I
took a bite directly from the peach’s red center. Thinking of a story my mom had once told, I
swallowed.
If Hattie is being honest, and she's often brutally so, she believes that her sister Sarah simply wishes to suffer. Sarah is the elder of the two, after all, yet she's needy, crippling emotional, a bleeding heart. She allows a bruised past to stain her perception of daily life. Sarah's sadness got bad enough to medicate a couple of years ago. Then, five weeks ago, bad enough to harm herself. Hattie, fresh out of college, was forced to move in and monitor the use of razor blades in the shower. Last week, Sarah admitted herself to a recovery center for the cutting. Since cell phones were prohibited there, Sarah talks on a corded landline where a nurse can watch her, which means that Hattie has to accept the call, talking for an hour each night, the crinkling connection and ambient chatter of other patients the only window into whatever Sarah is currently enduring.

“I just feel weighed down,” Sarah says now. “I'm heavy. My body needs sleep but my brain won't let me.”

“Will they give you sleeping pills or something?” Hattie pulls at a loose thread on the arm of her couch. It's dark in the apartment. Night came and she didn't turn on any lights.

Sarah exhales, the reception flickering. “No, of course not. How's work?"

“Work is fine.” Hattie is a self-employed web designer. The money is good. Less so is the fact that working from home makes her available to watch an at-risk sister. No room for excuses. More an acceptance of the challenge than a gesture of love, Hattie feels failure in Sarah’s leaving. Sarah's decision to seek recovery seems, to Hattie, a criticism of Hattie’s abilities as a caregiver. “You coming home ever?”

“The program is a month long; I've told you this.”

“But you don't have to stay. If you don't want to, I mean.”
There is a pause, and the line continues to crackle. Sarah says, “Yes. But I don't. I need this.”

The phone beeps to indicate that someone else is trying to reach Hattie. “Hold on, I have another call.” She pulls it away from her ear and looks. Conway Animal Rescue Team. She returns to the conversation, telling her sister never mind, but Sarah wants to know who it was.

“It's the animal rescue people,” Hattie admits.

As a gift to her sister last Christmas, the two of them signed contracts as volunteers for rescue missions, ready and on-call for whenever they were available and help was needed. They were only called once before Sarah left for treatment, to a damaged neighborhood just off the interstate that was hit by a tornado. The team had an on-site shelter for the animals they pulled out of the rubble, and the sisters showed up every afternoon to restock supplies and wash dust off greasy fur. Hattie found the tasks thankless and dull, and expected Sarah to be emotionally squeamish about the tucked tails and dirty paws. To her surprise, Sarah was the best volunteer responder on the team, the fastest and most efficient at cleaning and feeding.

“I'll get off, answer it!” Sarah demands.

“Nah, I know what they want.”

“You do?”

The thread Hattie pulls on the couch finally snaps. She really should learn to lie more. As a way of not directly answering the question, she asks, “Did you know that those contracts are a year long? They're going to call us for a year. And-” she hears a noise, thinks Sarah wants to argue, but doesn't stop. “I assumed that Conway rescue team implied that they only worked in Conway. Did you know they'd call about needing help all the way across the state?”
“Hattie,” Sarah says, a warning. “Are more animals neglected from a storm, like last time?”

“It's not a storm.” Hattie recalls the story from previous voicemails. “It's some hoarder in Clarksville. They caught her with like thirty dogs.”

“They're calling you because they need your help. Those puppies need your help.” She says this as though it will appeal to Hattie's soft side. As though Hattie has a soft side.

“They're calling,” she corrects, “because you're awesome with traumatized dogs. They want your help, not mine.”

Sarah replies, her voice clipped, that she can't help anyone right now. She has to help herself. Hattie visualizes the blood she found in the bathtub, the gauze around her sister's frail wrists. Sarah has already won.

Clarksville is a little over an hour away on the interstate, and she wonders if the rescue team will reimburse her for gas. She routed the location on her phone, but when she pulls up to the sagging home, with its withered wood-planked patio and missing roof shingles, she decides the map led her astray. There is no way this house held so many dogs. It's hard to believe anyone could live here at all.

A woman approaches, slow and lumbering. She is old and fat, and when she raises her arm in welcome, her skin sags off her bone like a heavy, ill-fitting costume. Hattie rolls down the window, but before she can ask if this is the right house, the woman tells her where to park. Like her body, the woman's voice is rounded and thick, the same Arkansas drawl everyone in Clarksville shares. She sounds too chipper, Hattie thinks, for nine in the morning.
The area around back, where she is told to park, is hard-packed dry dirt and yellow grass. Four cars are already lined beside a dingy white canopy, similar to the one used after the tornado, but smaller. She can hear rhythmic whimpering, like a pathetic alarm clock, even from inside her car. Closing her eyes, she breathes and counts backward from ten before getting out.

Five young people, four women and one man, are under the canopy, with several wire cages. The people are speaking to each other happily while attending to separate dogs and tasks. Three of the five of them bear religious symbols on their skin, jewelry, or clothes. There's one dog per cage, each looks sadder and sicker than the next, their eyes gummed and their fur matted, breathing hot, labored breaths. The young people smile brightly at Hattie when she joins them.

“You must be Hattie,” a girl with dreadlocks says, brushing her knees as she stands. Hattie nods. “Alma will be back to give you instruction, she's gone back into the house.”

“Is the hoarder still in there?” Hattie squints through the morning sun at the house. The windows are thick with dust.

“No,” the only male says, a beefy, clean-cut man of about thirty, Sarah's age. “She was evicted from her home. That's how they found the pups in the first place.”

Alma steps into the shade of the canopy, with the gait of one wading through water. “Time for a proper introduction,” she says, and sticks out her meaty hand. Hattie takes it, states her name. Alma responds with her own, and adds that she's the “dog lady,” with a wink. “Come on,” she says, bobbing her head away from the tent. “Let me show you around.”

Hattie has to follow slowly, since that seems to be the only speed Alma knows. She shows Hattie where the supplies are for various things: food, water, clean bowls and grooming tools. They pass the veterinary station, but Alma makes it clear that Wanda is the veterinary
volunteer and the only one permitted to attend to the health of the animals. She adds, “That's the one with that awful hairdo,” and shakes her head with motherly disapproval.

When they get back to the dogs, Alma goes through them and points out that the aggressive ones have red ribbons on their cages. Not that it's necessary, Hattie thinks. The growling seems like warning enough.

“Well I'll be,” Alma says at the end of the tour, and it takes Hattie a moment to realize that this expression of surprise is directed at her. “You must be good at this. Look at you. Usually people get all shaky and sad, looking at them dogs. You're stony as a statue.”

Hattie tries to hide her amusement. “That makes me good at this?”

“We can hope,” Alma says, and shrugs.

The day drags. As before with the tornado dogs, the jobs are boring. Most of the dogs tremble as if she might hit them. One dog, an old beagle with skin that falls over his bloodshot eyes, isn't scared like the others. He doesn't move when she reaches into the cage. He hardly looks up, breathing heavily on his side. Somehow this lack of response is more unnerving than the jumpy, frightened ones. She whistles at him to illicit a reaction.

“Oh, don't bother,” Wanda says from across the canopy. “That's Droopy. Droopy hasn't moved since we got him in the cage.”

Hattie hears her, but can't resist whistling again. She blows air toward his face with her mouth, satisfied when he blinks.

During her phone calls with Sarah, Hattie mentions the Clarksville shelter as little as possible, scared of what a conversation about sick dogs might do to the depressed. Even when
Sarah insists that she talk about it, Hattie speaks only vaguely, not giving specifics. The truth is that Hattie has almost nothing positive to say about the experience. An estimated four days with the dogs has turned into six and counting, and the days are getting hotter. Flies loom around watering eyes, and the crying increases with the dogs' discomfort. She smells cooked fur and boiling urine enough to taste it in her throat, despite the team's best efforts to keep the dogs and their kennels clean. They are waiting, the team tells her, to find enough animal shelters in the area that all the dogs are accounted for. Hattie wonders, with some of them, if there is a point.

The Christian Hippies, as Hattie mentally named them, are friendly, but Hattie sees no reason to act as though she cares for them. Mostly she keeps her distance, asking Alma when she has a question. That doesn't mean Hattie prefers the old woman. Hattie and Alma are not friends.

When Alma started giving Hattie all the most difficult, grueling tasks, Hattie assumed it was because the dog lady thought she was tough. Now that it hasn't ceased, however, Hattie questions that reasoning. Perhaps Alma simply doesn't like her. She watches, fanning herself with a paper plate while her sweat stains spread across her floral blouse, as Hattie cleans up the feces of dogs with intestinal troubles, rakes fleas out of clumped black fur, clips toenails of screeching lapdogs. None of them have become any braver, trembling pathetically from whatever abuse they endured before the hoarder was evicted. Droopy lies on his side, not moving to eat or drink water from the bowls they clean and refill daily. If it wasn't for his heaving breath, Hattie would assume him dead.

On the seventh day in Clarksville, Hattie finally loses her temper. She had consistently grumbled, and often felt like kicking the things, but her awareness of Alma's eyes had kept her from lashing out. Today, however, sitting among the kennels and flies, the squirming wire-haired
terrier in her lap is so determined to wail in her face that she forgets herself, her size, her
strength.

“Stop!” She hisses through gritted teeth, and yanks the dog by its front legs, shaking it. The terrier is shocked at the jerking motion, and squeaks dramatically, as though hit by a car or with a baseball bat. The crying stops.

“Ooh, child,” Alma says from her barstool in the shade. Hattie fears scolding for a moment, forgetting that she is an adult, a volunteer, that this dog lady has no grounds to shame her.


“Girl, if you’re not a nurturer, you're in the wrong place.”

Hattie thinks, Hell, don't I know it, but says nothing.

“That dog is a female,” Alma says.

“So?”

“You've been calling her 'it.”’ The dog lady smiles, as if in victory.

That night, in Conway, Sarah says over a sputtering receiver that things are good at the recovery center. That she feels better.

“I'm lucky,” she says. “So much luckier than these people. You know, I'm the only one who makes consistent phone calls.”

Hattie thinks the sisters of those patients have less work.

“Also, I'm lucky I don't have substance abuse issues. Most of the girls in group therapy have self-medicated their depression for years. I feel so fortunate.”

“So come home.”
“How does that make sense, Hattie?”

“If things don't suck anymore, you can come back.” She considers the idea that Sarah might go with her to help the dogs during the day. Maybe she'd even take her place and let Hattie stay home.

“You're relentless,” Sarah says. She's right, Hattie thinks, she's not ready to give up. If Sarah needed someone to watch her, she'd do it. Nurturer or not, she could beat Sarah's persistent gloom. She has been beating it her whole life.

Hattie discovers, after a week and a half, that her actions toward her sister and the dogs are dependent on each other. She snaps at Sarah after long days at the shelter, worn down from heat and boredom. In the mornings, she is bitter from lingering thoughts about the late night phone calls, the descriptions of meth heads and attempted suicides. She wonders what bad could come of quitting, and voices the idea to Sarah, who scoffs, horrified.

“What?” Hattie demands. “They don't even need me. It's not like I get paid. Do I get on some list of registered dog-haters or something?”

“Hattie, you are not a dog hater.” Sarah's voice breaks on the last word, and Hattie is so surprised she thinks, at first, that it's the connection acting up.

“Are you upset?”

“You just focus all of your energy on everything you do, Hattie. It's who you are. So why give up on these helpless animals?”
Silence lapses, and Hattie scratches at some dirt on her jeans. She wants to say that these animals are not helpless, that they are just dumb, but she thinks it might upset Sarah further. She hears a sniffle.

“'I'm sorry,’” Sarah says finally. “This is hard.”

“This conversation?”

“This place,” Sarah clarifies, the acidity in her voice surprising. “I'm not eating, everything here is awful. I feel like gagging. And they make me go to group even when I beg them to let me stay. I just want to stay in bed.”

“What's wrong with group?” Hattie stiffens, the self-pity in her sister's words disgusting her.

“They are so negative. They bring me down on the best of days. They don't want help, they want sadness. They want to live in misery.” The subtle thickness of Sarah's words tell Hattie that her sister is fully crying now. She clears her throat.

“So come home,” she tries, for what feels like the hundredth time.

A sob bursts through the line, so loud Hattie jumps. When Sarah speaks again, it is almost indiscernible through her tears.

“You have to stop doing that, Hattie. I hate that you do that.” She sniffs again, loud and sharp. “Don't you realize this is my life?”

Hattie blinks in the darkness. She forgot, again, to turn on the lights when the sun was setting. “What are you saying?”

“You think everything is a challenge. You think if I let someone else fix me, you lose. Don't you?” She raises her voice, repeats herself. “Don't you? You should see your face when you catch me trying to sneak your razor. You look so proud, Hattie. Proud. I'm trying to kill
myself. But you caught me, so you win. That's all that matters. Do you know what that feels like?"

A sensation comes over Hattie, like someone’s punched her in the chest or throat. She doesn't know what to say, so she doesn't speak. The crying continues, and Hattie listens to it until it annoys her. When their hour is up, Sarah blubbers that she'll call Hattie tomorrow. Before she hangs up the line, she says, “It's okay, you know. To not be good at this, this whole caregiver thing. You don't have to be good at everything.”

The line clicks, the call ends. Hattie thinks to earlier that day, when she tried to get Droopy, the old beagle, to drink. He didn't move, hardly looked at her, as always, but the repetition, the constant trying, made her momentarily blind with anger. She called to the dog once more, pushing the bowl in his face, and when he refused, she flipped it, the metal bowl clanking dramatically, rotating on its lip. Wet and startled, Droopy moved, flinching away from the metallic bowl. Hattie was glad to see him frightened.

In the morning, the Christian Hippies say that some of the sicker dogs might have to be euthanized. They look up every time they say “put down,” which seems counter-intuitive, but Hattie assumes they are visualizing some kind of animal heaven. The heat presses on them and feels oddly like being under water. Alma says they might have to relocate the dogs out of pure necessity.

The sun is casting long shadows by the time they are done treating and cleaning the dogs, and fewer are whimpering than usual. Perhaps it takes too much energy to cry. When she nears the last row of wire cages, her eyes rest on Droopy. Somehow, he seems even stiller than usual. The aggressive rise and fall of his body, it seems, has stopped.
Tripping over some dirty grooming tools, she nearly slams into the cage.

“Hey,” she says stupidly at the animal. He has never responded to calling. Her fingers tumble over the latch and she crawls half inside the cage, farther than she ever goes. The dog's eyes are closed. Putting a hand on his thick body, she can feel a heartbeat, shallow and rapid. Up close she can see that Droopy is, in fact, breathing. That too is shallow.

Dragging the dog out of his cage by his large, dry paws, she pulls him into her lap. She shouts for Alma, for Wanda, for help. When she pets the creature she realizes, her hand stroking his sleek, waxy hair, that she hasn't shown any affection to the dogs since the shelter opened. The realization surprises her, as does her certainty that a lack of tenderness should not be surprising at all.

The beagle doesn't die. Alma finds Hattie cross-legged in the dirt, and insists they go to an animal hospital right away. The closest one is nearly half an hour away, but Droopy's state seems unchanged when they finally carry him inside. Hattie thinks he's heavier than she would have guessed, sturdy in ways that suggest wellness. The vet tells them that Droopy was having a heat stroke.

This morning, a shelter in Hot Springs agrees to take the last of the dogs and tend to their ailments. Alma calls it a miracle when she relays the news, placing a hand on her enormous breast. Hattie thinks declaring it a miracle might be unfair to the people working at the hospital, but says nothing.
The wire kennels are packed into large vans that were already parked in the yellow grass when Hattie arrived. Alma watches without assisting, but shows up just when Hattie starts to move Droopy's cage.

“What?” she asks, defensive, suspecting Alma is going to become sentimental. She helps the old beagle into the elevated cage on the van floor. He doesn't squirm when lifted, but promptly lies down once it's over, as though he has struggled. Busying herself with the latch on the cage, she pretends not to see Alma's knowing smile.

“I assume you know,” the dog lady says, “that you can easily adopt any of these dogs.”

Hattie rolls her eyes.

“They're all going to shelters to find ’em some good people.” Alma's hand goes to the wire of another cage, and she reaches her fingers into it absently. The dog does not go to her.

“That's okay.” Hattie says. “I'm not good at the caregiver thing.”

Alma twists her face and Hattie thinks Alma must be offended by her unwillingness to play along. Droopy squeaks as he sucks in air through his old, drying snout, then releases it all in a bursting sigh Hattie feels she relates to. If not for Alma, Hattie’s chest might pull tighter, her throat might thicken with sadness. She blinks, dry and blank, unwilling to give Alma the satisfaction.

“Off they go, then,” Alma says mistily. Hattie waits—waits for the woman to heave herself through the dusty yard and back toward the house, before asking the driver where exactly the dogs are headed. She types the shelter’s address into her phone and hopes it looks like she’s texting.

When they close the swinging back doors to the van, Hattie looks at her face reflected back at her in the tinted back window. Half expecting to see her sister, wide-eyed and emotional,
she is both relieved and disappointed to find that the face in the glass, hard and expressionless as before, remains the same.
Harper scratched at the strap of her camera bag nervously while she walked, listening to the zip of her nails on the vinyl and the crunch of her shoes against the red gravel road. Her sister Eloise, who was seven, dragged a large, damp stick she had found somewhere, skipping slightly.

“Old man Wells better be on his deathbed,” Harper said through her teeth. Their neighbor, a retired old widower, watched Eloise for free nearly every time Harper asked him to. Today was the worst possible day for him to be busy.

“I saw him,” Eloise said unhelpfully, “in his garden. This morning.”

It was a bad day for pictures: wet fog veiled the air like tissue paper, discoloring the distant trees to shades of grey. An irrational panic rose to Harper’s cheeks as she wondered yet again if she’d packed the right lenses. She’d checked twice before they left home, not fifteen minutes ago. Cradling the bottom of the bag in her left arm, she unzipped with her right, not slowing her pace.

“You're nervous,” said Eloise.

She said yes, very. Her sister, as Harper knew she would, asked why, her voice prying and childish.

“Because,” she exhaled, irritated. All the lenses were still there. “The girl I'm taking graduation pictures for? Her dad's coming with her and he has like, big artsy connections in Waco.”

“Do we get money?”

“Yes,” Harper said, “but that’s not the point.” She never got much for her pictures. Just enough to take the occasional day off from her waitressing job at the local diner. The money didn't matter, though. She liked the practice, and McGregor was small enough that everyone in
town went to her for portraits and it still didn't take up more than a Saturday every couple of weeks, and that was during senior-picture season. “Besides, we aren't getting anything, El. You aren't here, remember? You're going to stay quiet and play games on my phone or something until Carp gets here.”

“She wants her pictures in the park?” Eloise said, and then, as though she hadn't asked, moved on to another thought. “Do I have to go with Carp?”

Harper gave her usual “yes, because I’m the boss” answer. Carp waited tables with her at the Texan South Café three days a week, always showing up late with bloodshot eyes and the distinct skunk-like smell of cheap marijuana. When Old Man Wells had backed out that morning, Harper sent a last minute text to Carp, who agreed to swing by and pick up Eloise on his way to work. Grateful as she was for his agreeable nature, she was embarrassed of his friendship, and hoped Mr. Marcus—the man she was meeting today—wouldn’t recognize him as the class clown who never grew up. She stopped walking and looked at her phone for directions.

“We're going to Area H,” She said, more to herself than to Eloise. The industrial park wasn't really a park, but a nine-thousand-acre stretch of land that was once a Naval weapons reserve plant, now scattered with the shells of storage bunkers and warehouses, useless for the most part but advertised as available space for lease, should someone have a business that needed a twenty-by-forty concrete industrial property surrounded by nothing but bare land.

It was a popular spot, oddly, for senior pictures. Harper never quite understood the appeal, but high schoolers seemed to like the intentionally rustic look of standing before the wall of a giant warehouse in cowboy boots and pre-distressed blue jeans. The second most requested locale was on the train tracks by the station.
“You li-ike him,” Eloise sang, referring to Carp, and wrinkled her nose. “He smells like fish.”

“That's why we call him Carp. Did you know that's a kind of fish? His real name is something else.”

“I know,” said Eloise, even though she didn't.

Trying to focus on where they were going, Harper worried about Eloise’s increasingly frequent lies. She wondered how other seven-year-olds behaved, if the lying was common, if she was raising her sister poorly. Sometimes, Eloise told entirely untrue stories, long ones that didn't quite make sense. Standing on the rust colored path now, El dropped her stick and squinted around her, probably pretending she could help find area H.

“This way,” Harper said, unsure but too nervous to stand still. This was the one shot, it seemed to her, the only way to grow up. The little yellow house was where her father left, her mother died, and where grime permeated the grout in the kitchen tile so thickly that no amount of mopping returned it to its original color. She didn't clean regularly, but in a different house, she might. That’s what young people in McGregor were supposed to do—leave. Or end up like Harper’s mother: all hard edges, overworked until her last breath. The transformation had already begun. Though everyone still called her “little Harp,” she was twenty-five now and looked older. She smelled of burned coffee, rarely unclipped her mud-colored hair from the twist on her head, and carried herself in a curved way that resembled dried out plants in Texas summers.

When the path curved and she could see the bunkers, Harper felt her chest unclench a little. Arriving before Mr. Marcus and his daughter marked the first good thing that had happened all day.
“So… What is the point?” Eloise asked, shielding her eyes with her hand as she looked up, despite the cloud coverage.

“What do you mean?”

“You said money isn’t the point. What is the point?”

Harper released a breath she didn’t know she was holding. “The guy. Mr. Marcus. He could get us out of this town, you know? Wipe the slate clean. He helped this jock, Judd, get a photo-journalism internship at the Waco Tribune-Herald when I was like thirteen and you were a screaming infant. Now no more questions.”

Eloise grew quiet, their steps loud and shuffling for a moment before Eloise asked if Mr. Marcus liked Harper’s pictures. Harper didn’t respond, as she never answered questions once she told El to stop asking. Mr. Marcus had never expressed an interest in Harper or her photos. Once they reached one of the structures and Harper put her bag down, Eloise was talking about possums again.

“I wish you hadn't chased it off,” she said accusingly.

“I didn't chase it off; it ran away on its own.” Harper had seen a possum the size of a bobcat in the yard that morning, just sitting on the lawn, pink mouth open, marble eyes ugly and angry. Eloise was mad she hadn't seen it. “Besides, you don't want to see one, they're gross. They aren't cute.”

“It could have been mom,” Eloise said, and her face didn't indicate she'd said anything strange.

“What are you talking about?”
They sat cross-legged, the grass soggy from the fog. Eloise said, “Mom turned into a possum when she died. I remember. She died and her soul made the candle go, you know, off and on again. And then a possum ran out from the bushes and into the night.”

Eloise had been two years old when their mother died, and every six months or so came up with a new false memory of it. Deciding not to address the possibility of her mom reincarnated as a marsupial, Harper checked her phone—still early—then handed it to her sister.

“Here,” she said, “be normal. Read me something.”

“Obits,” El said, and typed the cell phone passcode with childlike dexterity. She'd learned her big sister's habit of reading the obituaries every week. Harper inwardly chastised herself. No wonder El's a weird kid, she thought, the woman providing for her is obsessed with death. She had been nineteen when her mother died, hadn't thought to do anything about an obituary. Instead, in her angst, she'd performed an act of rebellion in her mother's name, spray painting the date and her mom's initials under a bridge just outside of town: an act distinctly unlike herself, but one she had been proud of. A community service group painted over it some years later.
Since then she'd become fascinated with obituaries, sentimental blurbs about the recently deceased, and felt strangely happy after reading them, though she didn't know for whom she was glad, or why.

Harper quickly told Eloise to shut up when she saw figures approaching, though the latter seemed to enjoy reading about some woman named Sally Daniel, who “flew away to her creator” last Wednesday. Eloise entertained the idea of an old woman flying and Harper ignored her, standing and brushing bits of wet grass off her jeans. As the two shapes neared, Harper saw that it was Mr. Marcus, who moved himself with an electric wheelchair now: his enormous, misshapen body finally became too much weight for his brittle bones shortly after Harper
graduated high school. His dark, caterpillar eyebrows jumped fervently as he spoke to his red-headed daughter, Daisy, the subject of today's photoshoot. Daisy wore a purple sweater with a not-quite-revealing v-shaped collar and riding boots, and held her graduation cap in her hands, fingering the black and white tassel absently.

“Hey, y'all,” Daisy said, and looked surprised to see Eloise. “Long time no see, Harper.”

Not two days ago Daisy had seen the sisters at the town square. Harper had wanted to shop for camera equipment unseen, having already splurged on the ripe red tomatoes and fresh basil that she stirred into her pasta once a week. The shame of treating herself stemmed from hearing a constant refrain from photography clients—here, buy something for little Eloise—so when Daisy had stopped her at the square, Harper had seen it as an accusation. An acknowledgement of Harper’s selfishness. Daisy’s shopping companion, a similarly red headed girl with blotchy skin on her neck, had mistook the two as mother and daughter, just as all out-of-towners did. Harper left the square without buying anything.

She shook hands with Mr. Marcus, heat in her face, unable to look him in the eye. When she had played out this interaction in her head, she had been cheerful and charming to the old man, leaving the kind of lasting impression that led to introductions and internships. As was common in McGregor, Mr. Marcus was someone she had known her whole life, but never really spoken to. She wished now that she had been friendly toward him in previous years.

Glancing around the park’s wet surroundings, she asked where Daisy wanted to go first, mentioned awkwardly that someone would come to get Eloise soon. Daisy, who was looking at her phone, didn't respond, and Mr. Marcus watched Eloise, who was staring at a phone as well, more from duty than disrespect. Finally it was established that the girl wanted to start in front of the rusting wall of one of the bunkers—the same place everyone requested. No one spoke but to
briefly discuss where Daisy should stand. It seemed she had already decided what to do with her body, though she was not a natural. With Harper's eye glued to the viewfinder, Daisy became awkward and scrutinized, and after a few minutes was more than happy to start conversation, answer questions. When Harper asked if she was attending college in the fall, Daisy lifted her chin slightly and said she'd been accepted to Baylor. Waco, Harper thought. Of course.

Repeatedly touching her orange bangs as if to make sure they were still there, Daisy alternated between a dramatically dignified expression and a smile so calculated it failed to affect the rest of her face. Harper, trying and failing to keep up polite appearances, wondered if her photography might come out better, the subjects more natural, if she was friendlier. One morning in a burst of confidence, Harper had made prints of all of her portraits, at least forty of them, and stuck them all together on the bulletin board in her bedroom. As she pushed thumbtacks into the old cork, she’d grown excited to see her work as a kind of collage. But when she finally backed away from the collection, her stomach clenched slightly. Especially side by side, the faces of her town seemed, to Harper, creepy and unflattering. Everyone looked ugly.

Eloise's attention to her phone games snapped by the time they decided to switch backdrops and take pictures against the colorless horizon. Harper wasn't surprised that when her sister spoke, it was something stupid and embarrassing.

First she hummed something vaguely recognizable, a cartoon theme song Harper couldn't identify, then she said, in a pseudo-masculine voice to no one in particular, “Don't have time to join the gym?” something she'd heard on a frequently repeated television commercial for exercise equipment. Harper almost apologized for her, but found it vaguely amusing that the comment troubled Daisy, who frowned and pulled in her gut.
Harper didn't attempt to scold Eloise until she asked why Daisy wanted the park in her pictures.

“Mind your own business, El,” she said, but Daisy answered anyway.

“I guess because everyone else does,” she spoke slowly, talking down to Eloise, who either didn't notice or didn't care. To Harper, Daisy said, “it's a good spot, though, right? Way better than the tracks.”

Nodding noncommittally, Harper hid behind her viewfinder. The high schooler spoke slowly again, looking at Eloise, picture-smile glued to her freckled face. Mr. Marcus didn’t seem to be watching Harper take pictures at all. He looked at his daughter, at Eloise, and up at the air around him, frowning as though worried it might rain. The covered sky created a feel of late afternoon, and she wished she knew the time, but El held her phone and it might be rude to ask in front of Mr. Marcus. When Daisy decided to put on her graduation cap, the pit of Harper's stomach started to bubble uncomfortably. She always shot students in their caps last. Soon there would be nothing for Mr. Marcus to observe without Eloise there, bothering them.

Switching to a new lens, Harper was watching Daisy fuss over the placement of the charm on her tassel when she heard the labored breathing of someone approaching.

Carp’s face was rough and red, the walk to the bunkers seemingly difficult for him. The Marcuses looked offended by his presence, though Harper thought she had made it clear that he was picking up Eloise.

“Hey, Harper,” Carp said between breaths. He rested a hand on his slightly distended abdomen now, and Harper noticed that his belt buckle was some sort of metallic fish, a bass or something. The fisherman smell seemed faint today, less thick and forceful than during night shifts at the café.
“Carp is here to pick up Eloise,” Harper reminded them, hot with anger at everyone involved. Carp was so late, now, that by the time he walked Eloise back to his car and took her to the diner, she would be done with her shoot. Pointing this out felt a bit confrontational, though, and she wasn’t ready to embarrass herself further in front of Mr. Marcus.

“There she is,” Harper said with finality, indicating her sister. “Thanks, Carp. I’ll see you at work.”

But rather than taking the kid and leaving, Carp lingered. He allowed Eloise to show him something on Harper’s phone for several minutes, then complained cheerfully about the café and hummed notes of approval as he watched the digital screen of the camera from over her shoulder.

“These are good, little Harp,” he said. Usually this sort of comment would flatter her, even please her, but Harper was officially embarrassed by his presence, his friendship, his bloodshot eyes. Mr. Marcus looked disapprovingly at him, his face as though he had just taken a spoonful of cough syrup. This wasn’t going well. She had seen all along that it wasn’t, but now things were all too clear. Panic started to rise in Harper’s chest and she swallowed down the thickening in her throat, fearful suddenly that she might cry. Why had she put so much hope into this? She’d considered it so much that it had wedged its way into reality for her. She could visualize it, moving out of the yellow house, away from the industrial park and the old-fashioned train station. Focusing on her breathing, she told herself that the pictures were still there. Mr. Marcus hadn’t looked at them yet.

Clearing her throat, she cleaned the camera lens with her sleeve and pretended nothing had changed. Daisy, who adjusted the graduation cap so much Harper had to ask her to stop touching it, continued to talk with her father. They’d returned to a conversation about the park,
but Harper only partially listened. Carp looked over her shoulder again. He really did smell like fish, she thought, and wished Eloise would tell him so.

“It would be cool if you could take pictures inside the buildings,” he said, projecting his voice in a way that suggested he was part of Mr. Marcus’s conversation. Harper wished there was a subtle way to kick him.

“Not really,” Eloise said. “They’re just empty and gray.”

“As opposed to the super colorful outside of this building?” Carp gestured to the wall, then let out a wheeze of laughter. “Senior pictures are dumb. No offense, little Harp.”

Daisy, clearly offended, said, “It’s about the natural light anyway. And this is country-style backdrop. Besides,” she turned her attention to Eloise, “you don’t know if they’re empty. They’re locked. You’re not supposed to go in the warehouses.” Her eyes flashed with something like jealousy. She was right—all of the structures remained securely locked. Not even the bored troublemakers could break in. Rumors came and went about hidden treasure, corpses, government weapons and so forth, though businesses could easily lease the structures, making it unlikely that the town could hide secrets in any of them.

“No, Harper and I went in one once.” Eloise said, and pointed out into the park. Daisy clearly didn't believe the seven-year-old, feigning amazement the way people often do with children.

Mr. Marcus exhaled deeply and checked his watch. With an ambush of embarrassment from the company she kept, Harper heaved up the resolve to remind Carp that he should be at work.

He snapped his fingers and pointed at Harper’s face. “Always the hard worker,” he said, as though it was all a big joke. Nudging Eloise with his hand, he bobbed his head in the direction
of the diner. When he moved, she followed him. Carp called out, without turning around, that he would see her at the restaurant.

“Bye, El,” Harper said unenthusiastically, despite relief to finally see them go.

They were almost out of sight when Eloise turned and sprinted ungracefully back to them.

“Here’s your phone,” she announced, holding it at the end of her outstretched arm. “I’m sorry I didn’t look at it and stay quiet like you told me to.”

Horrified, Harper mumbled that it was okay. Reaching to take it, she forgot that she had removed the camera strap from around her neck, and the whole thing fell. She heard it hit the damp grass with a thunk. For a moment she thought, perhaps melodramatically hoped, that it had broken, but it hadn’t.

Alone with the Marcuses, shy and embarrassed, she wondered what they must think of her. Friends with stoners, nervous and unfriendly, an unfit guardian—unable to even care for her belongings. Raising a sister who told strange lies.

Harper hid behind her viewfinder and considered that, though Eloise often lied, she actually hadn’t said anything untrue to Daisy. The buildings really were gray and empty. It was just luck that let Harper and Eloise find one of them unlocked, an enormous warehouse in area G, during a poorly planned picnic two years ago.

It had been overcast, but Harper hadn't expected the kind of cascading rain that comes like ocean waves, soaking their hair and socks and the Tupperware of pasta salad she'd stolen from the Texan South. Eloise had screamed, as though crying would make Harper do something about it. They'd run for the warehouse in hopes of it blocking the wind, maybe even having
enough of an awning to protect them. One of the two side doors was wide open, letting rain spill
across the slick concrete floor.

“Come on,” she'd shouted over deafening splatters, and pulled Eloise inside. Her sister
had stopped screaming at that point, tired of it, and gripped Harper's slick hand as they clumsily
sloshed into the covered space.

It was empty, of course. No forbidden treasure. But it was dry, all but the floor around the
open door, and they shed their coats, heavy and useless, and sat close, listening to the echos of
the rain against the ceiling thirty feet above their heads. Eloise said it sounded like aliens were
invading. It looked like the high school gym, but bigger, and dark, so dark Harper had to use her
phone to illuminate what was left of the watered-down pasta salad. Eloise was in gymnastics at
the time, and did soggy cartwheels around the warehouse, Harper holding her breath for fear she
would slip. They'd managed to salvage the newspaper they'd brought under Harper's coat, but
when she unfolded it she realized she'd left the obituaries at home, so Eloise held the phone up
and giggled while Harper read the funnies aloud. When the rain finally stopped, they'd rung out
their coats and returned to the car in silence.

Harper had completely forgotten this memory, and now, photographing Daisy outside a
bunker in area H, Harper questioned it, thinking it might've been a dream.

It had been only two years ago, she thought, two years but a million years. Like looking
back on someone else's memory, a different person. Nothing had changed. She still worked at
Texan South Café, still swiped leftovers from the kitchen, still worried and watched her sister,
feeling equal parts responsible for her and as though Eloise existed outside her control. Perhaps
somewhere in there she had crossed a line: bussed one too many tables, spent one too many
hours at the pediatrician’s office, taken one too many pictures that didn't matter to her or anyone
else. Perhaps her time for opportunities had expired. Eloise, though, was growing, wasn't she? Becoming someone, the way Harper had become someone once, by her mother's side. Now Harper felt more like the obituary she had created under a bridge somewhere: still there, but hidden.

Without much left to capture, Harper snapped the remaining shots somewhat absently, and after a few minutes Daisy took off the cap and put her hair in a ponytail. Her face relaxed for the first time from the hollow smile she wore in front of the camera.

“So if you can, I'd like those on a disk a-sap, so I can put them on Facebook.” She shook her watch down on her wrist and checked the time. Mr. Marcus was nodding off in his wheelchair. When Daisy called out to him—“Daddy!”—he coughed, and checked his own watch before politely stating that they should be going soon. Neither of them thanked her.

Harper lost her way twice walking back to the car—the scattered, flat parking lots all looked the same, and she'd been so flustered on the way that she hadn't paid attention. On the drive to the diner she played out scenarios in her head, ones where she told Daisy that the photoshoot had to be called off on account of how ugly she was, and ones where Mr. Marcus made jokes that Harper could laugh at with charm and poise, insisting that the weather was perfect, and making the presence of Eloise into a selling point. At a stop light, she practiced her “kids these days!” face, as though it made a difference.

It was dark by the time she parked outside the diner, which made it easy to see directly into the Texan South Café, with bright red, peeling booths and checkered tiles on the walls. No customers tonight, except an old man at counter—he always ordered decaf—and Eloise, who sat in the corner booth, fully concentrated on coloring with crayons on the paper tablecloth, a
marketing device the manager stole from a chain restaurant in one of the neighboring cities. As Harper crossed the parking lot to the overlarge chrome door handles, a voice startled her.

“Little Harp!”

She turned a full 360 degrees before she saw Carp, sitting in his car, the window half rolled down. The interior was hazy, and a pungent smell leaked out through the open space.

“Hi, Carp,” she said, and fanned the smell away from her face. “Aren’t you supposed to be working?” She briefly wished she could recall Carp’s first name. Everyone called him that, except his mother, who still found herself financially burdened by her son twenty-four years after his birth, no end in sight.

Carp coughed. “I told the old man the coffee was on the house, so he’s content. He leaves a good tip even when I’m loaded.”

Repressing the urge to roll her eyes, Harper tried to move on, but he called out to her again, and leaned across the car to open his passenger door.

She sat. He lifted a half-smoked joint and looked at her through pink, watery eyes. “Do you mind?”

“No,” she said. She was mildly disgusted with Carp, but much more disgusted with the results of her day. She held her hand out after his hit.

“What you, want some? Sure, sure.” He squeezed the end of it with his forefinger and thumb, handing it to her carefully. There wasn't much left.

Harper inhaled and immediately released through a fit of short coughs, her lungs and throat feeling charred from the stuff. She contorted her face at the joint, wincing, and held it toward him.
“You look so good doing that,” he said dumbly. “Look real good with your hair down.” She had intentionally made herself presentable today, in case such a thing mattered to Mr. Marcus. Carp took one last suck at it, then opened the door and tossed the remainder out into the parking lot. The unlatched door made the lights in his car come on, and she could see him more clearly than she had in the darkness. What was acne in high school now made light scars across his cheeks and forehead. His eyes, she just realized, would be a nice shade, were they not rimmed with red. The bones in his pointed face made his skin look stretched painfully across his cheeks.

“How is everything, Harper? We don’t talk anymore.”

They had never really talked. She shrugged in response. “How are things at home?” She added the question to be polite.

“She's awful hard on me, now.” He meant his mother. “She keeps calling me a burnout, like my dad. You're a burnout, Hector,” His voice went up an octave for the imitation, and he wiped his nose on the back of his hand. “But you don't think I'm a burnout, do you?”

Harper shook her head no. Hector, she thought. That's right.

“That was fun, today,” he said, “I like watching you work.”

“You see me work every day,” she said.

There was a pause, and the marijuana made her head swim.

“Come here.” He leaned over the center console. She did it too, and let him press his lips against hers. His mouth was dry and he tasted of the pot she had just smoked, but stronger. After a minute or so, the car light switched back off, and she pulled away, saying she needed to get home.
After saying goodnight to Carp, she worried that maybe this was it. She was too old now—too old to dream of a better city, to have grand dreams that would never follow through. Too old to pretend her pictures meant anything. She would have to give it up—stop spending money on lenses, and start spending extra shifts at the diner. After a while, Carp’s mom would kick him out, and would work full time, too. He was interested in her, and so to save money, he would move in with her, and Eloise would adjust to him, and the dirty grout would smell of fish. She would live with Hector in the little yellow house, because money was tight, and because no one in McGregor stayed alone for long.

Inside the diner, the florescent lights made her feel exposed, as though her seven-year-old sister might know about what she did in the car by looking at her. Eloise was still drawing, her nose an inch from the paper table cloth that she had covered almost entirely with a waxy layer of color.

“Let’s go, little rat,” Harper said, pulling her sister’s ponytail. That’s when she noticed what Eloise was drawing. “What is this?”

The surface was covered in shapes and colors. It was a map, or it looked like one, with gray streets that curved unrealistically around the table. Houses of pink, blue, and red were lit from the inside, the windows an orange color. There was a train station, small and purple, only recognizable as such because of the bright red train, emitting black smoke. Close to the salt and pepper shakers was a field, slick from vigorous pressure against the paper, bright green except for three gray boxes. The biggest was the house in the middle, yellow and skinny, with a surprisingly detailed front porch. Other than the house, nothing was yellow, except the enormous partial sun in the corner, crooked streaks of sunbeam landing all over the town.

“You can’t tell?” she asked, incredulous and offended. “It’s McGregor.”
“Yes. I can tell.” Harper put a hand on her sister’s back. She blinked at the artwork, trying to understand how the town she so desperately wanted away from—wet and gray and lifeless—could look lively, unplanned, and use every color in the crayon box. Eloise yawned.

Pointing to the middle of the drawing, Harper said, “Shall we?”

It was only a few blocks from the diner to the yellow house, but Eloise still managed to fall asleep, needing to be nudged slightly before dragging her feet across the lawn, into the house, and straight to the couch in front of the dingy-curtained window in the living room. Harper sat with her, the house dark except for one standing lamp in the corner.

Eloise leaned her head on Harper's shoulder and breathed slowly, and Harper couldn't tell if she'd fallen asleep or not. She clicked through the display screen on her camera, evaluating the day's photoshoot.

Daisy Marcus smiled grumpily up at her, the shadows on her face too dark, the sky the color of a mushroom. Harper scoffed lightly and plopped the camera on the couch cushion beside her, glad that Mr. Marcus hadn’t been paying attention. Careful not to move her shoulder too much, she stretched her left arm until the tips of her fingers reached the newspaper on the coffee table. She passed the obituaries and thumbed through to the funnies. Eloise said to read them aloud, startling her.

“I thought you were asleep,” she said. El rocked her head back and forth against Harper's shoulder. Behind them, the untamed bushes outside rustled noisily. Foreboding storm-winds, most likely. She craned her neck to see the top of her sister's head.

“Probably that possum,” she said. Eloise yawned, not looking up, and said calmly that it certainly was.
Cole had not left his home in over a week when he saw the picture, so at first he thought his mind was playing games with him. A trick of the light, perhaps, or too many hours awake, or a chemical effect from eating too many handfuls of Cheetos. The house was as it always was: fruit flies floated lazily over rotting bananas, plastic containers from microwavable Stouffer’s meals crowded the tiny kitchen, a few of them stacked to make room for Cole's laptop on the counter. Light could only find its way into the house through the semi-circle of distorted glass on the front door, which faced north, and the screen door in the back, which faced south, neither of them ever looking directly at the sun. Even Cole's laptop dimmed as the battery drained. He stared at the loopy text of the webpage, which listed scheduled activities for Highberry, the festival in Ozark that showcased music and art.

“Jazzie St. June of Amarillo, TX will show you her glory hole!” The advertisement read. Then underneath, in smaller letters “let the magic of glass blowing happen before your very eyes.”

A picture of a smiling woman with a daisy in her hair followed the description. Though she appeared quite young—long blonde curls, wearing a floral-printed linen dress, barefoot in the grass—Cole thought she must be fifty now. She gripped a green-and-gray glass vase, the shape of which reminded Cole of a cow's udders. The artist's wrists looked fragile and her spindly fingers bore rings with astrological signs branded onto them. This woman was Cole’s mother.

He hadn’t spoken to her in fifteen years, yet he knew this was not a mirage, despite the fact that his mom's real name was Jasmine Miller, not Jazzie St. June. Despite this woman's eyes flashing with spirit he didn't remember. Despite a color to her skin that gave her the kind of
liveliness she never possessed in his presence. It was his skin, his eyes, his fragile wrists. And this website told him that she was coming home. Back to Arkansas. Back to where she had fled from her family. Hardly chewing, he rhythmically placed Cheetos into his mouth with one hand, scrolling up and down the webpage with the other, unable to stop himself from returning to the picture every few lines.

Cole's communication disorder was not unlike a stutter, though perhaps a bit less defined. Like a mental hiccup. A hesitation before consonants. It was a speech disability that cropped up, for Cole, around the time other children had sorted theirs out. Trouble speaking and embarrassment from such trouble cyclically worsened his already timid behavior. Due in part to the shyness, but mostly to the timing of his impediment, teachers and counselors at the public schools whispered behind not-fully-closed doors that it could be emotional trauma.

He grew up in Elkins, Arkansas, 118 miles from where he currently dwelled in Morrilton. A three-square-mile flat space between the mountains that surrounded it, Elkins's only real allure was that it touched the White River and provided places for teenagers at the nearby university to go camping and drink cheap liquor from red plastic cups and shiver violently upon the arrival of morning due, heavy and chilled even in summer. There were a few nostalgically beautiful antebellum homes in the neighborhood, but most of the residents, including Cole's parents, lived in rickety little things with screened-off front porches and tricycles and cigarette butts on the front lawn.
Cole's father was a large man, beer-bellied with echoing footsteps and dark hair from the backs of his hands to his shoulders. He chewed tobacco and changed the lock on the door to his children's shared bedroom so that it could only be locked from the outside. Cole rarely looked at the man’s face, but he remembered his voice and his breath, and the day he learned that of all the people in his family, his father was the most predictable.

Norm was Cole's older brother by nearly a decade, and took after his father in stature and temperament. He did more screaming than talking. His fits often ended in violence. At nights when they were locked in, Norm would tell Cole he had taken a knife from the kitchen and was hiding it under his pillow. Cole often woke to the ripe smell of urine in the mornings, even when he had grown too old for such a habit.

His mother, Jasmine, was thin but not pretty, with sharp elbows and pinched lips. She had Norm at nineteen, married at twenty. By the time Cole came around there was already an idle quality about her expressions, her eyes dull blue vacuums that somehow never reflected the light.

The only thing that seemed to bring any glow to her face was when she was in the garage, working. When he was five Cole used to sit on a stool a few feet away and watch her at her studio, which she had squeezed between old boxes and dusty Halloween decorations and a punctured inflatable pool. Her workspace consisted of a steel-toped table and a steel plate on the wall behind it, a one-gallon canister of propane and a miniature oxygen tank sitting on the floor on either side of her. She would set the torch up, lock it onto the table, and melt glass. A ribbon of orange and blue heat softened the glass until it was moldable, and she would shape and color them. Usually the finished pieces of art were just clear marbles with swirls of navy, or beads that she would put on chains after they'd cooled. She never sold them, so the things she created accumulated on the misshapen shelves Cole's father made out of spare wood slats. The
best thing Jasmine ever made, Cole thought, was a figurine of a frog the size of a thumbprint made of colorless glass. It wasn't proportional or life-like, but when it was finished and cooled she smiled a smile that was somehow more awake than usual, more present.

The drinking made Cole’s father weaken as he got older. He slept more, mostly on the chair on the front porch, and the tremors in his hands complicated simple tasks like eating and shaving. But any power he relinquished, Cole’s brother immediately took up. When Norm was sixteen, he instantly filled the role of locking his little brother in his room, and started drinking whiskey when his father slept. He passed out on the couch in the living room at night, refused to go to school, and used the torch in the garage to burn holes in everything. Cole learned to climb on the desk in their room, wedge the window open, and crawl out to the brush below. For lack of a better plan, he'd do homework out there, even when the wind had a bite to it. He gave himself fake assignments when he ran out of times tables. He used crayons on paper and pretended he was coloring glass.

That's when Jasmine started to get sick. She stopped eating—or at least, she stopped preparing dinner—and became skeletal, her bones so sharp they looked as though they might tear her tissue-paper skin. Her face went from pale to gray, and she coughed dry, feeble coughs at her workstation in the garage, never doing anything, letting the steel table collect dust. She stopped trying to discipline Norm. Never making a mess, rarely moving objects, her presence left no mark on the house. When asked a question she would pause, as though listening to a voice only she could hear, before answering—her words brittle, her voice wispy. Cole thought if he touched her she might just slip through his fingers like the smoke from one of Norm's cigarettes.
Cole met Rose at speech therapy just over a year ago. The establishment was a little building in Conway associated with University of Central Arkansas, the waiting room decorated in purple and white. Two people sat in the row of chairs facing him: one was elderly, the other a stout woman of about forty, with dark hair that grazed her jawline and cheap, heavy jewelry that clacked together conspicuously. A nurse opened the door.

“Mrs. Reems, come on back,” she called, not looking up from her cell phone, and retreated. Neither woman moved. Cole noticed that the woman directly opposite him, the younger one, was messing with what looked like a hearing aid. It seemed possible that removing the piece of plastic could have made it so that she didn't hear her name being called.

He raised his hand toward her hesitantly and cleared his throat, but the lump formed again; the nervousness. When no words came out, he lifted his hand to get her attention.

The woman removed her sunglasses to show she was listening.

He cleared his throat again. Felt the force against his larynx. “M-Mrs. Reems?”

She pointed to her ear, indicating that she couldn't hear him.

“Oh,” he said. Starting with vowels was a bit easier. “Sorry. I—”

“Nah, I'm kidding,” the woman smiled as she put the hearing aid back into her ear. “I'm not Mrs. Reems. I think it's Ugly Betty over there.”

She was referring to the elderly woman, who sat about six feet away. Cole felt heat flood to his face.

“Oh, relax,” she said. “She can't even hear her name.”

Admittedly, the old woman's expression had not changed.
The nurse came back out and called the patient's name again, standing in the woman’s eye line this time until she shakily stood, apologizing. Holding the door open, the nurse looked to the woman seated across from Cole.

“You can come on too, Rose.”

Rose stood, stretched. Her bracelets clattered against each other. “What's your name?” she asked mid-yawn.

It took Cole a moment to realize she was talking to him. “Oh,” he said, starting with the vowel again. Slowly, deliberately, he stated, “Cole.”

“What've you got, Cole? Why are you here, I mean.”

He blinked at her. It seemed like quite a personal question. “I—” He closed his eyes and concentrated. “I have a communication disorder.”

“Vague, I like it. So do you have trouble speaking or hearing? Or both?”

“Sp-peaking.”

“Got it. I'm on the hearing side.” She tapped on her hearing aid as though to prove it.

The nurse called out, frustrated. Before leaving the room, the woman said over her shoulder “I'm Rose, by the way.”

Rose had Ménière's disease, which caused temporary hearing loss and difficulty with loud sounds. Doctors told her that she should avoid noisy public places, advice that she deliberately defied. She said her hearing didn't seem bad when she was diagnosed at twenty-three—Cole’s current age—but over the past few years her hearing had declined rapidly. She needed her hearing aid most of the time, and started to go to speech therapy for “listening enhancement,” her go-to joke being that she’d probably needed that her whole life.
Cole became friends with Rose mostly because he had no other choice in the matter. She talked to him in the waiting room and in the parking lot every Tuesday, about her friends, about places she'd been, about her failed marriage and about how glad she was to no longer hear the cicadas in the trees outside her bedroom, the sawing. One day she demanded they go get a drink after their appointments, and the tradition stuck. They had nowhere better to be: Cole worked nights at the university's computer lab and Rose took Tuesdays off from her customer service job at the regional airport. Cole didn't like bars much—the smell of smoke and whiskey made him think of his father—but Rose never made Cole speak unless he wanted to, and never complained about the speed at which he talked. Some weeks they just stared at their own foggy pint glasses and commented occasionally about being the only two people at a dive bar at 2:00 in the middle of the week.

It was here where Cole looked up the Highberry Festival information on his phone and showed Rose the picture he had found of his mom. She mused over it for a minute before handing the phone back to him.

“'The fuck's a glory hole? Do I want to know?’”

Cole somehow knew that would be her first comment. He concealed an eye-roll and returned the phone to his pocket. “Heating furn…furnace. Reheating.” Cough. “Shapes g-glass.”

“Sounds dirty to me.”

“I… know,” he said.

“She's pretty. You look like her.”

They sat facing away from the bar, looking out at the dingy room around them. There weren't enough windows to give the place any light, which was why Cole liked it. He watched the television absently, feeling Rose's eyes on his face. He thought she must be comparing him to
his mother now, noticing the similarities. The ski-slope nose, the thin mouth. He turned his face away from her.

“So,” he heard her say, “we going to this thing or what?”

He formed the words, mouthing once before speaking. His new therapist’s trick. “What thing?”

She tapped her fingernails on the bar. “Cole face me when you speak please so I can hear you.”

He turned to face her again. Cleared his throat. “What thing?”

“Shebb or whatever. Highberry.”

“W-We?”

“Oh, come on. I want to see how my aged ears handle concerts anyway. It might be fun. And it'll be boring as hell if you're by yourself.” She took a swig of her beer.

“I'm not. Not—” He mouthed the words first. “Not going for the festival,” he said slowly. “I know, but don't you want to enjoy it since you're going all the way over there?”

He shrugged. He wanted to say no, to tell her not to come, but knew he wouldn't. The bartender wiped down the tables in front of them. After a moment, she spoke again.

“Do you think your mom is a stoner?”

He looked to see her expression. She was smiling a little, amused by her own question. Another shrug. “Why?”

“Because she blows glass for a living! Which means she makes bongs and pipes and shit. Is she holding a bong in that picture?”

“It's… a vase.”

“I bet she smokes weed. Did she smoke anything when you were little?”
He couldn't remember.

She continued on like that, about Jasmine. About the festival. Cole didn't understand why Rose was interested in going at all, but honestly he needed the help with gas money and it was too much trouble for him to think of a reason not to.

The year that Norm gained control of the household was when Cole got quiet. When “I'm doing well, thank you” somehow turned to a nervous smile and a shaky prayer to not be asked another question. During this time Cole’s dad thinned down, his eyes sunken, his facial hair grew considerably. While his father slept and his mother stared, Cole tried to find ways to become invisible to Norm, and the simplest thing he could think to do was to actually become invisible—or the closest thing to it. Cole was so determined to keep his eyes low, his head down, his mouth shut, that some of his childhood disappeared. He had no recollection of turning eight, no idea what his third grade teacher looked like. He didn't remember what the holidays looked like when Norm was sleeping on the couch. Did they get any Christmas presents? A tree?

Speech therapists—first in school, then ones the university provided—always asked when it started. When he became afraid to form words. Cole had always been shy, but it was during that window—or he thought it was—that he let the ability to speak retreat into the shadows of his brain. Words came slower now, and one at a time, like shiny silver pinballs at an arcade. They shot out and rattled around in the map of his mind, but often they got lost in the dinging and flashing and fell away, behind the flippers and into the drain.
Then, in the spring, Norm left for the hills. No goodbye except a poorly written note explaining that he wanted to work on cars, or join the army. Cole didn’t tell his parents that in the last days Norm snuck the landline into their shared bedroom and made phone calls about buying household products in massive quantities and some kind of property in lower Arkansas. When they read the note, Cole’s dad insisted that Norm was seventeen now, and old enough to fend for himself. That was when Jasmine snapped. She snuck out on a weekday while Cole was in school. His dad must have left for the liquor store, because even in a drunken stupor he would have awoken to the sound of breaking glass.

She shattered it all, all of her creations, and left. When Cole came home from school that day he found the remains: tiny shards of blue and violet covered the floor of the garage, the light winking off of them as he circled the scene. Later that night he remembered watching his father sweep up the mess, unanswerable questions stacking in his thoughts: did she do it on purpose? Was it out of anger? Or pain? Was it supposed to send a message? She left the thumb-sized frog on the workstation, the only piece she hadn't smashed.

Now, in his darkened room in Morrilton, Cole looked from the picture on his laptop screen to the frog figurine on the bookcase. While he packed for Ozark, his heart raced, as though she might suddenly appear before him, a ghost, intangible as she always had been.

The drive to Ozark wasn't too troublesome: about an hour in the car, a straight shot west on I-40. Cole had never been to Ozark. He had never been most places, he supposed. Even Arkansas
itself, though easily accessible, he felt like he had only ever seen through the smudged glass of a car window.

They left at three, with high hopes of setting up their tents before sunset. Ozark was in the river valley, technically, and only grazed the southernmost corner of the mountains. When they got to the festival he could see why Rose had wanted to leave earlier. The little opening in the trees where the events were located was already overrun with colored linen and flower crowns and dreadlocks, nylon tents reaching the point of uneasy closeness to one another. The sun was starting to cast longer shadows by the time they decided where to build their tents—dangerously close to the speakers by the stage—and Cole wondered if he might have to wait until tomorrow to find Jazzie St. June's booth. Part of him hoped so. He checked and rechecked for the tiny, smooth little figurine in his pocket. They worked in silence, giving Cole time to think. He couldn't imagine how a woman that small could get a furnace out here, or how it would be powered. Just working on his sleep space made his pulse thump noisily in his ears.

“Hey Cole,” Rose said, her tent already looking sturdier than his, “Can I ask you something?”

Nodding yes, he hoped this was fast. He was distracted by the knot in his stomach the size of a bowling ball. Why hadn't the website told him exactly where she'd be?

“Would you ever learn ASL? Like, as a hobby or something?”

Cole proceeded to stake down a corner of his tent. “Sign… Language? Why?”

“Look at me please—” Rose said, and her voice splintered off suddenly. Arrested mid-movement, Cole looked at her. Her lips were pressed tightly together. She frowned at a nonspecific patch of grass for a moment before looking up at him.
She cleared her throat before she spoke, the way Cole did. “They think I'm going to lose all of it. Soon.”

“Your hearing?” He watched her closely. Perhaps for the first time since he met her, Rose looked truly unhappy.

She nodded, swallowing. “I'll be reading lips soon, all the time. And the hearing aid helps but not a lot.” She stepped away from the perfect tent she had pitched, pretending to admire it. “I'm going to start taking ASL classes. I just...” She laughed a little, fake, the smile forced. “I won't have anyone to talk to. And, well you don't even like mouth-words anyway, so I thought you might take it with me.”

Cole had never considered the idea that the friends Rose gossiped about weren't really her friends. Learning ASL, for Rose, meant cutting off a connection between her and everyone she knew. He felt a burning in his throat. Maybe sadness, but more like jealousy. He’d read about ASL before; he even watched some YouTube videos about it once. The language had been too, different, and he’d given up. Rose would learn it; she would have to. She was taking a new path, and Cole was stuck failing at the old one.

He cleared his throat. “M-Maybe so.”

They finished up the tents in silence, dusk settling in as the sun tucked behind the mountains. Rose checked her watch.

“You better go get her, kid, if you're going to. The booths are about to close shop. Band is on in fifteen.”

She crouched awkwardly into her tent and zipped it up behind her, finalizing the matter.
The reason it took as long as it did for Cole to find his mother was not because he was looking in the wrong place. Because of the listing, he somehow had the idea in his head that a great big furnace would be there with her. That she would be blowing glass for an audience. Of course, he thought when he finally found her. What a silly thought.

It was just a woman, just a booth. A little purple canopy tent with a rickety table. The art itself was intricate and beautiful: animals and flowers and ornate unidentifiable shapes with perfectly controlled ribbons of color. And, yes: pipes and bongs.

It was oddly lacking magic, seeing her here. She looked the same, yes, and different, too, but all in ways she might have guessed. Older, perhaps. Healthier. Maybe, he thought, because it was getting dark.

He watched her a while. She still had a delicate quality about her—moving her art around so fluidly that it almost seemed as though the objects moved on their own. Even when she didn’t interact with anyone directly, there was some hesitancy in her face that he associated with his own fear of communication. Something too calculated—like it took so much thought to speak that none of the words were naturally hers. This, Cole thought, was likely projection. There was no way to know how she felt.

He wasn’t quite sure what he had expected. He had so many questions; images of shattered glass had followed him all his life. So many times in therapy he had blamed his communication problem on his mother. His father was simple and drunk. Norm had been young. But Jasmine was the mystery. Looking at her now, he didn’t feel anger exactly, nor quite forgiveness. But she seemed like a woman who had lived a life away from him. Similar in posture and timidity, but still a stranger.
A man walked over to her. Tall, like Cole's father, but more handsome, his face less harsh. No less intimidating, however, with tattoos snaking from under the collar of his shirt up onto his massive neck. He spoke to her, and placed a hand on her waist.

Seeing this new life—the people and the art—it became clear to Cole that he was not strong enough to face his mother. He had wanted to find a connection; an answer. But none of that was sold at Jazzy St. June’s booth. Before he left for Ozark he had created a plan for if—and surely when—he found himself unable to speak to her. It was dark now, and while Jasmine closed her shop, she turned to speak to the man with the tattoos. Stuffing his hand clumsily into his pocket, Cole pulled out the thumbprint-sized frog. When he walked by their canopy, he laid it down on the table with her other pieces of art, and left it behind.

Back at the tents, the music was playing, and Cole had a front row spot right next to the speaker. As he approached he wondered, exhausted, when the concert would be over. Rose was sitting outside now, facing the band, her legs outstretched, leaning back on the palms of her hands. Her hearing aid rested on her thigh.

Cole didn't speak to her; she wouldn’t be able to hear him anyway. Thinking of what she had told him earlier, he walked around her, standing between her and the stage. With a flat hand, he touched the pads of his fingers to his chin, then brought them down and forward. Thank you. He couldn’t remember most of what he’d learned online about ASL, but that sign was simple, memorable. Still sitting on the grass, Rose didn’t smile exactly, but the corners of her eyes crinkled, and he thought she understood. When he sat down, it was not beside her. He sat with
his back to her back, away from the stage, noticing when he did so how small the width of her shoulders were. He felt her body turn and look at him, then back around again, relaxing her arms, using his back for support.

The band was terrible. It could be because they were so close, but Cole thought the combination of electronic synthesizers and a fiddle was a bit much. Lights from the stage danced around them. Rose tapped to a beat that he knew she couldn't hear, but rather feel as vibrations shook the ground.