

COUP

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Sometimes I ask myself how I ended up here. I guess, if I had to, I could figure it out. I could trace the line all the way, like tugging at a string in the dark, and wind myself back to the beginning. "Know Thyself" Daddy always says. I'm not afraid of poking around inside my head like most people are, but it's not serving me any right now to be dipping into memory lane, not in a place like this. It's much easier to count the seconds, in this Hampton Inn or Holiday Inn or whatever, body still and smooth as icing against the mattress, with the light coming in through that irritating space in the curtains, the kind you can't ever seem to stamp out. Like they build them on purpose that way, just to remind you that this space won't ever belong to you. Or maybe it's more simple than that, just a way to get people out of bed and on their way. Makes sense to me, since right now that light's reminding me that it's still daytime out there, a million miles away from here. And it's light I want.

Sometimes I have to count real high until they fall asleep, but other times I barely have to wait at all, I get to a hundred and three and it's lights out. Right now his breathing is all heavy like, consistent. A rumble like a thunderstorm is happening two counties over. I inch myself over to the edge of the mattress and bring my eggplant-painted toes to the carpet. I'm not crazy about the color. I locate my bra and my dress with the tag still on it and everything else and tug it on. No more need in being graceful now that it's just me. I know his wallet is there poking out of his pants pocket, folded up nice and neat on the armchair where he left them, after nearly toppling over while trying to strip them off. If I was common, I would ease it out with my fingers and be on my way. But this is part of the deal, I can't just take the money and run. What I have are regular clients. They trust me and not just because I don't steal from them. And while there's no part of the deal that says I have to wait for them to fall asleep, it's easier this way. I hate good-byes even with people I care about. I've always preferred to just slip away, like slow moving fog over a fast moving lane.

This one is named Ali. He's actually pretty nice. He's the son of some furniture importer from Egypt or something like that and as a joke I call him Prince Ali, like from the Disney movie with the monkey. He gets a kick out of that. I see Ali about once a month and sometimes he just wants to take me to dinner. He always picks some exuberant French restaurant with valets who call me "ma'am" and waiters whose whole job it is to serve wine. I tried snails for the first time with Ali, imagine that? They make fun of my people for eating frogs and squirrels, but the French have turned eating bugs into an aspiration. Ali seems to find me interesting. And on these nights he gives me a whole five hundred smackers just for going

out with him, even without doing any bedroom stuff. If you ask me, I think he likes to see himself as my benefactor. Supporting a young girl through college. Well that's fine by me. I'd do the Funky Chicken dance if he asked me to for that kind of money.

He's lying on his side, chest hair peeking out from under his white cotton wife-beater. You're not supposed to call them that anymore, but I don't know any other name for it. His hand is tucked under the pillow, but I can still see two of the gold rings he wears on his fingers, looking dull in the semi-darkness of the room. The gold chain around his neck hangs lifeless, like a dog collar that someone forgot to tighten. He likes his jewelry, Ali. I don't wear any myself. Too much bother. I prefer to feel as weightless as possible. I slip on my heels and hunt in my bag for something to write with. I rip a piece of paper off of one of those notepads they always have in these types of hotels and pencil a message to Ali: *"great seeing you as always. I'll miss you"*. I add a few "XOXO"s just to top it off. I won't be missing Ali at all, but they eat it up, this romantic goop. They want to feel desired, just like anybody else. And if I'm being honest, I'm good at giving people what they need. That's what makes me so successful in this industry, knowing just what to say and how to say it. And he's not bad, Ali. Far from the worst.

I pop into the bathroom real quick, give myself a once-over, and pocket the small plastic bottles of lotion and shower gel from the sink. I don't really need it. Thanks to Ali and the others, I buy myself the premo beauty products straight from Sephora. Lotion with aloe vera and coco butter and other foreign plants promising to keep me supple. I love those bright colorful bottles, lined up on the shelf, like my own personal grown up candy store. And plus, the beauty products are like a legitimate business expense, keeping myself soft and attractive being a requirement of this line of work. If I filed taxes, I could write that shit off.. It's one of the few things I let myself splurge on. But I take the hotel favors anyway. I'm into anything free, except labor. Those little bottles just sitting there, for the taking. What would mama say if I left them there? I know who I am.

I step into the hallway of one of Atlanta's more mundane hotels – even the guests look beige – and head towards the lobby. Funny how the most daring design choice is always the hallway rugs: the more chaotic, the better it masks the stains. But in the lobby I see that it's one of those hotels that keeps coffee out all day long, so I drop the criticism. Free coffee makes up for a lot. I see the receptionist giving me a look. I consider saying to her that both of us worked the night shift, but I could guess who made more. I satisfy myself with just the thought. I was raised to be polite.

My car has a fine layer of frost from spending the night outside. I scrape at the windshield with my nails to clear my driver's side view. They're already chipped in a few places so it

don't matter and I'm dying to change this color anyways. What possessed me to pick eggplant purple? I must have thought it looked sophisticated, but really it looks like I have ten little bruises blossoming on each finger.

I've been driving the same electric blue Mini Cooper since high school and it's hanging in there at 412,000 miles. The seats still smell like a tobacco plant, given how many times I let my friends conspire towards cancer in the passenger seat. Daddy used to get on me about that, but it was my car, not his.

I'm possessive over Princeton. He's the first thing I bought for myself, first big thing. I lied about my age to get a job at McDonald's when I was 14 and by the time someone actually looked at the paperwork, I was already wearing an apron and a big fat smile. Because of my school schedule, I could only work the early morning shift and weekends. And my folks gave me hell about still pitching in at home. Daddy was fine with me learning the value of a dollar, but they expressed clear as eggwhites that they would not be lightening my load of farm work any.

The sunrise shift meant I kept the coffee flowing for the same group of octogenarian regulars who came in every morning to read the paper and get on each others' nerves. For the most part I enjoyed it, felt proud to be making my own money. I especially liked working the closing shift on weekends, because me and the Mexican lady I worked with would help ourselves to extra large servings of vanilla soft serve from the machine, fudge sauce and all.

I paid eight thousand green ones for the Mini, from an ad I'd seen in the paper. Daddy went with me, so he could make sure I wasn't getting hoodwinked. The guy who was selling it thought daddy was my boyfriend and that he was making me a present of the car. I stepped in real quick to clarify, underlining the fact that I was using my own money and daddy stepped in real quick to underline the fact that he wasn't the type of dad to go around giving out cars to children. I was so nervous driving it back home, especially considering that my house was located about two miles up a dirt road, riddled with loose gravel and potholes. I'm pretty sure Mini Coopers weren't designed for that sort of off-roading. A few days later and I quit my job at Mickey D's. Walked right out in the middle of mopping the bathroom. Leaned the mop against the door and hung my apron on the door handle. That felt just as good as getting that first paycheck, better even, since quitting didn't require paying taxes. On to better and brighter things. I missed the Mexican lady though. Out of principle I didn't ever go back inside, but sometimes I drove through the drive-thru to say hello to Xiomara and practice the few Spanish words she had taught me.

My next job I worked at the gym in Eaton, a few towns over. I had started going to the gym with a boy I dated who wanted to stay in shape during the off-season. Big fellow, shoulders

you could stand on in a jam. I left him to pick up heavier and heavier things, while I struck up conversation with the owner. Lila was this washed up California Barbie, surely the only one who'd ever crossed our county line. She was a professional bodybuilder twenty years earlier and she had hung her old competition photos all around the gym walls, itty bitty bikini and all. Whether she was trying to inspire us or intimidate, go figure. But something tragic happened in her life – what, I never did find out – and she ended up here, God's other armpit, born-again Christian. The gym had this religious angle to it. So did everything else in town, but I mean way past the point of literal. Along with her half-nudes on the wall, she had hung Bible verses over every section of weights. So the verse above the squat rack had something to do with beefing up your hams for the Lord or some shit like that. It was even called Lord's Hope Gym. All that and she still had her fake tits, bowling balls pointed at all of us like we were pins to knock over. I always had a desire to touch them, but I settled for the job.

Given that this was the only gym for about a hundred miles, she had quite a large client base: mostly high school boys, retired farmers, and housewives trying half-heartedly to be a better version of themselves. I was responsible for cleaning the equipment, re-racking weights, stuff like that. It wasn't a formal job, no paperwork, and she paid me with a cream envelope at the end of every work week. Suited me fine. Always preferred a cash business. I stayed with that job until I graduated high school and it was time to leave home. Lila gave me a rosary as a graduation present. I don't really believe in that sort of thing and my people definitely aren't that breed of Christian, but I've kept it with me ever since. Maybe it reminds me of home, or that once someone gave me something without expecting anything in return.

I steer Princeton back towards Midtown and up the ramp of the parking garage of my building. In second year, I moved off campus to a studio apartment that's still close enough to walk to class if I'm not in a hurry. My apartment is everything I dreamed about as a kid. It's small, I have to squeeze around the sofa to reach the kitchen, but it's all the space I need. Living alone is a paradise I never imagined for myself. Hell, sleeping in something besides a bunk bed. I have white bulb lights strung up around the ceiling like little popcorn balls that some girl threw out from her dorm last year. The furniture mostly comes from my Godmother, who recently downsized her house. She has good taste, better than mine and some of it's matching too. She downsizes after every husband and she's on her fifth. My crowning joy is my green Chesterfield sofa. I went up to the Salvation Army, the one by Linux where the rich people drop off their stuff. Went on Sunday morning when I know they refresh the inventory. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw her. And only one little stain on the left arm. I have art too, believe it, posters I picked out at the hipster weekend street fair down in Little Five. Candles are real popular with all the college girls here, but when I found

out how expensive they were, I couldn't believe it. For a thing that undoes itself. I'm not shelling out twenty-five bucks for some beeswax, so I make my own. I bought some pure soy wax from Michael's and some essential oils: rose, vanilla. It's pretty easy, and I got into it: multiple wicks, adding coffee beans, real elegant shit. I've always been crafty, me being the one to mend daddy's pants when they needed sewing. I got the best lines in the family. They make good gifts too, like for your linear equations professor before the final exam. I'd send some back home, but they wouldn't be appreciated. I like to be cozy, something my folks don't place a lot of value in. It's one of my only weaknesses, but it's a big one. Mama used to tell me I was too fond of softness. But I like to curl up on the sofa and pool the blankets all around me, tucked in snug as a bug in a rug. As a kid, I made forts on laundry day, when the bed sheets were hung out to dry. When Mama was too busy caught up in something to pay attention, I'd pull them down and carry them inside to pin them up with furniture. I'd sit inside as long as I could, marveling at this feeling that nobody could get to me in there. Nobody watching me for once, nobody asking nothing from me. In a pinch, I would use daddy's old newspapers.

Not all of this luxury comes from between my legs. The only reason I'm here at all is because my scholarship covers most of my school costs. I did really well in high school, top grades and good test scores and they offered to pay my tuition. I guess you could say I earned it, but most days it feels like I snuck my way in. It's like waiting for someone to jump out of the closet and tell me the gig is up. Like someone's staging this big social experiment about what would happen if you took a hillbilly and put her in an elite academic institution. But without it, there's no way I could afford the 40,000 a year tuition. So that leaves me needing to cover food and housing and books and stuff like that. Which I can handle, even though living in the city's not cheap. I've always known how to work, always held a job since that first one. And even before I did odd jobs, pestering neighbors to watch their cattle for a few bucks. In second grade, I braided bracelets out of yarn and traded them with the girls at school for candy. I've even been known to write an essay or two for the boys in lit class for fair compensation. Nowadays everybody's talking about hustlin', being a 'hustler', but they don't know.

And I'm resourceful too, knowing little tricks for how to live with less, like watering down laundry detergent to stretch washes. Being a student helps. There's always some campus event or student club looking for new members and usually there's food involved. I keep my eye on the student newsletter for these kinds of announcements and what do you know, I can eat free some nights. Even I know that Papa John's four times a week isn't a health recommendation, but I've got a lot of hunger to catch up on and an iron constitution I inherited from Mama's people. From the outside, you'd think I was the most extra-curricular'd Junior in the whole student body. But I'm pretty damn sure I'm not the

only one. These clubs gotta be expecting it, pizza being the preferred currency of college kids and them dangling it like chicken gut for the grouper. Fair game as far as I'm concerned. And who's to say I'm not interested in joining the Earth Day Committee? Just weighing my options. That being said, being Student Body Treasurer isn't exactly in the cards for me. Sure, I'm good with money, but it's money I have to make for myself, with no time for fooling around on board meetings. I scraped and clawed my way into college and I'm scraping and clawing my way to get through it.

I got this job by browsing Craigslist. Nothing good really ever comes from Craigslist, but I'm not squeamish. There was a listing for a massage girl and I was pretty sure I knew what that meant, but I was also pretty sure that it didn't sound so bad. I was in the city now and the city came with opportunities I wasn't about to squander. I responded to the ad and a few days later I was meeting some lady for coffee in Lindbergh. She looked even older than her supposed thirty-five on account of the work she'd gotten done to her face, but I talked to her normal anyways, because I was raised to be polite. She held my palms face up and inspected them for a minute. Said I could come by later that day for photos. "Photos" meant stripping down to my panties and sticking my ass out while she took blurry photos with her iPhone 5. She asked if I wanted to see them and I said hell no. Got my first call the next day. Wasn't much to it, although I can't pretend I wasn't a little taken back. I'd seen penises before of course, but they'd all been young, attached to high school athletes, and for the most part, welcome. These were different: deflated like balloons three days after the birthday party. Worked just the same though. "Massages" was me giving a half-assed back rub while I thought about homework problems in my head. When ten minutes were left, I spun them around and inflated the balloon. Easier than milking a cow. Easier than my Physics homework. I worked around three nights a week during my first semester in the city. I got really good at making sure none of their ejaculates touched any part of me. Going into Spring, one of my clients approached me to see if I'd be interested in making a career change, something more lucrative. Facedown, nose smushed into the massage table, he told me about his business. I wasn't interested in what he offered, but it got me thinking about what I might be capable of and the amount I could earn by being just a little more capable and a little less discerning.

This thought took me back online. Being this particular city, it wasn't hard to find what I was looking for. The first meeting I arranged took place at a rundown strip mall. I parked in front of a windowless box of concrete the color of cigarette ash and held my breath while I pressed the buzzer. The man inside ushered me in. He wore a brown suit that was too big in the shoulders, like he was still getting hand-me-downs at age 45. He was sweating. First thing he asked was my age and the second thing he asked was that I take off all my clothes. Without so much as my name or offering me a glass of water. I was so affronted that I left

right then and there, almost brought to tears. I was going to have to grow thicker skin if I thought I had a chance. The second interview went better. An old man, eighties or so, asked me about my ambitions in life. I told him about my studies. He said he only took college girls. Better stock. You could get more for them. He said I could keep my own tips. I was half way towards shaking his hand when it occurred to me that I didn't need to be there. I should have realized it sooner: I had the internet and a goddamn brain. I could figure out how to sell my own pussy, thank you very much, and cut out the middle man. I told him I would think about it and high-tailed it out of there.

Back in my dorm I turned my laptop – the one I had on loan from the library seeing as I couldn't afford my own – so my roommate couldn't see it. Not that she would have paid me any mind, she was too busy with her face an inch off the page of Nietzsche or whatever famous ghost was altering her worldview this week. Pairing me with a Philosophy major was an irony even I appreciated.

It was easy to find, the marketplace. Two sided: oldies and goodies. Making the profile took longer. I started at that cursor wondering how to fill those five hundred characters of About Me. How to ask someone to take you seriously without being a bore, or a whore. In the end, I don't think it mattered much. I had the photos from the massage gig and a few of my own and that was that. I chose the name Angel, because I always liked it. I needed a name that would get their attention. A name so fake they wouldn't have to bother asking whether it was real or not.

The first dates were horrible, without exception, but I learned soon enough.

At the beginning, I tried to find the good-looking ones. Beauty is another handicap of mine. As a rule, I pretty much exclusively date these raging hot guys, without much regard for what else they're bringing to the table. Daddy always told me I was as smart as two people put together and I guess I really took that to heart, the idea that I could provide the brains for me and my man, as long as he gave me something nice to look at. But I couldn't think like that as an escort. That was the term I had landed on, for what to call myself, even if I hadn't done any escorting yet, I was training my mind. I learned about this in my elective intro to Psychology class: conditioning. It wasn't hard for me to accept the terms of what that word meant. I had always known women who earned their way like this and I wasn't above it. To each, her gifts. Use whatever resources the Good Lord thought to bestow you with. The only difference is that I wanted the best. I wasn't willing to shell out for the President of the high school Booster Club from back home. If I was going fishing, I wanted the big fish from the big pond. But those early days, I also wanted the handsome fish. Well I tell you what, there aren't

too many of those, given the fact that these are men who for one reason or another have to pay for their kicks. A fish is a fish and not a one of them smells like lemons.

I went to meet this guy in his apartment once, some elegant brick building in a ritzy part of the city. I had to wait around in a lobby full of glass while the security guard kept his eyes on me, which became a recurring theme for me. I've spent a lot of time in lobbies since then, trying to look as purposeful as possible while ignoring the undivided attention of the security guards. He was drop-dead and told me he was an actor, local. I was too struck to question why he'd be using a service like mine. I was also too much of an amateur to have settled on terms before showing up, something I learned later was absolutely crucial. Agree on the job and the price before meeting. But he had said he wanted to feel it out first. He wore a simple t-shirt and when he took it off, I noticed that he used these little clips for the sleeves to make them tighter, so that his biceps would look bigger than they were. We cuddled for a little bit on top of his made-up bed while he asked me about my studies. The hospital corners on that bed were so tight I knew he must have a maid. I told him how it had been hard catching up, since most of the other students began programming courses in high school, but that I was doing just fine. Half-listening, he reached into his night stand and pulled out a baggy of coke. He asks me to take off my clothes and lay face down. Once I'm positioned, he taps out that coke on my ass and does a few lines. I'm not exactly sheltered, but when it comes to drugs, I'd always avoided them. Too many overdoses where I'm from. I'd only seen coke once before at a frat party on campus and I turned heel soon as they brought it out. He wanted me to do some and as nervous as I was, I said no. He insists and I say no again. He goes into the living room and comes back, holding something small and black in his hand. He lifts it up and I see it's a small pistol. I gasp – loud – and he starts laughing his head off. Tells me it's a prop from set. But even still, could he hold it to my head while we fucked? He let me check it out first and I knew immediately from the weight and feel of it that it wasn't real, but damn it looked convincing.

Afterwards, when he was in the shower, I went through his wallet. I didn't take anything, I just wanted to see his real name, since he had given me an alias. Well, I took a 20, but I googled his name later and turns out he was a contestant on America's Next Top Model. I waited for him to towel himself off before I asked for my compensation. He just stared at me. And that's what I'm talking about: the handsome ones, even on a website for escorts, feel like they're doing you a favor. Feel like they're getting everything they deserve in life. I had a couple more shit experiences with this type before giving up on the idea that clients could be both rich and attractive. But what about young? There had to be a few tech-startup, boy wonders on the site.

One of those boy wonders had me ride him while he watched Bloomberg's. What I remember most is this giant Husky he had caged up in the corner of his apartment. Poor thing was crying non-stop, wanting to be let out, barely fitting inside that cage. He told me all about his success with his company and even turned his monitor towards me, showing me his bank account and how much was in it. He pulled me onto his lap and I watched as he transferred five thousand dollars into my bank account. My eyes grew so wide I must have looked like a cartoon. I was so ecstatic I did the other stuff he was asking for. It took about a week and a week's worth of unanswered phone calls to realize he had scammed me. He must have canceled the transfer as soon as I left, because that money never came. And the number he had given me was disconnected after a couple days too. I was so angry, I thought about getting one of those prop guns myself. I fantasized, lying in bed, about busting into his apartment and stealing his dog. Setting that Husky free. I did nothing of course.

I got smarter after that: no young guys and not hot guys. It was better, but shit still happened. I saw more guns, but none of them ended up doing any real damage. Every client was different and there was always something off. Not a single one was happy. A lot of them were lost. A lot of them felt guilty about being lost, about wanting what they wanted. Once, there was a client who asked if he could FaceTime his friend while I gave him a blowjob. He wanted to show off the live performance. I should have said no, but as I said, early on, I didn't know the rules. I thought I was just supposed to say yes, to acquiesce, since I was the one needing the money. And I was desperate that night, in no position to advocate for myself. Earlier that day, my card had been declined trying to buy coffee. I opened my app and it said my account had 1.46\$ in it. I had stopped in my tracks, seeing that, in the middle of the Student Union building and students trudged on all around me, not one of them seeing the fear in my face. So he was filming me and I could hear his friend laughing as they both watched me suck him off. On the ride home he started crying. He told me that I was a good girl, that I shouldn't be doing this, and why did I make him do that. That he was a sick, fat fuck and deserved to die. Well, he was fat. I let him talk at me while I stared out the window of his Benz and counted the seconds till I was home.

I bounced around like that for a while, date after date, new clients every week, before finding my set of regulars. I was making good money, pulling in two or three thousand a month, but goddamn every cent was earned. A demanding fucking job, especially considering all the collateral. The number of text messages I got from these guys. And me trying to navigate their moods, figuring out exactly the right thing I needed to say for another pay-out. Every now and then, a phone call from a wife. Those were the worst and I ended up disconnecting my voicemail. Scheduling was another nightmare, especially when I had evening lectures. But little by little I picked up my regulars. Men who didn't disgust me, who didn't overtax me.

Regulars are great because it's a bird in the hand, but there's always the risk they get too attached. Start making a nest. Which will happen every time, so you gotta look for the signs. And I'm better at pulling out than most of the men I know.

Ajay was a regular. He was one of those .com millionaires, a real tech genius who started some software sales company in Texas and sold it when he was still well under the hill. Ajay was great for a couple of reasons. The first being I didn't have to have sex with him. He had this idea that I should only have sex with him when I felt ready for it. Well fuck, I would milk that for as long as I could. In the meantime, he liked to hangout, play house. He didn't like giving me straight cash, but he bought my groceries every week. On our weekly trips to Whole Foods, I turned on my charm to the max, hanging on his arm while I picked out cereal. I'd never even seen the insides of a Whole Foods, not being able to afford the water they spray over the broccoli. He took me shopping for clothes too, playing dress up with me being something they all loved to do. I always took as much time as I could in the fitting room. I was working overtime to keep him smitten and it worked a little too well. I'd known him for three weeks and Ajay is talking about buying me a house, wherever I want and dropping the L-bomb left and right, before I had time to duck for cover. That made my head spin and once it stopped, I realized I had a choice to make. I could play him. Forget fiddle, I'd play him like an entire bluegrass quartet. Suck the meat out of this crab and toss away the claws. I wouldn't need any other clients. But you know what? I didn't love Ajay. It didn't feel right, playing with someone's heart. I'm about business, but I'm not about cruelty. Especially not to someone who loves me the way Ajay seemed to. Sometimes you get too far in and forget where the exit signs are. That led me to option two: cut things off immediately. I saw how Ajay looked at me and I knew I couldn't pretend any longer. I reached into my trunk for my famous trick and disappeared from his life. Back to buying groceries at Kroger.

You'd be surprised at how cold it gets in Atlanta this time of year. I walk between buildings with my hands cupped over my mouth, breathing hot, sticky air on them. My classmates have been oozing about Fall for weeks, but in my opinion, only people with good childhoods like the Fall. For most kids, it's candy and corn mazes, but for me, Fall just meant more work. It meant harvest, busiest time of year. It meant Daddy stressing so much the whole house started buzzing. Fall meant more time at home, which is something I started avoiding as much as I could the older I got. I've decided not to go home over Thanksgiving break. I told my folks that I need to study for exams, which are just a few short weeks away. Mama got all quiet like and gave the phone to Daddy and he said they'd see me for Christmas. I guess they feel like I'm growing away from them, but they must have known that I always would. That's just what parents have to accept. Even the best can't hold on forever. And mine, well, if they didn't see this coming, that was their own ignorance. I'm not whining or nothing about my childhood, that's for rich folks, but I also can't look you in the eye and tell you that

I was born to two people who wanted me. In some parts of the world, kids are born out of necessity, not love. Necessity or tradition. My folks had land, not valuable apart from there being a lot of it, half inherited and half accumulated. Mama's daddy, my Papa Tom, bought the first parcel in an auction, drunk off his socks, sight un-seen, and moved the family even further into the mountains to claim it. He spent everything he had on those twenty-five acres, and then some. Mama grew up barefoot. And not barefoot like I grew up barefoot, out of being a country girl, thrilled by the mud squishing through my toes, but the kind of barefoot where you sit in the last pew at church so no one can see that you ain't got shoes. Papa Tom worked as the town mechanic to bring in money and he would get home dog tired to their cabin – the one he and his brought built with their own hands and a bit of ingenuity – and set to chopping firewood into the dark hours. There wasn't money for gas, but they had the woods. Mama and her sisters grew up hard, as kids did back then, and that must have left her with the notion that kids are meant to be worked. I don't know where Mama's fear of softness came from. One time, on a trip to Chattanooga, I watched a potter prepare clay for his wheel. He slammed that clay, over and over, working all the oxygen bubbles out. And that's the way Mama raised us, doing her best to beat the air out of us.

Mama was strict, and Daddy was too. But Mama was hard in spirit, whereas Daddy made room for people to be people. He didn't categorize everything into correct or incorrect the way Mama did. Shirts tucked in, beds made perfectly, even policing the way we talked. "Yes ma'am" and "No ma'am" or you had a smacking coming your way. The only way you were allowed to refer to your ass was by saying "fanny". Mama tolerated no foul language. And us being girls earned extra scrutiny, with Mama's belief being that girls are born unholy. When we were old enough she started with the body searches. Coming home from an after school event or on the weekends, she'd grab us walking through the door. We had to show her our panties before we could go into our room. We were teenagers though, and we did what we were gonna do. When we were born, Mama had Daddy plant a Hickory tree out behind the house. She got her switches from that Hickory tree. Laurie got the worst of it, being the oldest. By the time I came along, Mama was worn out and I was spunky. I didn't let her hit me like she hit the other two. And I remember the last day Daddy ever hit me. He grabbed me by the elbow and hauled me outside. I had been horseplaying and ended up breaking a glass. I turned straight round and told Daddy that he better hit me hard, cause I didn't mind it. He stopped after that and let Mama do the spanking.

It wasn't as bad as I'm making it seem. There was joy. There was delight too, if you had eyes for it. One of my jobs was to mind the chickens. We had about fifteen or so, kept in a little wooden coup Daddy built behind the house. They mostly did for themselves, but they needed airing out every few days or so. I opened the hatch and watched them file out, let them peck the ground for a half an hour before shepherding them back inside. This was my

chance to collect the eggs. I loved the eggs. I loved reaching my arm into each hen's nest and scooping up those perfect wonders. It's the closest thing to magic as I can imagine. Something from nothing. I would hold them up to my cheeks to feel the warmth and then place them in my basket one by one, little prizes for Mama. After we got the rooster, I had to check for the fertilized ones, holding them up to the sunlit sky to peer inside for embryos. The rooster made my job more complicated and I took to carrying a stick to thump him with when he ruffled his feathers at me. Daddys says he got the rooster to make more chickens, but part of me thinks he got it to wake us up at the buttcrack of dawn. But the hens were happier with the rooster around, so I made my peace with him. One day the dogs dug their way into the coup – a mission they had been attempting to carry out for years – and had themselves a chicken massacre. Even the rooster, mean as he was, didn't stand a chance against a Rottweiler and a St. Bernard. Poor bastard. We got back from church and saw the feathers still suspended in the air. Daddy beat those dogs so hard they didn't come back around for three whole days. And we never had chickens again.

For a long time, I just had assumed that the way I grew up was normal, having nothing to compare it to. Sure, I was a hillbilly kid, but so were all my friends. Our school even had a half-day program where the farm kids were excused from class in the Spring and Fall so they could help their families during busy season. Our county graduation rates were the worst in the whole state. But the further I got from home, the more I had to accept that Mama was an eccentric. Other moms didn't lock their kids in the closet the whole night through for spilling milk on the table. Or have them kneel on rice for an hour for talking back. Mama would say this is just our culture. That mountain people know best about raising kids. And she'd point to me and say see, look, we did right with you, look where you're at. And I wouldn't know what to say, having to admit that yeah, I did turn out alright, and maybe that was partly because of them. And like I said, as the baby of the family, I was the spoiled one. And I recognized early on that my way to freedom would be through a paycheck. Getting those jobs young got me a car – my first way out – and the distance I needed from Mama and Daddy. I wanted more than anything to be financially independent from them. It's not because I hated them, I just hated the thought that I would end up like them.

With exams just about two weeks away, I need to spend more time studying and less time on dates. I signed up for Quantum Physics 101 this semester, being curious about the universe, but I'm kicking myself now for it. Curious is another one of my character flaws. Most people fuck off for their elective courses, scouting out the easy A's in the history department. But I need this education to mean something and I'm not wasting three credits on something that doesn't excite me. Although it would be nice not to kamikazee my GPA this year. Principles are fine and all but I've got considerations, the big one being my scholarship is dependent upon a 3.7 average. I've been nursing my GPA since my first day at

this school like a bird with a broken wing, squeezing water droplets into its outstretched beak with my chemistry pipette. But this Physics exam is looking like a hammer to my glass house, unless I pull off some kind of miracle with this Final. That's alright. I come from mountain stock and mountain people have always been known for their ability to get out of tight spots. As Mama says, it ain't no hill for a stepper. I've just gotta pull on my big shoes and by that I mean, swallow this textbook word for word until I can tell you how to recognize a wave from a particle. That's a trick, see? Professor Dunkin taught us in our second class that they're really the same thing. So I might not fail after all.

The other exams I'm not so worried about. I'm majoring in Computer Science, unlikely as that is for a girl who didn't see a computer till fifteen years old, but I've taken to it pretty well. I've got a logical mind. Some of my clients think too logical. Like it's my logic and not their beer bellies that keep me from growing attached. Mama accuses me of not having any sentiments. But I've got sentiments, I just don't store them where people can easily trip over them. My sentiments are nobody's business and Mama lost her right to my heart a while ago. I don't see how she can expect much from me now, being how she was with us. Everything I ever confided in her growing up she used against me. Or if it wasn't what she wanted to hear, she ignored it. When I told her about Mr. Livingston, Daddy's hunting partner, reaching up under my skirt, she didn't even stop sugaring the blueberries. She just kept slapping that sifter with her palm, covering up with my words with all that sweetness. Mama blamed me for the things men tried to do to me. Like how dare I be in this body at all. And seeing as how I came from her, you'd think she'd cut me a little slack. But Mama must have thought I looked for attention like a coon looks for trash. And okay, sure, maybe I did, but not from everyone. And I reckon I should be able to decide where that attention goes and what it earns me. Mama wouldn't understand. She was never pretty the way I'm pretty. I don't know how she managed to hook Daddy. I've seen photos and Daddy was a looker as a young man. But Daddy appreciates a woman who can work hard. After all, that's what's needed to make a life more than anything else. When all is said and done, you can count on Mama. That's a woman who will cook the food for her own funeral, remembering to turn the oven off before she keels over.

I've got some of that in me too. It's the same fight that's gonna have me pinning these exams to the ground like five squealing hogs. Physics as I mentioned, that boar's got tusks, then Information Systems II, Front End User Experience, Electrical Circuits, and Health. Health is a wash, being a requirement for all students and a complete crockpot of bull. I haven't shown up for lecture since the first one, on account of them not taking attendance. I just read through the notes and post my assignments to the online portal. I picture my brain like a big industrial dishwasher. The important stuff gets loaded in for cleaning. But everything else, well, that gets served on paper plates that I dump straight into the trash. No

use in taking up space in the dishwasher. Health class is paper plates all the way and it's all going in the dumpster once I take the exam. So that leaves me four serious exams to worry my way through. I post up in the Starbucks that's attached to campus, spread my books all around me, and drink my weight in espresso. I'm here so often that the barista doesn't need to ask me what I'm having. Hell week reminds me a bit of having the flu. There's a subtle pleasure in turning your brain off from everything else that's happening around you. Having the flu gives you a one way ticket excuse to not having to give a fuck about anything or anyone. Studying for exams lets you press pause on life in the same way. I get a break from attending to my clients, them loving the idea of me as a student. And besides that, my clients all understand this world I'm in, being from the upper classes where higher education is the norm. Ironical that I'd have something in common with them. But I count on their sympathy and their memories. What with exams and Christmas, it's my most profitable time of year. Just yesterday I found a pair of Jimmy Choo size 7 on my doorstep. I googled it right away to see how much I could get for them, re-selling gifts being in large part how I make my money. And I know I've got a few surprises awaiting me post-exams, most of all being the St. Regis.

One of my regulators lives in one of the penthouse suites of the St. Regis. Talk about money. The first time I visited him I was all in a tizzy. There was a big celebrity staying on his same floor that day and I felt like goddamn royalty waltzing past those thick black ropes into the residents' elevator. Gotta have more money than Jesus to live full time in a five star hotel. I still don't know what he does for a living, but I've pieced together that it's gotta be something in entertainment, like making movies. Don is the name he gave me and Don has this platinum blonde hair that always looks like he's been driving a convertible with the top down, wind-blown. And red skin, like he was pulled off the grill too soon. He's one of those old guys that wears young people clothes, like high-top leather vans. He's got a lot of spunk, Don does. And he's not too bad in bed either. The wrinkles on his neck are really pronounced like someone tried to cut his throat open over and over, but I close my eyes so I don't see his skin sagging back and forth like pizza dough. And the bed in the St. Regis is the best bed in the whole world, with pillows that are probably from the black market or something, because you can't find a pillow like that out in the real world. The luxury of that room is dazzling. Something I've never even come close to before. Crazy how so much of the world is locked behind some big golden gate with a pearl-encrusted deadbolt. And I found my way in. If you can't buy the entrance ticket with money, you can buy it with sex, if they like the look of you. And if it wasn't here, I'd be having sex anyways, with some business major on sheets that have never been washed, faking an orgasm just to be nice. So you tell me what's better. I knew young and I knew true that the world was gonna use me, was gonna chew me like bubblegum. But I thought maybe I could get something out of it, put it on my terms. My terms principally being getting the hell up and out.

And speaking of getting up and out, Don hasn't given me a chance to explore the rest of the St. Regis, which I'm itching to do. So far it's been the lobby, the elevator, the hallway, and his room. But for Christmas, he's taking me ice skating. Now that might sound a bit off, but the rink is located inside the hotel. They set it up in their big ballroom. And not just that, but we'll go for drinks after in the rooftop bar. I'll probably get to order some seasonal cocktail that tastes like a Christmas tree looks. I'm so excited I could lay an egg. But I gotta keep the egg-laying to a minimum until I'm through with exams. That's the natural order of things, work first, then reward. But I will take a break from my Starbucks study perch to go buy me some new lingerie for the special occasion. I'm going red and white, Mrs. Claus-edition. I'm thinking about these panties when some guy approaches my table. I might as well have police tape strung up around me, given how not-welcoming I look with my textbooks piled high as a medieval barricade, around the border of my table.

"Studying?" he asks me.

I consider not answering, given how moronic that question is. He must be a business major. I give him the once-over. Not bad looking.

"Yep" I offer him back.

"What class?"

"Physics mostly"

He gives me what I assume is a sympathetic look.

"Yikes, that's a doozy. Mind if I study too?"

I would have liked to finish the chapter I was on, but I guess this is a sign that it's time for me to go jingle bell myself over to Victoria's Secret.

"Take the table, I was just leaving." I give him one of my best non-asshole smiles.

I gather up my things and wave goodbye to my second favorite barista on the way out onto the street. It's not that I'm rude or anything, I just prefer to study alone. Actually, alone is how I prefer most things. I've never needed a lot of company. I had friends in high school, a best friend even, but in college, there hasn't been the time. I think of myself like a soldier here, focused on the mission. Focused on getting what's mine.

Kaycie was my best friend in high school. She lived with her family in a trailer, like plenty of families in our county. Us having a two storied cabin was a rarity. But it's because Papa Tom built it when land was still cheap and men still knew how to do such things. Kaycie was the other smart one in our class. Every year we had fifty or so graduates and every now and then there might be one or two who continued on to junior college. Well Kaycie had a shot at some higher learning, as did I. The teachers were real excited in our year, seeing as they might have two success stories. Kaycie was artistic too. She drew these life-like portraits of kids in our class. I loved watching her draw, watching that blank paper begin to breathe life. She wore her hair in two side braids and she would stick the end of one of her braids in her mouth while she worked. She wasn't weird or anything, just concentrated real hard when she was drawing. Both of us were pretty tom-boyish and even though we talked about everything under the sun, we never talked about boys. I wanted to, but Kaycie never did. I never knew for sure, but I suspected that Kaycie didn't really like boys. I don't think she liked girls either. Now that I think about it, I guess there were a bunch of things about Kaycie that I never knew, even though I always considered us to be close as close can be.

Kaycie's mom could see ghosts. She was a real mystic, wrapping herself in oversized, colorful scarves. She had quite a figure but cocooned in all that fabric, she might as well have been a sack of potatoes. She was also the only woman in our town with her hair cropped short, like a lesbian. I liked Mrs. Pitts. She had less rules than the other moms and was about the exact opposite of Mama. She let Kaycie and I watch TV, something that was banned in my house because Mama was real anti-noise and Daddy was real anti-children sitting around doing nothing. Mrs. Pitts said their trailer was haunted, which didn't make sense to me, because ghosts only haunt old things. She saw ghosts around town too, and liked to tell people, while picking out cans of creamed corn at the store, if she felt she needed to deliver a message from the beyond. Kaycie's dad was a drunk. Plenty of those in town too. He was on disability because he threw out his back falling off a roof while on a job. So he hung around the house turning himself into one of Mrs. Pitt's ghosts. Eventually he succeeded, although I was gone by then. I heard about it through Mama. But in high school, he was just the man in the armchair. I could tell he loved Kaycie, but he was the saddest man I'd ever seen and love is hard to see through all that sadness. I didn't say anything to Kaycie after her dad died. Not that I didn't want to, but the number I had for her didn't work anymore. I called the house once, but Mrs. Pitts said she wasn't staying there anymore. So I listened to Mrs. Pitts cry instead, telling me that she had seen Billy around the trailer, that he was dripping wet for some reason and couldn't speak. She said part of her wanted to do a cleansing ritual to get him out and the other part of her wanted him to stay forever. After I hung up I spent all night thinking about how I never wanted to be in love.

I'm sitting in the hall, tapping my foot like a jackrabbit, waiting for the professor to open the doors to the lecture hall. It's my last exam, Circuits. I feel prepared, but still, we're all sitting here, anxious as mosquitos. There's 18 of us in the class. I've worked with a few of my classmates on homework assignments. Jenny's from North Carolina and we've been studying together in the library. Smart as a whip, Betty. Her Daddy owns some kind of engineering company, but she's nice despite all that. Hair the exact color of pineapple. Jenny's into robots. She's in some robotics club that's sponsored by the engineering school and she's invited me to come to a meeting. I've read about that, how you can make fighting robots and different schools compete in these big tournaments. But Jenny said they make a different type of robots. It'd be a lot less blood than a cockfight, I'll tell you that. I always hated cockfights and it wasn't for me that I went, but for Uncle Al. Uncle Al ran the cockfighting ring and managed the fights. He needed somebody to help keep track of the bets and he supposed a 12 year old girl was as good as anyone for this type of work. So on Friday nights I marched down the road to the property that bordered ours and up the hill where the old barn stood. Men in coveralls, still dirty from work, stood crowded around the fenced-off ring, passing around bottles of Mrs. Vicky's homemade moonshine. They came to Uncle Al with dollars clenched in their fists, crumpled and stained. He passed that money to me while I jotted down their bet on little slips of paper. The cocks were named things like Hulk and Snake Slayer. The men never left happy. Something I couldn't understand, then or now, why they kept coming back every week when they didn't seem to enjoy it. But Uncle Al did alright and he gave me a percentage of the winnings. But I never could forget the smell. The smell of blood and fear and metal and fresh mowed field all rolled into one. August for me will always be the month of violence, of mopping up rooster guts, of empty pockets.

Jenny and I sit next to each other when the doors finally open for the exam.

"How do you feel?" she asks me, looking as nervous as I feel.

"I've done what I can." I tell her and she nods, knowing how hard both of us have studied for this.

We turn forward and wait quiet while Professor Dracken passes out the exam booklet. I pop a piece of menthol into my mouth right before he gets to me. I always chew gum for something important. Helps me think.

The exam wasn't as bad as I thought it was gonna be and I'm feeling good about how it went. And regardless of how it goes, ain't nothing better than that feeling after you finish your final exam. Better than three back to back orgasms – which I've never had but can still

guarantee that this is better than that. Jenny is smiling like Orville Redenbache and I must be too. She asks if I wanna celebrate with a beer and yes ma'am I do. This being a city college, there's quite a few options for day drinking, but only a couple that look the other way on the ID. Not super sleezy or anything, just like those parents that tell you they'd rather you do it in the house than out in the street. Who's got parents like that, I haven't got the damndest, but I've seen it in movies, so it must exist somewhere. We head to the Dark Horse tavern which is always dark inside like the name. I let Jenny order me some kind of IPA she likes and I remember that I almost applied for a job here. When I first got to school, I knew I had to find something quick. My savings from the gym would buy me a few weeks, but I had to act fast. I thought I could be a server, work the tips angle. I stopped by a few off-campus restaurants. Most of them served booze, so I didn't make it very far, but I was offered a spot at Antico's, a pizza joint on the Northside. Great mozzarella. On my fourth day I served a table of college boys – business majors most likely – and they started making fun of my accent. Now normally I don't give a coon's ass about what people think or don't think about the way I talk. Growing up in the country taught me to pay attention to what people are saying, not how they get there. I see the way people react when I speak up in class, but I'm here at this school same as them. Boys can be nasty, especially city boys raised with no good sense. I was turning away from their table to put in their next round of beers when the biggest dunce of them all yells out "yeehaw" and smacks my ass. I ain't taking that shit from anyone, unless I'm being paid for it, and I whipped around so fast I almost tore something and socked him with my good right hook. That sent his friends to hooping and hollering while he just looking up at me, bewildered, clutching his face. Needless to say that was my last day on the job. I wasn't too torn up about it. I don't have the temperament for service. I guess you could call what I do now the ultimate service job, but it's different. Even though I'm the one following orders with my clients, it's really me in control. I don't feel inferior to them. I feel like I'm putting one over on them. And it's a lot more glamorous than coming home with tomato sauce stains all over my jeans.

Luckily, I didn't hurt my hand giving him what he had coming. Daddy taught me how to fight. He didn't bother with the other two, but he could see that I would probably need to know how to throw a punch proper. Daddy was like that, trying to prepare us well for life. He ran drills with me, showing me how the movement starts in your big toe and travels up through your body. He said you gotta respect the flow of energy. You get screwed when you block it, like with a bent wrist, the power getting all choked up. Daddy said that with men most things could be solved with a few clean punches. It was different for girls, us being more complicated, but it was something I needed to know just in case. Once I had the basics, he set me up in front of the mirror and had me fight myself, called it "shadow boxing". That tripped me up, not knowing who was winning. One day he calls over my cousin Trent. Trent was skinny on account of being underfed. Long limbs and pale in a way that made it hurt to

look at him. He wasn't really my cousin, but due to the proximity of his trailer to our cabin and us being about the same age, we called him that. He lived with his strung-out mom and whatever psychopath of the month was passed out next to her. Daddy always looked out for him, feeling sorry for a boy in a situation like that. He gave him little jobs around the house, raking leaves and what not, just to have an excuse to feed him. He tells Trent that he and I are gonna fight. This surprised both of us, but I rearranged myself real quick into my ready stance. Daddy being who he is, Trent didn't dare question him. I struck first, but Trent was quicker and my first swung through air, missing its mark. He responded with a blow to my stomach, hard enough to lose me my breath. That pissed me off. I'd been angry before, with Mama, with life, but something happened right then. Rage like I had not known before. Nothing to do with Trent, but with the hot sticky need to eliminate the thing that had hurt me. I wailed on him until Daddy pulled us apart, laughing. He winked at me as he picked Trent off the ground and dusted off his shirt. He took us both for ice creams at the drugstore.

With exams being over, I have no more excuses to avoid packing. I told Mama and Daddy that I'd be home for Christmas. Not the whole break, mind you, but a few days. I'd go for one day if I could get away with it, but the drive alone takes about that long. I'm halfway through stuffing my duffle bag when it dawns on me that I ain't got presents for anybody. My family isn't much for gift-giving, never having much to spare, but a little something to give at Christmas is just manners. Laurie won't be home, I can almost guarantee that. According to Mama, she ain't been home in two months or so. Laurie's been having a rough go of it these past couple years. In high school, she liked to have a good time, but nothing more than the usual teenager rebellion. And Mama and Daddy overreact to everything, expecting saints of us all. When I moved out for school, she was still at home, helping manage the farm and working part time as a receptionist at the auto shop. But something happened and she changed. Nearly killed Mama and Daddy the first time she didn't come home. She'll disappear for weeks at a time and then pop up, showing up at home one day like it ain't nothing at all. Looking more disheveled every time, like time were moving faster for her than for everybody else. After this last spell, Mama told her not to bother coming back.

So that just leaves Jill at home for Christmas this year. Jill still lives with Mama and Daddy, sleeping in the same bed she's had her whole life. She's working at the women's prison they built at the edge of town, butting right up against the county line. We still haven't worked out why they decided to put a maximum security prison in our county of five thousand. She works in the commissary, doling out candy bars and packs of playing cards. She says things are mostly calm, but every now and then she'll get ushered into lockdown when one of the prisoners decides to act up. Metal doors clamp down over all the exits and a siren, loud as anything, clangs out over the speakers. But it's not so bad. The ladies are mostly good with

her since she's not a guard, but rather the one doling out the things they want. When she first got the job, she said it was temporary, just something to hold on to while she looked for more solid ground. She talked about getting her nursing license and going to work in the big regional trauma center. But she's been at the prison for four years now and I don't hear much talk of nursing school anymore. I'll get her a sweater from the campus store, something she can wear over her uniform since she told me they keep the prison real cold due to budget cuts.

Daddy'd be happy with a smile, but I want something nice for him. Even though Daddy busts his butt working our farm, he still finds the time to help out around town. Daddy can fix just about anything: lights that won't light, refrigerators that won't refrigerate, cars that won't run. More than anything, people like having him around. Since forever, people have been calling Daddy to solve their problems. Maybe Mrs. Shannon calls Daddy to come look at a blown fuse, but really she wants his opinion on her sister in law's custody claim. Mrs. Lindon's tab at the groceries had reached five hundred dollars, but she was still recovering from her fall in the shower, so what did Daddy think should be done about that? The city needed more fresh water for the reserve and was wanting to take claim to the river running through the Teek's farm, and what did Daddy think was right? People recognized that Daddy was fair. People thought he should run for mayor, but he refuses, saying he has no head for politicking. That doesn't stop folks from stopping by to get his view on their personal matters. Mama isn't too keen on this 'getting involved in private matters', but she serves coffee and biscuits all the same. I'll get Daddy some nice coffee. I wonder if he'll notice if I switch out his Folger's for something artisanal. Better grab a nice bottle of whiskey too, in case he doesn't care for the coffee. Daddy's not much of a drinker, but for special occasions, he keeps a bottle of whiskey tucked away in the cabinet.

Mama is the hardest one of all to shop for. I think Mama believes that to have any wants at all is a sign of weakness. Sinful. By trying to take up less room, she's taken up all of it, like a tiny hole in a spaceship that sucks all the air out until nobody can breathe. I'm tempted to get her nothing at all and see how that lands. But it'd be best to buy her something useful, show her that I'm not as frivolous as she believes me to be. Maybe something for the garden, so she can kneel over her tomatoes until her knees start aching. Or for the kitchen, so she can scrub until her hands turn raw. Mama is a working woman, but she does the kind of work that nobody appreciates. The kind of work that gets you nowhere.

On the drive back home, I'm in a fine mood. I got my exam grades back earlier than expected and I did alright, passed all my subjects, even Physics. I didn't even have to flirt with the professor. The semester is over and I'm one step closer to being a college educated person. I hold on to that thought, dreading the next couple days as I am. I'm just

visiting, I don't belong to this place anymore. The trees get thicker the closer to home I get, taking up more and more of the world. The leaves are all gone, save for the evergreens. The highway gets narrower too, dropping from six lanes to four to eventually just two. I slow down. Even going fifty miles per hour I'll get there eventually. The road starts climbing. I'm seeing my breath now, so I turn up the heat just a little. I don't like to tax Princeton. It's cold up here close to the mountains. I take our exit off the main road. Whenever you need to give directions to out-of-towners, you just tell them to look for the school bus graveyard. You can't miss it: the eaten out frames of dozens of school buses, their yellow cadavers slumping this way and that, half frozen into the ground that marks the entrance onto Crane Mill Road. There's lots of junkyards around here, so it's not that peculiar. A few miles onto Crane Mill and there's everything that was once everything to me. I pass the same houses of the same families that have always been our neighbors. Or the closest thing to neighbors as we could have. Our property is further in, so far in fact, it crosses the county line. Which means, apart from being harassed by two different tax collectors, this is no-man's land. We had to install our own plumbing and our water comes from the original well Papa Tom dug. Everything out here is dirt road, but Daddy hauls in rocks once a year to keep our driveway from caving in. We've got electricity of course, I mean, this is the 21st century. But sometimes when the storms blow through, we lose power and it takes a whole lot of bother to get them to come this far out and repair the lines. We're lucky if it only takes them three days. As a kid, I loved those days, snowed in, with the lights off. The candles made it look like we were celebrating something. We girls played flashlight tag, told scary stories under the blankets in the living room. I didn't register the looks on Mama and Daddy's faces, that panic beneath the surface. Didn't know that they had memories of what it was to go without heat.

Papa Tom and his woman, my grandmammy Eleanor, had this dream of self-reliance, of sustaining life away from the noise and haste of the world. I'm not sure they would have called it like that, but something in them wanted to find peace in themselves and in the land. Daddy shared that same dream and carried it on forward. Mama, I'm not so sure. I've never heard her talk about what she wanted, then or now. But I know that Mama loves Daddy, as well as I know anything. And she will not speak against him. If Daddy wanted to move to Mars, she would follow him, asking only whether they should bring extra bedding. Papa Tom and Grandmammy suffered then too, but that was when everyone was suffering, so it didn't make no difference. It's different now. The world is pushing in more and more these days, running its fingers against the seams of our town, plucking at loose threads. There are still plenty towns like mine, more than you'd think, sprinkled around this country, in the high places and the low places. People carrying on with less consideration for the march of time.

Being poor has a lot to do with it. People from home always talk about how proud they are of their roots, but I bet if they had more than two nickels to rub together, they'd get the hell out. People without money have no options, so they might as well put on a smile and convince themselves they chose to live like this. This whole town is just folks who can't afford to die somewhere other than where they were born. Maybe that's a little harsh, considering Daddy. Daddy is as poor as the rest of them, but he's genuine happy with his lot, both the one he walks on and the one he lives in. Whether that has more to do with the kind of man Daddy is or the kind of place this is, that's anyone's guess.

We don't know a lot about Daddy's life before us, but it definitely wasn't pleasant. Once, when I was around 11, we were out squirrel hunting a mile or so into the property. And Daddy lifted his head to look at the trees and the sky, and says "when I was a kid, all I wanted was to have land like this". So if I were guessing, I'd say he grew up in close quarters, somewhere where the walls pressed into him, never being able to fully breathe right. His accent isn't as strong as the rest of us, so maybe he grew up somewhere on the periphery, somewhere less green, less full of open spaces. Probably, he never had anything that was really his, just his, to hold and to control and to protect. So when he met Mama and saw what she had, it must have been like a thousand balloons inflating in his chest and the boy inside of him trying to grab hold of them before they sailed away. When they first started going steady and Mama had to bring Daddy around the house to meet her folks, Papa Tom took Daddy golfing, trying to intimidate him most likely. Daddy didn't know the first thing about golfing and Papa Tom not much more than him, just enough to know which club to use for a par four. They went golfing after that, once a year or so, just the two of them. A silly sight, two country goons swinging their fancy sticks. Daddy really loved Papa Tom, you might even speculate more than he loved Mama. Daddy's own father was a cold bastard of a man, to hear anybody talk. Daddy don't talk about things from growing up, but certain of my aunts and uncles do, especially when we're all together at a reunion, and conversation gets a little loose. Stories slipping and splashing their way through beer and whiskey. I learned that Daddy had been beat pretty bad as a kid, for years and years, until he ran away at the first chance he had to join the military. Being a military man is the one thing Daddy is proud for us all to know. Aunt Caroline told me that Daddy went ten years without speaking to his father, after he left home. I knew Grandaddy Bob only briefly as an old, quiet shape, half-melded into a Lazy Boy recliner. By that time, he was mostly shadow, and I can't recall ever hearing his voice, aside from grunts. It was hard to see how that pitiful man wasting away into the upholstery had inspired such terror in my strong father. But time has a way of shuffling the deck. They must have made up in some sort of fashion, because at the end, even after all of that, Daddy did his part in looking out after the old man, accompanying him to his death without grudges to sour the parting.

I think that's part of the reason Daddy married Mama though, because he wanted to be Papa Tom's son. And in time, that's what he became. Whatever Papa Tom needed, Daddy was there. He's the reason why Daddy became so trusted in the community. It was Papa Tom who people always called on when they were in a pickle, Papa Tom who could fix anything. And over the years, Daddy took up the mantle. People called him "Papa Tom's boy" and I think that suited him just fine. He always said Papa Tom was a good man, which is high praise from Daddy. When he died, Daddy was real cut up. He built a bench out of wood from our land and placed it on a nice piece of hill, overlooking the lake. He soldered in a plaque that read 'IN LOVING MEMORY OF CARO THOMAS HAYNIE, LOVING FATHER, HUSBAND, AND BROTHER'. Daddy would go there sometimes, walking along the trail that connected our property with his in-law's. He'd sit alone on the bench, watching the ducks stream across the lake, and talk outloud to Papa Tom. On his way back through the woods, he'd usually find a golf ball sitting in the middle of the trail, in a place where no golf ball has any right or reason to be. He had about seven of those golf balls, all lined up along the window in the bedroom he shares with Mama. Daddy didn't tell anybody about those golf balls until we were older, not being one to make a fuss over things he couldn't explain. Daddy's a God-fearing man. And when you live long enough in nature, you know about miracles.

As the motor cools down from the long drive it makes a ticking sound, like a countdown for how long I can reasonably stay seated in my car. If nothing else, it's the cold air, already seeping in, that will convince me to step out onto the gravel, grab my bag from the passenger seat, and walk up the front steps. I open the door and call out. Mama comes around the corner from the kitchen and takes my bag from me. At first glance, Mama's the kinda woman that looks soft, a bundle of folds and buttery skin. But poke her with a finger and you'll feel the muscle underneath. Even with her knee acting up, that woman can move faster than you'd expect. She's almost fully grey, but it's only evident under certain lights since the color is close to her original blonde. A blonde so blonde it was near transparent.

"How was the drive?" she asks

"Easy peasy, lemon squeezy" I say.

"I just finished making some soup, sit down"

I'm eating ham and onion soup when Daddy steps in from the outside porch. He has his camouflage hunting suit on and his cheeks are flushed from the chill. Daddy is a few shades darker than the rest of us, like God held him up to the sun a little longer before he was born. Daddy's always been lean, with long fingers and calves that are too thick for most waders.

He smiles when he sees me.

"Get anything?" I ask him.

"Nah, just getting some fresh air." he responds.

Jill walks in around seven. She drops her purse and squeals at the sight of me. She pulls me into a life-threatening hug and demands I come with her into our room while she changes out of her uniform. She looks tired, the skin around her eyes like sheets of rice paper. Jill is built like Mama, with what folks call good birthing hips. She hates the way her underarms jiggle, but I think she gives the best hugs in the family. Right now she's all smiles, pulling her legs through a pair of old sweatpants. Jill has always been the sensible one of the three of us. She strives for peace. Even when she's happy, it seems muted. So I'm surprised how enthused she is to see me. When I came home last year for Christmas break, she was quiet. I thought she was moody because it was just her left at home with Mama and Daddy. When she did speak to me, she mentioned the nursing courses she had once planned to enroll in. But this time around she actually seems pleased to see me. I let her drag me to the couch, arm around my shoulder, and pester me with questions about college. Jill and I always got along alright, but we were never close, so I can't give her a hard time for not knowing how to be around me. It's Laurie I miss though. Growing up, I followed Laurie around like a mosquito. She let me tag along, mostly because I did whatever she asked me to. She was always getting us into trouble and then talking us back out of it. Jill stuck to herself more, until we dragged her in to resolve some conflict between us. Laurie grew up to be stunning, like really stunning. People would turn around to look at her when she walked past. And she learned quick how to use that beauty. I think this scared Mama and Daddy, which is why they were so hard on her, harder than they were with Jill and me. We don't know where she is though, hasn't phoned home for some months. I was hurt when she didn't get in touch after she left home, thinking that I at least deserved to stay in her life. I was always loyal to her. But it's been total radio silence. That same silence has extended to the rest of us. Mama and Daddy don't talk about her.

We have soup again for dinner and Daddy wants to know about what classes I've been taking. Jill is curious too, but Mama stays silent while I talk about school. I'm taking up the dishes from the table when she asks me

"You been minding your manners up there?"

"Yes Ma'am, I have been."

She nods and says "Good. Wouldn't want anyone thinking you don't come from a good home."

I squirt soap into the dish sponge and begin to wash the bowls. I say "No ma'am".

Daddy cracks open the porch door and calls to me, "Sugar, when you're done with the dishes, will you give me a hand out here?"

Daddy's cleaning his guns out on the porch. He motions to the chair next to him and I sit down. Daddy likes having his conversations on the porch. It's freezing.

"You doing alright, money wise?" He doesn't look at me, but at the oilcloth he's sliding down the shaft of a double barrel shotgun.

"Yes sir." Daddy sets down the shotgun, angled away. "You've always made do for yourself."

I feel my face flush and try to keep my voice casual as I reply "Yes sir, as you taught me."

He's silent for a moment and then he puts his hand to my cheek and smiles at me. "My fighting girl."

Upstairs in my room, I lay down on my bed. Growing up, all three of us slept together in this room. I remember how we used to tease each other after bedtime, voices at a whisper, not daring risk waking up Mama. As we got older, we grew more private, but we still spoke to each other in the dark. But now it's just me and Jill sleeping in here. I wonder what kinda bed Laurie's sleeping in tonight. Whether it belongs to her or not. Whether she feels safe. I wish we were still staring at each other from across our twin beds. I look at Jill on her side, back turned to me. I want to tell her what Daddy just said to me, but I know there's no way I can without making her jealous. I'll write it down in the morning in my notebook, dated, so I can remember the day he called me a fighter.

The next two days pass more or less the same. Jill's off work, so we help around the house, assisting Mama with chores and cooking for Christmas dinner. There's always something needing doing in a country house. With Jill working so much at the prison and Laurie and I gone, Mama and Daddy are busier than ever. They're not as old as old can be, but Mama has a bum knee that hurts her and Daddy's no spring chicken. If I were on better terms with Mama and Daddy, I'd think about bringing up the idea of downsizing, at least sell off some of the animals, but I know it wouldn't be a welcome topic. Retirement doesn't register in these parts, not being the privilege of the blue collar. Retirement is like Disneyland: we've heard

about it, but who has the money to get there. Mama and Daddy were always private about their financial situation, but I know there's some debt, because I've seen the envelopes that come in the mail. Jill's paycheck helps a whole lot, more than anything because it comes when it's supposed to. I spend a good portion of these two days thinking about whether I should be giving some money to Mama and Daddy too. But that might invite questions about how I'm doing so well. Money always comes with questions. Not ever having much, Mama and Daddy don't trust money without a clear origin story.

We do other things around the house too, for Christmas. We wrap presents with the same wrapping paper we've had since Jesus himself was born. Jill and I bake sugar cookies and cheese straws and caramel popcorn. We string lights on the tree that Daddy chopped down from the forest. We always have a real tree, one of the small perks of owning your own land. In past years, we girls would crunch through the forest, searching for the king of the spruce trees. Once we selected which one we wanted, Daddy would lug out his ax, bring it down, and haul it back to the house. The forest gives lots of gifts like this, as long as you know where to look and you don't overindulge. I eat more than I've eaten all semester, especially Mama's turnovers: two slides of white bread packed into a cast iron skillet, clamped shut with fruit and butter in the middle, stuck directly into the wood stove and cooked until molten and deliriously delicious.

We're sitting down for Christmas dinner – venison from the deer Daddy's shot last month, wild carrots, collards, and Mama's butter rolls, almost soggy with butter – when I hear something like a car door slamming. One big disadvantage of all three of our dogs dying is that folks are able to sneak up on us now. No more chorus of barking when any moving thing with or without a pulse gets within a mile of our house. But all three dogs dying within the span of a year broke Daddy's heart and he's sworn off getting another. Plus, the woods are loud. A lot of people wouldn't imagine that, but it's true. Coyotes yipping and yowling, sometimes for hours each night, branches falling to the ground like artillery shells. Cicadas alone are loud enough to cover tires crunching gravel. But these are the familiar sounds. The sounds that assure us all is right with the world. Any foreign sound, like those made by people, is cause for immediate alarm.

Daddy must have heard it too, because he gets up and grabs the shotgun that sleeps above the mantle. The rest of us follow him to the door. From the small glass pane I can make out a car sitting in the driveway, something like an old Mustang. I push my way outside to get a better look. Steam's rising from the hood of the Mustang, like smoke signals in the icicle air. And then I see Laurie, climbing out of the passenger side. Just looking at her makes me shiver inside, barely clothed as she is. She's got on a ratty old t-shirt and gym shorts, the mesh kind we all used to wear for P.E. class. Her hair is matted and stringy, ends dyed a

solid, raven black like she's been dipped in oil. She's skinny, but not the flattering kind. The hungry kind. She's shouldering a trash bag. I don't get a good look at who's driving, because as soon as she shuts the car door, the driver takes off, U-turning back down the driveway. Laurie stares at the car as it disappears back through the woods.

No one says anything until she turns back to face us.

"Merry Christmas..." She says, her voice dry and gravelly like she's holding back a cough. "Can I come in?"

Food's gone cold, but nobody's thinking about that. We're standing around, waiting for some kind of explanation. Laurie's shaking. I know she's hungry, by that weak, glassy look in her eyes. Her eyes keep flicking back and forth from the table to our faces. But Mama and Daddy aren't about to offer her anything without her first answering some questions.

So Laurie settles in, leaning her back against the foot of the couch. She sat on the floor, like we did as kids. She combs her hair with her fingers, an old anxious habit. "I've been working in Memphis," she starts. That surprises me. Memphis is far. She says she first went to meet up with a friend from school who offered her a place on the couch. Says she's been working there, doing assembly line work, but had a falling out with her friend and didn't have any place else to go. I look at Mama and Daddy, to see how they're reacting. It's obvious to me that this story is pure horse bologna. By the state she's in, she's leaving out some details. Whether they buy it or not, Mama sighs and makes Laurie a plate. And she's eating with her hands before Mama can come back with a fork. Everything's topsy turvy because Mama isn't even yelling at her or nothing for acting like an animal in the house. She hasn't caught my eye once, even though I'm boring down on her like she might evaporate at any moment. I have seen my share of drug addicts. All of us have, that being one of the most popular post-graduation career paths in this area. I don't let myself think what I'm thinking. But it's right here in front of me, cross-legged on the floor.

We normally exchange family gifts after dinner on Christmas day, but none of us know how to act now that Laurie's sprung herself on us. The wrapped gifts remain under the tree, as if they were empty, nothing more than display, the way rich folk do it. Each of us picks at the food when we feel hungry, but mostly we sit in the living room in silence. We watch each other. Not knowing who's supposed to give in first. I make coffee for Daddy and Jill. Mama's the only one who won't drink it, prefers her daily gallon of sweet tea. How Daddy's the diabetic and not her, only the good Lord knows. I try and keep my staring at Laurie to a minimum. Eventually she asks to go to bed and retreats into our room. I think we all breathe a little better once she's cleared out.

The first, or maybe second, time Laurie fell off, she was staying with our Aunt Tessy. Aunt Tessy decided to send her to a state rehab facility, even footed the bill. Mama and Daddy didn't know anything. They preferred to stay out of it, even abandon Laurie if it meant they'd be spared the details. But Aunt Tessy is no nonsense. And she has a high tolerance for drama. Her boy, my cousin Vicky, has been sick since he was little, so Tessy gets a little relief from other peoples' problems. I didn't find out Laurie went to rehab until much later. I always thought Laurie's problems were boy-related, like she kept running off with some new beaux. She stayed clean four months. Eventually Aunt Tessy kicked her out. I don't think Mama and Daddy know what's wrong with her exactly.

Laurie's asleep when Jill and I get to the room. She didn't bother changing her clothes, but she's pulled the blanket off my bed to use. Jill leaves and comes back with an extra blanket from the linen closet.

"Thanks" I say, not bothering to lower my voice. Laurie can be such a selfish bitch.

I leave the day after Christmas, telling everyone I was needed back. Not true, I have a whole week left of break. I'm gonna let Mama and Daddy and Jill deal with Laurie. I might have planned to stay longer if I'd known she was coming home, but seeing her felt like swallowing hot coals, like folding my insides into a paper airplane and throwing it to the wind. She isn't beautiful anymore. I couldn't see myself forgiving her for that. I have lost a few friends to weakness. I thought my sister was made of stronger stock, the same stock as me. On the drive back to campus, I force myself to think about it. I do a mental scan of her body. Don't listen to her words, look at the physical evidence. The body can't lie so easily, it arrives at the truth before the rest of us. Dehydrated skin, like sheets too long out on the line. Tremors coming and going. The bones of her skull look more pronounced, like the skeleton inside is doing its damndest to get out.

Heroin. There's no other explanation.

I get to my apartment late, after eight hours burning rubber, and collapse into bed.

CHAPTER

The spring semester starts and I've got a bitch of a workload. I always sign up for fifteen credits, because I'm graduating in four years, and not the five that many engineering

students opt for. The first time I met with my academic advisor he advised me against it. I sat down in the hard-backed chair in front of his desk while he looked over my credentials.

"You might want to make it easier on yourself" he said to me, reading glasses perched on the point of his nose. I told him I'd be fine.

"You're not used to this level of rigor. It might be too demanding for you."

Well that right there is the kind of statement that gets me riled up. If I had feathers, they'd be ruffled. But I sat up straighter, crossed my arms, and told me that he didn't have the faintest idea what level of rigor I was or was not used to. That shut him up. Since that first meeting, he signs off on my course requests without so much as a peep. Good boy. I wouldn't dream of admitting this to him, but it has gotten harder. Every semester is more difficult than the last. Sometimes I feel my brain like a cement block and no matter how much I drill, nothing new's getting through. Other days it's a burst pipe and everything I need to remember is spilling over the sides, running through my fingers. And the professors expect you to know everything now, even before you get to class on day one. That means more hours for me in Starbucks, palm glued to my chin until my hand goes numb or in the computer lab, searching through lines of code for that one missing integer.

I like programming. I took to it immediately. Doesn't mean everything comes natural, far from it in fact, but programming is more about sensibility than anything else. It requires a certain type of person, with intelligence being less of a factor than you might think. Being a programmer is a lot like being a detective, except you don't have the human element getting in the way. No bodies stacking up while you're on the case. And it's less sexy. But in the same way you see a detective obsess over an unsolved crime in a murder mystery movie, programmers obsess over their program to figure out why something's not working. It is an excess of care. Where most people would simply stop looking, rationally weighing the price of their time against the value of the solution, programmers are unable to stop. It is a very lucrative defect. Most students, when starting out, are not aware of their own tolerance for frustration. They get weeded out between first and second years and all you're left with are the truly unstable. You see a lot of poker players emerge from the remaining pool: people who need to break down a mechanism into its core set of rules. To a programmer, anything with logic is a game and any game can be won. Poker, like any game, is just an algorithm you have to solve backwards. Unstable is the right word, by the way. Most of us are as one-tracked minded as a one-track train, neglecting the other aspects of what is called a well-balanced life. We put all our chips on this one number and once all those little balls stop spinning, we look up to realize we forgot to try our luck elsewhere. That's what's causing the cleanliness issue among my cohort. The professors are always having to remind

my classmates to shower, because they get so caught up in their homework assignments they forget about their own basic human needs. Being so logical as to be stupid, this led to the invention of the sink-shower. Male classmates started visiting the bathrooms five minutes before class to wipe themselves down with the water from the sink. It's a dead giveaway when they walk into class with armpits soaking wet through their t-shirts. Though I'll take that over the fumes – certainly toxic in such high volume – from Axe Bodyspray that these boys douse themselves in.

I decided to study programming because I looked through the options in the school catalog and realized it was the only major that was entirely self-sufficient. And because Mandy introduced me to it. Every other field of study requires contacts, a network, a team. A programmer just needs a solid hard drive and they can make a world of their own. I should be able to afford a computer in a few months and after that, I can do anything I want. Any idea I have, I could execute, without needing to ask for anybody's help or permission. I might not even need clients, if my ideas are good enough on their own. This appeals to me greatly. Go anywhere, build anything. Like a dog walking himself on his own leash. But other people don't see this little golden ticket hidden in the four grueling years. They don't have the eyes I have. Or the nose for gold.

Mandy was one of those goody-two-shoes Ms. American dream types that signs up to volunteer in the forgotten, downtrodden corners of this country. Her program was called Americorps and she came to teach math at our high school my tenth grade year. Little pink thing. She wore overalls, but not for work, just to be ironic. And strappy sandals in fall. And she wasn't the best math teacher I ever had, but I was fascinated by her. I couldn't believe she was only six years older than me. My whole life, the teachers have drooled over me, praised me six ways to Sunday. But Mandy wasn't impressed by me. She treated me like an equal. And she's the one who introduced me to the idea that I could study programming. She could see I was good at math, but less good at talking. Or the kind of talking that people wanna hear. Mandy's big objective for her volunteer program was trying to increase the percentage of college-educated white trash, or something along those lines. So she stuck to me like mud on a hog. I was already planning to go to college, but I wasn't sure what for. I just knew I needed out and knew I had the brains to do it. She made me come to her classroom at lunch to watch YouTube videos about assembly language and C++. She even arranged a phone call between me and her friend from college that had gone into the field. And at some point I stopped doing it to appease her and took a real fancy to the subject.

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Aside from meeting my professors, being back at school means checking in with my regulares. I have a standing monthly with Ali, so that's squared away, just need to send a quick text to confirm. Don and the others require customized scheduling, so I spend some time replying to their messages. One of my most consistent clients, Deji, had to go back to Nigeria for business, so I have an open slot to fill with a replacement. Deji was my favorite client. He always wore suede shoes, in colors like burgundy and emerald and beautiful suits, extremely well-tailored. I'd never known anyone who dressed as well as he did. And it wasn't just the quality of the clothing, but the way he wore them. Like he deserved nothing less than the best fabrics. Like his clothing was just another layer of his skin, born to fit him. He wasn't handsome in an obvious way, but the clothes could almost make you forget he wasn't. He probably didn't need to pay for the company of women, but I figured out on our first date that it was his preference. Deji comes from a semi-royal family in Nigeria and had particular cultural views on relationships between men and women. He never spelt it out for me, but something about paying for my company didn't violate his sense of cultural loyalty. I'm not paid to give my opinions and he always treated me the way my Nana treated those little porcelain angels she collected: like the more breakable you are, the more precious. She certainly didn't treat living creatures with as much care. He was always very formal with me, even in sex. He let me undress with his back turned, as if this small privacy mattered given what we were there to do. He was quiet while we fucked, which made me self-conscious at first, like I wasn't doing enough to please him. I tried to bring this up once, as we laid together post-orgasm. He didn't sweat, or breathe loudly. Dije never lost his composure. But he liked me to lay next to him after he finished, both of us staring up at the ceiling, like a couple in the park, spotting figures in the clouds.

I asked him, making my voice light and pushing my tits into his shoulder, "how was it...for you?"

And he replied, without turning to look at me, "Good".

And that was the only time we ever discussed what we did in bed. But he was vocal when it came to his business and would spend hours talking about his investments. This bored me at first, until I considered that I wasn't enrolled in any Business classes at school, so I might as well pay attention to whatever practical advice I could glean from him. I'd never thought about investing. Not sure how you can even think about something you've never ever heard of. I can guarantee you there ain't been a single person in my family who could do much more than define the word. Sure, land is an investment, but only if it's located where somebody'd be willing to buy it. Plus, my folks are more likely to divorce than they are to sell that land. Deji once said, "You should never invest what you can't lose" and by that logic, our family land is about the opposite of an investment. And even now, making better money

than I ever have, after expenses, my spare change doesn't seem like I could roll very far. But Deji says there's no minimums and that starting with any amount is good. He helped me set up a brokerage account with my bank, so I can buy ETFs. Don't ask me what those are, but Deji said to stick to them while I'm just starting out. I did it partially to make him happy, because I've got other things on my mind than locking my money up somewhere I can't get to it. I know it's something rich people do to get even richer, but I know plenty of men back home who gamble and I never could understand the temptation. It takes quite a lot to part me from my money. But even as I'm thinking that, I realize it's an old way of seeing things. If there's anything I've learned from my clients is that rich people treat their finances different from poor people. I've got habits etched into my skull, generational thinking and what not, that I've got to let go of. Not all of it, just the bits that are gonna keep me poor too. Mama and Daddy couldn't teach me about money, on account of them not having any, so I've got to learn from my clients. I can't be too obvious about it, but by observing and a well-timed question here and there, I might be able to figure out my own kind of plan.

But Deji is out of the picture now. On telling me he was leaving to go back home, he gifted me a jade hairpin. Just like him to buy something so aesthetic. Deji is one of those men that needs things to be beautiful or he can't make sense of it. Like the world is too horrible to bear if it's not dressed up in something pretty. I don't know if that's cowardice or idealism, but regardless, it's a hard standard to live by. I like Deji, but him leaving is like letting out a breath I didn't know I was holding in. I haven't ever been in love, but I imagine it's a lot like kicking off a pair of tight shoes you've been wearing all night. And all my clients prefer me in heels, so what does that tell you.

I sold the hairpin at my favorite pawn shop. Got enough to buy some ETFs, I imagine.

I solved the shortage problem created by Deji's departure real quick, and in a big way. I met this new guy in the usual way – on the site – and we've been exchanging messages. He's an American, but been living in the Dominican Republic for work for the past few months. Must be real eager for a woman who can speak to him in his own tongue. We were chatting last night and out of nowhere he up and asks me to come visit him. My mouth was ready with about fifty-four reasons to tell him no before my brain caught up to reconsider. I thought about it all night and finally texted him 'Yes' in the morning, as long as I could fix it with my class schedule. We have MLK Jr. day off, so if I ditch my classes the previous Friday, that'd fit like a glove. Get a load of me, on an airplane, and an international one at that. Now all I'm thinking about is how that doggone plane stays up. I've just finished studying Physics, so I can tell you all about thrust and drag and propulsion, but that doesn't really make a difference to the body, now does it? Sometimes the body just won't listen to reason. But if my mind has had to learn all this new stuff, then my body's got some catching up to do. It

owes me that at least. He sent me the ticket a few hours after I accepted and I double-checked to make sure it was a roundtrip reservation. Don't want to get stuck on some island with no way home. I wouldn't put it past him, or any man for that matter. Thinking on international waters reminds me I haven't checked in at the house and no one's called for me, which could either be a good sign or a bad one. I'm curious to know whether Laurie is still kicking around and if so, whether they've all managed to kill each other yet. There's no way in hell I'm telling them about my travel plans, but I call to check in on the Laurie drama.

I call the house phone from my cell. Mama or Daddy don't bother with cellphones since there's no service once you leave the highway. Seems inconvenient, but the more I'm spending my time surrounded by the constant haphazardness of all these devices, the more I'm starting to recognize the merit of living someplace nobody can reach you. Sure, you might be as well-informed as that opossum on the side of the road, but you'd have about as much stress. And room to make up your own mind about what the world holds for you. Mama picks up on the third ring, out of breath, and I know she's just come in from the garden.

"Hey Mama, it's me." I say

"Charlise? Everything alright?"

Mama always sounds nicer on the phone. Don't know why that is, except maybe there's something about not seeing my face that she's more inclined to.

"Yeah, just calling to say hi."

I don't want to come right out and say I'm calling to find out about Laurie, hoping she'll get to it.

"Well that wasn't necessary." I wait for her to continue.

"We're all good up here. Daddy's out at Ed's"

Ed's the owner of the largest chicken farm in the North side of the county. And Daddy's best friend, if you measure friendship by the number of arguments had between two people. We all know Mama doesn't care for Ed, thinking he riles up Daddy. Certainly gets him to drink more than he ought to.

"Jill's at work a'course and Laurie's sleeping."

So she's still there. Interesting. We're both silent for a moment and I know Mama's figured me out, but she's not gonna be giving any handouts.

"So..." I begin "is she home for good?"

Mama sighs into the phone. "It's too soon to talk about all of that. We're letting her stay on while she rests up."

I almost choke on my own spit. Hard to believe that Mama and Daddy've gone soft. Mama is stricter than the government when it comes to drugs. And they know enough to know there are drugs involved. Must be Daddy's influence, working on Mama, convincing her to let Laurie clean up at home. Mama won't be happy about that, but she won't want the town talking either. Having Laurie under the roof means she can keep her tucked away and out of sight. I wanna ask more questions about what they've found out, but I know I won't get anywhere. Conversations with my parents always go this way, like tap dancing around minefields: even if you avoid stepping on the bombs, you still give everyone a fright making too much noise. There are more things we don't talk about than things we do. I've lost my edge a bit, being away. I used to be like a one-woman SWAT team when it came to extracting information from them, without them knowing what I was after. But I can see that this is much too sensitive. Mama won't be budging, so I've got to get my info directly from the source itself.

"When she's up, will you tell her to give me a call sometime?"

"Jill too" I think to throw in, to cover my tracks. I practically see Mama raising her eyebrows.

"Sure thing. I'll tell 'em."

Whether she did or not is anybody's guess because for the next week I don't hear from anybody. Just as well, I've been dead distracted by one thing and one thing only this week: getting my passport. I never thought it'd be this hard to prove I existed. You'd think me having a body and a name would settle the matter. Nothing gets me redder than asking somebody's permission to live my life. All this control, wanting to know where I am and where I'm heading. Ain't nobody's business. By the grace of all things holy I have my birth certificate. When I moved out I had the good sense to take all my important papers from the house. I don't know what I thought, just that maybe I didn't want to leave pieces of me behind. With only a week until my flight, I had to request the ultra, super-expedited kind of passport, which meant harassing my congressman's office until they could get me an

appointment at the passport office. I spent all day there, filling out forms, writing a check (no way I was paying for this myself) and surrendering two horrible mugshot photos of me to the clerk. I got my passport the day before my flight. They printed it so quick it came to me warm. I stared at it in the parking lot and set myself to memorizing the numbers. Always good to have the important facts of one's life stored safely in the noggin.

Making my way through the airport the next day was the second ordeal of the week, which might sound on the far side of pathetic until you remember that Atlanta's got the country's biggest airport. Atlanta's already a pretty diverse city, but the airport is a nation unto itself. Talk about all shapes and sizes. All those people trying to get somewhere else. That really hit me, waiting in the security line, hand wrapped around my new passport, how the airport's got to be the most poetic place in the whole world. It's the one place where everybody's life is changing. Whether you're leaving home, or leaving your lover, or starting an adventure, the airport is the mechanism for transformation: the portal between who you are and who you're about to become. If I wasn't so nervous about the flight, I'd reprimand myself for being so dramatic.

And well apparently the person I was destined to become is somebody afraid of flying. I was surprised by how much you feel the air itself. It reminded me of being on a boat, which I've done only once, with the waves rocking you this way and that. And the plane is loud – groaning something awful like it wants no part in being lifted into the sky. I forced myself to breathe in and out deeply while we took off. I did my counting trick, visualized the numbers in big bold font coming one after another. I didn't want anyone to notice my panic, so I closed my eyes, hoping this would make me look calm. I kept wiping them dry against my jeans. We leveled out and it got a lot better. I ventured a look out the window and saw something I'll never forget. A field of clouds, straight from a child's dream, like someone spilled a bag of cotton balls into a puddle. Mesmerizing. Thinking about the ground made me lightheaded, so I studied the different types of clouds instead. When the attendant came by with the drink trolley I asked for wine. I saw the passenger in front of me do this and saw that it worked, like a rabbit out of a hat, so I dared to try it too. I thought the wine would help dampen my nerves and I was right, but even still, I didn't breathe regular again until we touched down. A few of the passengers clapped and even though I didn't join in, I felt the same relief burst inside me like someone popped the cork off a bottle of champagne. My seatmate, who I'd barely noticed, rolled his eyes. There's always somebody who thinks himself invincible.

Outside of the airport in Punta Cana, the air is heavy, like waking up from an afternoon nap in summer. There's a breeze that lifts my hair as I look around for David. Black men in bermuda shorts, leaning out of taxis, asking me if I need a ride. I shake my head and walk a

few paces away from the airport exit. A World War II military Jeep comes hunkering into the Arrivals lane, and I see David behind the wheel. I walk towards him, fling my bag in and climb over the passenger side door. The first time meeting a client in person is always telling. He greets me with a side hug, barely looking at me, before yanking on the Jeep's massive stick shift that juts out from the space between our seats. Quick as a lightning bug we're lurching down the ramp and away from the airport. The road leaving the airport is a two lane parade of potholes. David maneuvers the Jeep with ease around these and the militia of bicycles and motorcycles that zip and weave by, close as a pinprick to collision. He's driving this Jeep the way I drive a four-wheeler and I'm just grateful my hair is tied back. Piles of trash litter the shoulders on both sides. We hit a hole and I feel it rattle up through my bones, as if I too were made of metal and part of the car's skeleton. I see smoke and notice a small fire ahead. A young boy sits by the road, burning trash. Plastic by the color of the smoke. The nature here is so dazzling, it is almost disorienting to see signs of human life. I'm from the country, so I know how to co-exist with nature, but I've never seen nature like this. Palm fronds are crowding in from both sides of the road, grasses tall as my hip bone fencing us in, the call and response chant of the ocean coming from somewhere just beyond sight. Everything here is expanding, trying to make more of itself. Living here must be like playing a constant tug-o-war, fighting to hold on to what little space you've claimed for yourself out of the great big wheel of it all. David and I chat about unimportant things as we drive along. He asks me the same questions they all ask me: about school, about my family. I give him enough details to put him at ease, all lies of course. I invent little stories to make myself seem more fascinating than I truly am. And more importantly, I shift the conversation back to him as often as I can. That's the great big secret of being charming: say less. Men love a woman of few words, as long as those few words consist of compliments, jokes, and innuendos. I can sense him relaxing by the way his hand loosens its grip on the steering wheel, the other one falling to his side. After about an hour he pulls off on a gravel road, barely visible through the thicket. The Jeep clatters along until we emerge into a clearing. There's a large villa, two-storied with white walls and lined all around with a variety of pink and orange and violet flowers. I smell what can only be the ocean and know that it's just on the other side of the house. David jolts the car to a stop and dust rises around us. I jump down, fish my bag out, and walk up to the house. I stop only when I see that David hasn't gotten out of the car.

"This one's just for you" he calls to me from the Jeep.

"What?" I stare blankly back at him.

I'm so surprised at his words that I've forgotten myself.

"I live down the road. This is the guest house." He smiles at me. "Settle in and I'll pick you up around seven for dinner."

With that, the Jeep roars to life again and disappears behind the foliage. I watch the dust settle back on the road before heading inside. No key in the door, but it's unlocked. The first thing you see walking through the front door is the ocean. Floor to ceiling windows line the living room. The floors are marble. I find the bedroom upstairs has an equally impressive view. I'm tempted to take a nap, but I'd prefer to shower so that my hair is dry in time for dinner. I stand around naked waiting for the water to heat up, but it never does, so I rinse off quickly, goosebumps activated like a thousand little soldiers up my arms and legs.

I didn't get into this earlier but David's not quite fifty. It goes without saying that he's not a looker. He's pale, questionably pale given someone who's been living on an island for six months out of the year. He wears nondescript, unmarked, and usually baggy clothing. And he smells. Like, really bad. And I'm somewhat of an aficionado when it comes to bad smells, having lived within touching distance from manure for most of my life. I didn't realize it was coming from him at first, being in a foreign country, it might have been some tropical plant for all I knew. But when he came to pick me up for dinner, it was unquestionable. It wasn't smelly the way sick people smell, like when you have a diabetes sore or an infection, it was just regular ole', good-fashioned, David needs a shower smelly. What I couldn't wrap my head around was how he wasn't aware of this. And second, how was I supposed to have sex with a man this dirty. The thought shook me from my game a bit. There wasn't any way around it though, now that he had brought me here. I might be able to tempt him into the shower. It wasn't just my extra good sniffer either, I saw the reactions on the face of our waitress when she seated us. Guess there are some things that don't train you on when it comes to fine dining. David asked for a booth and then chose to sit next to me, rather than across. Unorthodox, but fine, I'll just try and not look like a frog as I breath through my mouth instead. David says he knows what he wants to order, so I don't bother looking at the menu. We're eating some kind of pickled fish when I feel David slide his hand under my ass. I sit up straighter, but I don't say anything.

"Just keep eating," he says to me.

He moves himself a bit closer to me, I assume so as not to alarm the wait staff. His hand curves under me and starts touching on my business. I'm wearing a dress, so access is a sitch. I'm honestly not sure what he's doing, but all I'm thinking about is how his hand must be hurting with all of my weight bearing down on him. He touches me until he sees the waitress bringing out our main course and right on out the hand slides. One thing that is both a hindrance and an advantage for me is how well-lubricated I am. Even when I couldn't

be bothered, or if I find the man in front of me as repulsive as that pickled fish, my body sets off for the races anyways. And with men usually thinking everything's about them, this has every client believing they've got me all hot and bothered. I don't bother correcting them, but it irks me all the same. I can't help it, I'm just built this way. But it goes without saying that he had to give his hand a good wipe on that white linen napkin. I've already started digging into the main course – something that tastes like chicken – as if I wasn't just treated like a human bowling ball. But I can roll with it. You got to, every client being weirder than the last. I wait for him to say the first word, possibly some clue about what he wants from me, but when he speaks, it's just to ask me whether I want to order something else to eat.

I can't figure out if I should be speaking more. David don't seem too talkative, but I don't know if that means he prefers me to be quiet too or wants to listen to me yap. I've known both types. I ask him about his business – usually a safe topic. A lot of my clients don't have an identity outside of their jobs.

"I build houses." He says.

"That's impressive." I say. "Here on the island?"

He shrugs and does a little wave with his hand. "Here, there, all over."

Okay, so he didn't bring me here for the conversation.

After dinner, David walks me to the beach. There are no lights beyond the brilliance of the moon and a few distant windows. The breeze is stronger by the water, almost chilly. He must know this part of the beach well because he leads me to two beach chairs that have been left out. The water comes up close to our feet but stops short. It would be enough for me to sit here and listen to the ocean, but this is a work trip, not a vacation. I can feel David looking at me while I stare out at the waves.

When I finally return his gaze, he says "I want you to take off your dress."

Instinctually, I look around us, but he interjects "No one will bother us here."

I notice he didn't promise that no one will see me. I lift the dress above my head, as graceful as I can manage while sitting on a plastic beach chair, and place it next to me. If I can confess something else, it's that I'm also a bit of an exhibitionist. I think this kink developed more out of the process of elimination than anything else. Since I've been having sex

transactionally – to say, without personal enjoyment – the idea of doing so without being touched is actually quite appealing. So this request from David doesn't bother me much. With clients there's a lot that doesn't bother me. I don't like pain and I don't like humiliation, but most everything else is on the table. If I'm being honest, those are on the table too, if the price is right. I'm reclining back now, doing my impression of delectable, and David is across from me staring like someone's set his head on a tripod. He finally speaks and his mouth sounds dry and he asks me if he can pinch my nipples. As consent, I lean forward. He does it so hard I gasp. But he just does it once. Then he asks me to touch myself. So I do that too. This part is always hard, when the client wants me to finish. I have to focus real hard on being somewhere completely different, with somebody completely different. I run through the mental rolodex of fantasies I use for these occasions and choose one. It takes me a few minutes, but I manage. And that was it. He didn't touch me again, just asked me to put my dress back on. Back at the guesthouse he says goodnight and whips away again leaving me alone for the rest of the night. I walk back inside, wondering for a moment whether I did something wrong, until it hits me that I don't give a damn.

Normally, after seeing a client the first thing I do is take the hottest shower I can manage, but given there's no hot water and he didn't even touch me, I'll pass on that for tonight. I slip my feet into my thick fuzzy socks, the ones with little penguins on them even though it's months past Christmas, and climb into bed. It's early, but I couldn't bring the school laptop with me, so I don't have much to occupy myself with. I snoop, opening all the drawers. Maybe someone's stashed a puzzle. But all I find is a large book in the nightstand in the guest bedroom downstairs. *Les Misérables*. A pretty intense volume to keep at a beach house. I would have expected some cheap romance novel. This book is big enough to kill a mouse with and it takes both my arms to lug it upstairs. It's like someone put it in there hoping no one would ever take it out again. I'm not the biggest reader, but it's only eight o'clock and there's no way I can fall asleep right now, unless lulled to it by this old book that's got more dust than words on it. I crack it open to the Preface: *"So long as ignorance and poverty exist on earth, books of the nature of Les Misérables cannot fail to be of use."* That's a bold statement. And an unnecessary one to boot, given that ignorance is the fundamental nature of us humans and poverty is its culmination. But this has got me intrigued enough to continue.

At some point, I fall asleep reading, or at least, based on the evidence, fall asleep holding a book. I made it about fifty pages in, which is more than I've read for pleasure in years. This book is really something. It took a few pages for me to get used to the manner of writing and I still miss a bit here and there. There's a lot going on in the story, a lot of different characters. I carry the book down with me to the kitchen and set it on the counter while I poke into the cupboards to see what I can scrounge up for breakfast. In a word: nothing. I

have no idea what David's got planned for today, but I've gotta eat. The drive into town last night was short, so I could definitely walk there. And there's only one road, so I know where I'm going. But then it hits me that I don't have any money. Well I've got dollars, but not local currency. I figure I'll just stay put and wait for David to come feed me. I flop onto the couch with Les Mis and start where I left off last night. The book is entertaining enough to keep me immersed for a couple hours, but by then I can no longer ignore the pain in my belly. Makes me recall the line from the Preface: *"the corruption of women by hunger"*. Well ain't that the truth, I'm pretty corruptible as it is right now. I can't call David because my phone doesn't work international and I have only a slight idea of where his house might be. It's past one o'clock when I hear the tires out front. I run out to greet him. I'm split between being furious and being a professional, because what the hell David! I choose furious but dial it back a few notches and make sure it's the sexy kind of mad and not the scary kind, because believe me, I'm capable of both.

David registers my face and asks if everything is alright.

"Actually, no," I start, "David, it's almost two pm and I'm starving. There's no food here."

I lose a bit of steam when I hear how whiney I sound.

David blinks at me. "Oh." he says.

Oh? What kind of response is that? "Well," he tries again, "let's go and get you some food."

I'm changing out of my pajamas and coming to the conclusion that David must have never had a girlfriend before. He must not interact a lot with people in general. Or maybe he's autistic. In town there's a small coffee shop and I order us two sandwiches and a Papaya smoothie for me. I don't know what Papaya is but it sounds fun, like skipping a stone across water. David says that he's got to work today and so he won't see me until tomorrow. On the inside, I'm thrilled that I'll have the whole day to myself, but on the outside, I'm pretending to pout, telling David that I wished he had more time for me. I don't want to question my blessings, but I still don't understand why he brought me out here. We're not fucking and we're not spending time together at all, so I've got no idea what his angle is.

I spend the day on the beach with Les Miserables, getting sand between the pages. David left me some money this time to buy more food, after I reminded him that it was a requirement for me staying alive. I've never minded getting sunburnt. I like the chill you get from it, when your skin radiates heat like it's got a secret, but you still feel cold. I take a break from the book to float in the water. I've never really been able to float, so my feet drop

down and drag across the sand. This is my second time ever being in the ocean. The first time I was a kid and we took a trip to Folly Beach. The sand here is different than in North Carolina. The dunes there would make to swallow you if they could, but here, everything seems at rest. That trip wasn't even a family vacation, but for a 4H competition. I'd advanced to State for my presentation on livestock insemination and the State presentations were being held at Folly. My folks didn't want to go all that way and my begging wouldn't have made a difference if it weren't for my teacher pleading my case. Daddy couldn't refuse when he brought up 'responsibility to the school', but he did have the idea to turn it into a family vacation. So he asked Trent to look after the property while we were gone and we set off for the coast. Jill got sick in the car and Laurie was sulking, having to miss the weekend with her friends, but I was an eager-beever to be seeing the ocean. I didn't make it past the second round, but it didn't even matter that much because I got to sit out on the beach and stare at the water for as long as I wanted afterwards. I walked straight in with my socks still on. I remember thinking that anything that big had to be sacred, had to mean something really important. I wondered why no one had ever told me about how magical it was. I didn't like thinking that there was magic in the world I didn't have a right to, or hadn't even heard about for that matter. A seagull pooped on my head that same trip and Daddy said that was good luck and I could make a wish and it would come true. So I wished for a world of open doors. There are no seagulls here in the Dominican Republic, but I think I saw a toucan fly overhead. Something about this place makes me want to stop wearing clothes and eat nothing but fruit. Like if I spent enough time here I would slowly morph into an animal, climbing my way down the evolutionary ladder. Being an animal doesn't seem too bad, except there's lots of rape in the animal kingdom. Well hey, there's plenty of rape among humans too, so that cancels out. But I could pee wherever I wanted and sleep outside. Nothing's stopping me from doing that now except for social norms. I'd like to wipe my ass with social norms, but I'm held in place by those chains as much as the next person. Mama and Daddy raised me too hard for me to be indecent. I could always opt to be crazy, I guess. Floating on my back in the salt water, looking into the sky, I consider choosing to be crazy. But crazy in the small town way of being crazy, like being the old lady that lives in an old house and sings outloud to field mice and gives people herbs for their bad dreams. The kind of crazy where people leave you alone, not cause they're scared of you but because they don't understand you. The more I think about it, the more I realize being crazy is just another word for being authentically yourself. Once you stop pretending you like the things everybody else likes and start living just for you, well that looks a whole lot like crazy. I tuck the thought away and agree that I'll save being crazy for after I make enough money to stop caring about the rules. Anybody making money's got a boss and you can't go crazy if you've got someone to answer to.

I spend the rest of the day and night alone as promised. I've gotten about half-way through *Les Misérables* and I'm already dreading leaving it behind. I didn't know it was possible to get so attached to a book. The next day, my last day, I see David only for dinner. We go to the exact same place and order the exact same food. The only difference is that he doesn't wait for the appetizer to start fingering me. I had expected this, so I wore a loose skirt. I could have played dumb and been less accommodating, but I'm actually starting to feel a bit bad for the guy. He's asked very little of me: about five hours over an entire weekend. The smell emanating from him is still atrocious, but has been explained. When I asked David why he ordered the same food twice, he told me that he doesn't have a sense of smell. And since smell makes up for most of taste, he has to order really flavorful food or else he can't tell what he's eating. Well I'll be. David has no idea he needs a shower because he can't smell himself and ain't nobody's gonna tell him. That must be kind of liberating. I'm thinking about whether losing your sense of smell is an advantage or a disadvantage when David asks me, "I can tell I'm not doing it right. Will you teach me?" The look on his face like he just asked the prettiest girl to prom. So after dinner, David takes me to his place. Which, turns out, is less than a stone's throw away from mine. But the foliage is so thick you can't spot anything. He's got a clear view out on the beach in front of the guesthouse, so I rewind myself through the past 48 hours to review where I did anything embarrassing while I was most likely being observed. If I'd known I might have made it more interesting for him and ditched the bikini. David's standing around like he's lost in the middle of Macy's, so I lead him to the sofa. I get undressed and prop myself up in front of him like it's Show and Tell Day at school. I show him the movements. I let David practice on me, like he's tuning an instrument for the first time and afraid the strings will snap. It takes an eternity and David looks more like he's solving a math problem than bringing a woman to climax, but we get there. You'd think I was a rubix cube and not a standard edition of 50% of the population. Once we both manage, he seems to relax. At least more relaxed than I've seen him all trip. He asks if I'd like to watch a movie. In my mind I'm visualizing the next chapter of *Les Misérables*, but of course I say "alright" and he shoots up to turn the TV on. He puts on some sci-fi movie I've never seen and settles on the couch in what must be David's version of cuddling: one hand on my leg. No complaints: I theorize that the smell gets stronger the closer I am to him. Any movie that was made before the year 1995 runs the very real risk of losing my complete attention. I'd have fallen asleep if it weren't for my active inner world. That and my general guideline of not falling asleep with clients. Even with the ones that seem harmless, like David, or the ones I could confidently best in an Indian wrestling competition, like David, I am on guard. Clients aren't friends and they aren't lovers. I trust a couple, like Ali, a bit, because I've known them a while, but trust is a temporary condition, contingent upon not having it. It's like jumping out of an airplane and trusting that the parachute is gonna fly open. I'd just as soon keep my feet on the ground. I sit through all two hours of David's film and he lets me go to bed. I'm itching to bury myself in *Les Mis*, but I have an early flight back tomorrow.

I'm passed security before it dawns on me that David didn't kiss me once this whole trip. We didn't fuck either, but the kissing strikes me as more odd. Not even a peck on the cheek when he dropped me off at the airport. I'm having a hard time figuring out what category to file David under. In terms of clients, there are three buckets. The first bucket of men are the Controllers: they get off on the power play. You've got the nasty sick fucks who wanna hurt women, but you also get the men who see themselves as benefactors. These men are typically older, typically have daughters, and wanna fill the role of patron. They think themselves mentors, but don't be confused; it's an ego trip all the same. And it's often these clients that end up being the most overbearing, thinking they know best. The second camp are the Shamed: men with sexual interests that they can't mention to their girlfriends. These are pretty much regular guys who are so desperate for sexual gratification that they'll spend money they don't have for a stranger to make their fantasies come true. There aren't a ton of these clients, mostly because a prostitute will serve their needs and they come cheaper. I stick with the third and final camp: the Lonely. These clients want intimacy, whether they know it or not. Most of them think they get it by sticking it into someone and they're either too ugly or too busy or too awkward or too particular to do it the free way. For a lot of them, it's just easier to pay to make something happen than to invest the time to jump through the usual social hoops. I like the Loners because they're the easiest to please and the most predictable. The same base formula works for all of them, even if the surface level details change. They want to feel loved. And love is easy to simulate. Watch one romantic comedy and you have a pretty good idea of how to make a man feel cared for. I've gotten my inspiration from movies, because I never saw Mama take care of Daddy the way I do for my clients. Not the sex stuff of course, but the back rubs and the compliments and the lovey-dovey eyes. Mama barely looks at Daddy. It wouldn't kill her to give him a nice word every now and then. Course, I can't be sure what goes on behind closed doors, but Mama's about as loving as a prickly pear cactus. And even those give fruit. I was digging through the attic once as a girl, snooping, and came across Daddy's wooden trunk. The trunk is from his military days and inside I found letters that they had written each other when they were going steady in the early days. Daddy came across pretty much the same, a gentleman who knows how to sweet talk a lady. But I didn't recognize Mama from the words on those pages. Nothing untoward, but borderline flirtatious. I thought about her at seventeen waiting in town for the postman to come bearing Daddy's words. Thought about her sitting up late by candle light, pencil in hand, thinking about what to write to her sweetheart. It made me wonder what happened to that girl who seemed a lot more free than she does now. I think it's supposed to be the other way around, ain't it? The longer you live the more freedom you should have. That's my goal anyways. To be free. Freedom means different things, but it definitely means being where you wanna be. And I feel like I just passed Go, with one international trip under my belt. Which has me scheming. There must be more clients like

David who are willing to fly me places. I might be able to widen my net a bit, start striking up conversations with clients in other countries who are looking for their stars and stripes. I'd be more prepared next time: research the place and have a backup plan in case things go sideways. But I might just be able to see some of the world this way. I tell you one thing: if it's to be had, I'm gonna have it. I'm gonna make sure that life happens to me.

It's March before I have my next travel opportunity. I've been chatting for a few weeks with a man named Raul. He's less trigger happy than David and wanted to get to know me better before offering to fly me over. Over, meaning, to Spain. I wasn't trying to rush it either. After David, I had time to reflect on how to proceed. There's definitely risk involved in meeting a client in a foreign country and I wanted to weed out as best I could that Raul isn't a psycho. You can never be totally sure though. I look up the address and number of the US embassy in Barcelona and ask Ali to hook me up with an international SIM card. I also pick up a Spanish dictionary and start memorizing phrases in between classes. I'm sure I'm about as eloquent as that chimp who learned sign language, but it might come in handy, since Xiomara mostly taught me curse words. The trip is a lot longer than last time, two whole weeks. One of which is Spring Break, so I'm only missing a few lectures and can forgive myself for that. These international clients – as I've started thinking of them – cover the expenses of the trip, but they don't offer money beyond that, so I've still gotta maintain my current regulares. One fairly obvious common-sense rule of my business is that you don't talk to clients about other clients. And when I tell my weeklies that I'll be taking a trip, they give me that look that says "this girl hasn't enough gas money to make it to New York City, let alone across the Atlantic." So I tell them it's a study abroad thing and they can't jump my hide about that. In fact, I sell them a little story about barely being able to go due to the cost and missing out on college experiences and that plays nicely, earning me a little sympathy bonus.

I talked to Mama the night I came back from the Dominican Republic and Laurie seems to be sticking around. No one's said that she's gotten clean – because that would require the acknowledgment of her as a junkie – but she's still living at home, so she must be doing alright. Daddy's back has been hurting him so he's been taking it a bit easier and having Laurie around has come in handy to fill in around the land. I bet he's hoping that Laurie will take over for them once they retire. Mama and Daddy gave up on me sticking around and Jill's not much of a laborer. But Laurie could take up the mantle for us. That would take the pressure off all of us. I haven't told them about my trip. Even if I could get them on the phone, I wouldn't bring it up. It's not like they could stop me, but still, I don't want them to know. I don't think they know about Spring Break, since I haven't once come home for it. Laurie never called me like I asked. Must be busy milking the cows, mending fences, minding Mama. I know from personal experience how easy it is to let the weeks go by without making

a phone call. Mama tells me not to bother her, as if I were trying to start trouble. Mama defending Laurie is a whole new dynamic. Either she's making up for all those years of strict parenting or she's afraid. Afraid Laurie might bolt like a field mouse on fire while nobody's looking. Afraid of herself not giving Laurie more chances. But Mama having more love for Laurie means she has less for everybody else, like love is a finite resource that's meant to be rationed. That's just how she is, like a heart that can't pump enough for all four limbs. Daddy and I don't go into details on the phone, but he sounds as he always does. Daddy's tolerance for phone calls is about two minutes before he hands the phone back to Mama.

Other than the classes I'll miss, I'm not too stressed about the trip. I don't much care for being strapped into a metal tube for that many hours, but I scored a Xanax from my lab partner and plan on taking it. I tell myself that I'm doing fine in all of my classes, so I can afford to miss a few lectures. The semester has been kicking my butt, but I've been kicking its butt right on back. That first quiz in Advanced Systems was the slap to the face I needed to switch myself into gear. Funny how soon as I think I'm maxing out on my abilities, I always find just a little more reserve somewhere inside, like a country well that never runs dry. Last Fall I thought surely I had done my absolute best, but this semester I've shown myself that I can do more than my best. Or that my best is like a goal post that keeps sliding itself further down the field. Sometimes I wish I could brag to somebody that cared, tell them how great I'm doing. But there's no one to tell. Clients ask me how I'm doing in school, but I don't let myself believe for a minute that they care. So I content myself with knowing it for myself, imagining what my thirteen year old self would think about all this. Even if there was someone to tell, they wouldn't care the way I care. No one really cares about anything that doesn't directly concern them.

I don't know much about Raul even though we've been exchanging emails for a few weeks. He works in the airline industry, but I don't have specifics beyond that. I have my money on pilot. He's pretty young, early to mid forties. He only has a couple of photos on his profile, but if the photos are real then he's not hard on the eyes. He speaks English, of course. He seems a serious. The plan is that I'll be staying in one of his apartments in downtown Barcelona. He's set me up there alone to start out with, so I'll feel comfortable, but sleeping arrangements are flexible. Better that way, I think. Especially because I expect myself a full mess after a ten hour flight and will want some time to clean up before presenting myself to anybody. I've been reading up about that city and one thing I learned is that I best grab a map upon arrival. The streets there don't make no type of sense, don't follow any patterns. They just wind and end and curve and intersect without any regard for reason. I could see myself in a place like that: somewhere I could get lost. I wanna know how a place like that gets its start. I wanna know if at some point, somebody looked around and said "hey, we've got to get a handle on this or we're gonna be in trouble" or if they simply acknowledged the

growth of the city the way you acknowledge the growth of a child: letting it make its own mistakes, letting it become its own self.

Part of me, one of those voices that peeps up every now and again, says I'm getting greedy. That in itself wouldn't bother me too much, except greed leads to carelessness and carelessness leads to mistakes and mistakes are what I cannot afford. That voice says things were going just fine with my standing docket of regulares who cover my expenses and leave me with enough time to manage my life. That I'm getting too fancy with this idea of international travel. It's a fantasy and fantasies are like buckets with no bottoms, they don't hold shit. And rather than exchanging time for money – which can be touched and counted and spent – I'm exchanging time for experience. But last time I checked the phone company doesn't accept 'experience' as a valid payment method. But then the other part of me – the bigger part I suppose, since it's the part that's winning – says I deserve this too. Or maybe deserve is too complicated of a concept to prove. Maybe it's as simple as me wanting it. I want to see Spain. I want it. Is that a solid enough reason? Solid enough to put both feet on it and stand up? I know that I could take these two weeks and use them to earn money. But at the end of it, I wouldn't be able to tell you what the Sagrada basilica looks like. Or how Paella tastes. So I try to extinguish this feeling of guilt in my stomach. I'll take care of everything, myself included. Nothing's gonna slip.

That Xanax did a hell of a job getting me over the Atlantic. Next thing I knew, lights were up and someone was pushing a ham and cheese croissant at my face. Rather than pulling up directly to the gate, they parked the plane in the middle of the tarmac and made us deplane right there on the asphalt. They wheeled up a metal staircase to the plane door and walking down it had me feeling like the Princess of Delta. I stumbled my way through the immigration questions and was in the backseat of a taxi before 7:00am. I hate the way the Taxi men hustle you right when you walk outside, falling over themselves to get your business. I walked a ways down the line, ignoring the shouts, and decided on an older man who was just sitting in his car. We get into the old city and the taxi can barely navigate through the streets for being so narrow. There's no one out because it's so early and the Gothic quarter has an abandoned feeling, like some terrible apocalypse came through and purged the whole city. People or no, my face is glued to the window, trying to save as many images as I can to the photo album in my mind. We come to a stop and he gets out to help me with my bag. I ring the doorbell of 612 and a little woman with a question mark for a spine opens the door. She smiles at me and says a few words and I just nod. Raul had briefed the housekeeper as to my arrival. The door opens up to a marble staircase that shoots right up, practically forty-five degrees. She leads me up it and I'm thinking about how her old lady legs will manage the stairs, but soon enough it's me huffing and puffing and her waiting for me at the top. There's another door, this one wooden, that opens up into a

massive apartment. The apartment takes up the whole floor and it's the only unit in the building. The wooden floors look ancient, but have been waxed and the apartment is decorated the way I imagine an artist would decorate their apartment, massive canvases hanging on every surface. There's even some kind of blue, metal sculpture pushed into a corner. I set down my bag and do my best to pay attention to the housekeeper as she's speaking to me. I bet she's earnestly explaining about how to turn the gas on or something, but I'm not about to let on that I can't understand a word of what she's saying. She drops the keys in my hand and takes her leave. I lead myself on a tour of the apartment and find that there's some cheese and bread and a bottle of wine in the kitchen. I'll assume it was left for me. That'll have my attention after a shower. After being sealed in on a ten hour vacuum of coughs and farts and sneezes and Lord knows what else, my skin is begging me for a scrub. For all the grandeur and airiness of the apartment, the shower is a closet with a million hoses and valves. I spend a solid half an hour coaxing the hot water out of the showerhead. Once out, I drip into the bedroom and open my suitcase. I won't bother unpacking, even for a two week trip. It's not a good idea to get too comfortable in somebody else's home. But I don't want my nice outfits – the ones I brought counting on a fancy dinner or two – to get wrinkled, so I do pull those out and hang them up.

For right now I choose the coziest clothing I brought: a hoodie with matching sweatpants. It's much colder than I expected, even having consulted about the weather ahead of time. I didn't anticipate that the wind blowing in from the sea would cut through you, making it feel five to ten degrees colder than it really is. Every inch of me's pleading to climb into bed, but I know I have to resist the urge if I'm to adjust to the time zone. If I stay here, there's no way I'll avoid falling asleep, so I decide to explore. The street the apartment is on is made of cobblestones, so worn down they'd be shining if the sun was out. It's a little later in the morning, but still hardly any people about. I walk out towards the main avenue and find a newspaper stand. I buy a map with the pre-paid debit card that Don gave me. It's not much, but good for walking around money.. I also finger a lighter while he's not looking and slip it into my pocket. Lighters aren't the property of anyone, they're universal; meant to be lost and borrowed and pass from hand to hand. And I don't smoke, but maybe Raul prefers a girl who does. I've got to wait and see. On the other side of the main avenue is the water, but it's too cold for that, so I turn around and re-enter the shadows of the Gothic Quarter. I keep half an eye on the map and the other eye and a half zooming around trying to take in everything. Each building looks older than the next and any of them could be older than my whole country. The shops are beginning to open up and there's cheese in big round wheels and flowers lined up in buckets on the sidewalk and a man sharpening knives. I walk through a market: a massive open building with stained glass windows and pigeons roosting on every beam. People are drinking coffee right next to where the fishmonger is reaching his gloved fingers down the throat of today's catch. The combination of smells is enough to

knock your socks off. I walk my way through side streets until the rest of the city is awake. Now there are cars competing with pedestrians to make their way through the streets. Scooters and bicycles whiz past. Everyone makes way for the old women with curved backs who roll their grocery bags behind them. I enter a small coffee shop on the corner and melt into an armchair. Luckily, ordering a coffee is essentially the same in every language. I'd be happy to sip my coffee, closed eyes in this armchair for a century or two, but someone speaks to me.

"Excuse me, are you American?" I open my eyes. The question asker is a blonde girl, about my same age, sitting opposite me.

"How could you tell?" I ask back.

"Oh, I heard you ordering coffee" She smiles, I'm assuming so that I will understand she doesn't mean to cause offense. I do my best impression of someone well-rested and generally amenable. I ask her where she's from and she says Australia.

"That must have been a long flight," I responded.

"It is, but I didn't fly straight here. I came from Turkey." I'm impressed by this and ask how she has the time to travel, being so young.

"In Australia, it's normal to take one or two years to travel, between high school and college. Like a gap year."

"Everyone does it?" I ask.

"Well not everyone, but most people."

Hot damn. I chew on that for a moment, but then I ask her why. She leans back, thinking it over.

"I suppose it's because we feel so far away from everything. We grow up pretty isolated, feeling disconnected from the rest of the world. And it takes so much effort to leave, you might as well make the most of it before you come back."

"Same's true for the US. It's so big it might as well be an island. But I don't think we travel as much."

She smiles, "Well, the US has convinced itself that it is the world."

It must be the jetlag, because normally a comment like that would get me bent all out of shape. I don't know enough about Australia to go around offending Australians. But I sip my coffee, which has long since grown cold.

"Maybe." I say back. "But we started out as a country full of runaways, criminals and the like. Folks who left everything behind. That's who we come from. And we're still a country of immigrants. People still leaving everything behind. So after all that, who's still looking around for something else? After that, you might as well stay put."

She nods, like what I said made a whole lot of sense. "That's a pretty fascinating theory. I was just going to say something about small airplane seats." She smiles at me and I do too, once I realize she's made a joke. There's a small journal on the table beside her and I ask her if she's been writing.

She shrugs "Oh, just observations mostly. I wanted to keep a travel log on my trip, but I got lazy, so I just jot down whatever moves me in the moment."

"Like what?" I ask. She turns a bit red, but picks up her journal anyways and flips through a few pages.

"This is from a few days ago: 'Men need women to regulate themselves, while women are capable of self-regulation.'"

She closes the journal and sets it on the table.

"So...you're like a poet?" I ask, because I can't tell what to make of it

She tilts her head. "Isn't everyone?"

"Not me. I don't trust words very much. Too slippery. Always changing what they mean depending on who's talking."

"Poetry isn't about the words, but the emotion behind them" She counters.

I'm still not buying. "I don't trust emotions very much either."

She gives me a look I can't place. "Well like it or not, humans are emotional beings. We can live your lives coughing up water or we can find a way to swim."

CHAPTER

I'm set to meet Raul at the entrance to some famous street, Las Ramblas, around eight, so I concede and allow myself a nap. I wake up panicked to the sound of a buzzer. I stumble out of bed and find the intercom by the stairs.

"Yes?" I speak into it.

"I'm downstairs."

Fuck. I consider asking him to wait outside, but it'll take me at least ten minutes to get changed. I buzz him up and sprint frantically to the bathroom, hoping to comb down my hair in the seconds it takes him to climb the stairs. The mirror tells me I've definitely been drooling. I'm still in my sweatpants and my face is puffy. I've never let a client see me like this. I hear the knock on the door and part of me wants to hide. I walk as slowly as I can to the door, smoothing my hair down with my fingers, and let him in.

Raul is dressed formally, in what I imagine people would call a well-tailored suit. His hair is close-cropped and black, but not black-black. He's thin, but I can see he has some muscle tone by the way he fills the suit and by the way he walks. He seems relaxed for a man in a suit. Maybe that's a European thing. His eyes are lighter than mine. We're about the same height.

"Hello." He says. His voice is light, amused.

I had no time to prepare myself mentally for our first interaction. I don't know if I should choose airy, or sassy, or laissez faire. Best to go with neutral until I learn more.

"Hi," I breathe, "I'm so sorry, I overslept."

"I can see that" Raul smiles, good-naturedly. "But Las Ramblas isn't going anywhere."

Raul moves past me into the apartment and takes a seat in the living room. He indicates the chair across from him. I plop down, hugging my knees to my chest. All illusion is abandoned, no use in trying to maintain any level of sophistication.

"Do you know why you're here?" He asks me. I consider a few responses.

"To entertain you." I state it as a fact, not a question. Raul chuckles.

"That, no doubt, you will do. But that is not why. You're here to enjoy yourself."

I must have looked surprised because Raul continues,

"So to that end, we could stay all night in this apartment, chatting in your pajamas and it would make no difference to me."

This was new. I wonder what kind of client he will turn out to be, because so far I am having trouble categorizing him. Clients always – and I do mean always – want an illusion. My job is to keep a pillow pressed firmly against the face of reality. No room for breathing for any of us. This is probably a power move, like most things men do.

"So..." I start, "should I get dressed?"

He cocks his head a bit to the side.

"Do you want to get dressed?" he asks me

.

I wonder if this is a trick question.

"I would like to see a bit of the city," I say slowly. "If that's alright with you," I add, just in case. Raul claps his hands.

"Excellent. Consider me your humble guide."

He leans back, looking comfortable and I remember that this is his apartment and I am the guest here. I scramble to my feet and head to the bedroom. He calls to me from the living room, "and there's a small matter of a business function we need to stop by first. Nothing too important." This has me rummaging through the clothes I brought to try and see which one says 'not-too-important business function in Spain'. A little black number should do

the trick. Not too showy and I look good in it always, even when I'm bloated, which I've come to suspect is part of air travel.

As we walk to the not-too-important business function, Raul points out things to me on the street and I nod and ask a question when it seems that I should. Never too many questions. Men don't want a woman who seems too eager. Clients pay for mystery, if nothing else. We all grow up disappointed that there's no magic in the world, but not all of us are good at coping with that fact. I get paid to hold in my farts.

We get to this hotel-looking building and ride the elevator up to the 20th floor. It opens to a bar, all dark colors and leather, making you think of cigars and jazz, and a pretty bartender reaching for something on the shelf. Raul steers me to a table where three other men, middle-aged like Raul, also in suits, are seated. Raul pulls my chair back for me as he does the introductions.

"This is Eduardo, who's leading the acquisition, Greg who keeps the ship afloat, and finally, Mateo who is mostly concerned with busting my balls." I notice how Raul speaks as if he and I are not practical strangers. Another clue as to the role I need to play for him tonight.

"English tonight please, gentleman" Raul says and winks at me.

"And how did an ugly son of a bitch like you earn the company of someone so charming?" This comes from Mateo and earns laughter from the rest.

"Didn't you know, I am very rich." Raul responds and the rest of them eat it up.

What the fuck kind of answer is that. I can feel my face turn hot. Do these men know what this is, what I am? I'm thinking about whether this was a joke or not and miss the turn of conversation. Eduardo is saying something.

"There isn't money for the company to issue a buy-back. It doesn't make sense with the year we've had. *Que opinas, Raul?*"

"As I told Greg last week, what matters is perception. The market responds to moves of power and moves of weakness, nothing more. Approve the buy-back and more than a few analysts will be taken by surprise. The money will come. Di-vest South America, it's not doing us any favors."

Santi cuts in, "enough business. Surely there are more interesting topics to discuss."

Greg picks this up, "Santi is right. Let's not bore our guest. Interesting name, Angel. Where are you from?"

With the conversation suddenly steering towards me, I'm caught a bit off guard, and I'm still pissed about what Raul said, even though it's true. "I'm from the South, where the name isn't so uncommon." I say, "we like to call things as they are."

Eduardo smiles at this, showing his full array of teeth. Two rows of little white soldiers. "So I can see. So tell us Angel, what about you inspires the name?"

I take a sip of my water. "Knowing the difference between forgiveness and mercy." This seems to amuse them.

Mateo interjects, "how very fortunate for us poor sinners." He gives the others a smile like this was something very clever and intimate. I've decided I'm quite annoyed with these men and their smiles and their treating me like a cat toy, flinging me about for their amusement. I look at Raul and see him watching me.

"It's a dangerous thing, no? Deciding who deserves heaven and who deserves hell," he says.

I stare right on back. I don't care if I'm not being charming. I'm already here, right? So what difference does it make if I'm rude and the gig is up. I can spend my remaining days by myself in this city.

"Only if you think of them as separate places. I think of them as a choice." I say this, hoping it will shut him up, shut them all up.

"A choice? Do people choose to suffer?" Raul asks, doing that irritating thing again with his head, tilting it to one side like he's the most curious man in the whole world.

I shrug. "Yes, they do. Didn't you say earlier, what matters is perception?"

Raul leans forward slightly. Clearly he's a man who enjoys an argument. "So what is your idea of hell then, helplessness? And one gets to heaven through sheer will-power? You can't possibly be so naive."

I smile for the first time all night. "Naive, no. American, yes."

The other three men have been watching this exchange silently. Santi picks up the menu.

"Well, what I know is that the pork belly here is about as close to heaven as I'm going to get in this lifetime. Let's order two for the table"

And just like that they're talking about white fish and bone marrow and lapsing in and out of Spanish. Raul throws me smiles, probably trying to ease the tension and bring me 'round. What does bring me 'round a bit is the food, which is delicious and fatty and expensive. By the third plate, I'm in a much better mood. The coffee from earlier has been churning around on an empty stomach. They can't help themselves talking about business and I tune out a bit, much more interested in the salted peppers. I love eating with my hands, always have. Eventually, Raul makes our excuses and I'm nodding goodbye to these men and we slip onto the noiseless elevator. Twenty floors down and we're spit back out to the street. Raul pulls me in a purposeful direction and we walk a few blocks until a giant cathedral comes into view. It's gold and ornate and odd and eclectic and backlit against the dark night sky. And so, so big.

Raul says, "They started building La Sagrada in eighteen eighty-two."

But there are also cranes and paneling and a huge white mesh covering part of it. "How come it's under construction?" I ask.

"Because, it has never been finished."

I think about making a joke about Spanish work ethic, but decide against it.

"Some people say that it will never be finished. They say it is cursed." he continues.

I peer at him. "Is that what you believe?"

Raul cranes his head up. "I believe that being unfinished, it links us to the past. We share this legacy of progress with the Barcelona of eighteen eighty-two."

I suck on that for a beat. "Unfinished, it still has the chance to be anything."

Raul nods. "Exactly."

We are both quiet, eyes lifted to the tall spiraling towers and the latin script and the small cross at the tippy top and then Raul tugs on my hand. "There is more to see." he says and I follow him.

We walk longer this time and I'm about to remind him that I'm wearing heels and he is not when he stops. There are fewer street lamps here, almost none, and it's dark. There's nothing in sight except ordinary looking brick buildings. This part of town looks more industrial.

I aim for levity when I ask him, "Is this really the best time to be site-seeing?"

He smiles. "It is the best time."

Raul walks to the building next to us and tugs on a metal gate. It comes loose.

"And this is why."

He swings the door of the gate open and ushers me through. I'm looking into a dark tunnel that for the life of me I'm not going down.

"Is this the part where you murder me?" Less humor in my voice this time.

Raul laughs and says, "no spoilers," as if that is a comforting thing to say. He presses against my back and gives me a light shove forward. We walk close like that as I feel my way forward I feel the air first so I know the tunnel leads outside again. I see the sky first. When my eyes adjust I see that I'm standing in a large arena. Seats for thousands of spectators encircle me. The round pit I'm standing in is filled with sand. I walk carefully in my heels to stand in the center.. I'm trying to figure out what sport they must play here when I remember something I read in my guide book.

"Bulls." I say.

"Yes. Although not anymore. Bullfighting was banned a few years ago. The last fight took place here."

"Good. It's barbaric."

Raul turns to look at me. "Really? I thought someone like you might have a different lens."

I cross my arms out of habit. "Someone like me?"

I can't read his expression well in the dark, but he ignores my question. Instead, he says, "for hundreds of years, this arena fed the poor of this city. The only time a struggling family would get their hands on meat was Sunday afternoon after the bullfights."

I roll my eyes. He thinks himself a romantic, does he?

"And violence is a requirement for charity?" I counter.

"Violence is a requirement for everything." His voice is soft.

"That can't be true."

"The bullfight simply exposes the nature of the world. It represents the truce we must all make with death."

My eyes are going to get stuck if I keep rolling them this much. "You're romanticizing it just because it's tradition."

Raul turns to face me and spreads his arms open, sweeping them over the arena.

"I romanticize it because it's over. And there is one less thing in the world that keeps us honest."

"Things change. Things are supposed to change, forward means better. Gotta accept that." I say. I mean it too.

Even in the dark, I can see him staring right at me. "Sometimes we make the wrong decision." I'm getting squirmy. I don't like his eyes on me all of a sudden. I want to leave this place.

I remember his earlier comment. "And you think someone like me should understand that?"

"*Should* is not a word I find useful. But yes, you do understand it."

He begins to walk now, in a circle around me.

"To move forward, collectively or individually, we must kill that which does not serve us. All growth requires sacrifice. Progress is violence."

I don't know what game he's playing, but god this man is as arrogant as they come.

"You don't know anything about me" I feel my Appalachia start to rear its head and I don't even care. I don't care about anything but making this asshole hurt in some way.

I start to walk towards where I remember the exit to be, not worrying that my phone is probably dead and without it, there's no way I can find my way back to the apartment. Nothing besides God's own hand could have stopped me walking away from him. I hear the sound of sand swishing behind me and know he is following me.

He keeps his distance, but stays behind me as I wind my way through unfamiliar street after unfamiliar street. They all look the goddamn same, with the same exact stores on every block. I know I'm not taking the right route, but he doesn't say anything, just lags behind keeping pace. I finally see something I recognize and orient myself towards the apartment. At this point, I whip around.

"I'm not interested in your company tonight, you can go on home."

I say this, knowing all the while how ballsy it is. I am here because he paid for me to be, staying in an apartment that doesn't belong to me. But I dare him to contradict me. He looks at me with an irritatingly pleasant expression, the way a scarecrow keeps his smile even while being picked apart by vultures.

"Alright. But I will make sure you get home safely."

He walks past me to take the lead and doesn't turn back to see whether I choose to follow. I don't want to be stranded in the middle of Barcelona all night long so I fall in behind him. Suddenly we're standing in front of the door to the building. So I was pretty fucking close.

I unlock the door with my key but he puts his hand out to block the door.

"You're right that I do not know you. But I would like to have the chance." He says this and there's no more slick smile, just an open field of a face and I think about how I still have five days to spend in Barcelona. Five days of me either sitting bored all day in the apartment studying my own naval or five days of spending this guy's money. I think the same thought I had earlier: that he's not too hard on the eyes. For a client.

"That's fair." I hear myself say. "Come by in the morning and we'll see what we get up to".

Laying in bed later that night, I convince myself that I haven't conceded anything yet. I am here to work and if Mama and Daddy taught me anything it's that one's got to take pride in their work. Maybe they didn't have hooking in mind when they taught me this, but I can find my own honor in sticking to the principles of hard work and honesty. I tell myself that's what I'm going: honoring my word, the agreement that Raul and I made those weeks ago when he first offered the trip. Gotta keep my temper from getting the best of me. That's part of what's so hard about this line of work, it's near impossible to separate your emotions from the job. It's not like going into an office and shutting off your brain and typing in numbers all day long. It's giving your body to another person, even when part of you doesn't want to. You could make an enemy of yourself carrying on like that, if you don't train your character in the right way. I knew what I was getting into when I got started. I had a good long chat with my soul and we agreed on what we could handle and what we couldn't. That's how you get boundaries.

But that doesn't mean that I'm completely immune. Sure, I'm better than most at muting my feelings, stuffing them into the back of the sock drawer. I get so good at escaping my own sensations that sometimes I don't even realize when it's over. I never fuck a client when I'm feeling emotionally compromised. That's one of the soul agreements. It takes concentration to turn my body into a tool, a thing of utility. And I will never let a client have more of me than that. There are things I get to keep for myself. So if I'm feeling vulnerable that day, I

cancel my appointment. Blame it on my period, even though I don't get them anymore. So with Raul, I've got tonight to recenter myself to the objectives of the trip. He threw me off a bit by being so...unreserved, but tomorrow I'll set things right. Get back to business.

Raul comes by in the morning and this time I'm ready, waiting for him in my yellow and white babydoll dress and matching day pumps. I offer him the second half of the french press. I take the milk out, but he takes his coffee black. The apartment was stocked with the essentials when I arrived: coffee (whole beans, which meant I had to teach myself how to use the grinder that was here. Two days in Europe and I'm already becoming more sophisticated), olive oil, salt. I realize that Raul had prepared this, had envisioned us spending a fair amount of time in this apartment, rather than at his home. Maybe he thought that would make me more comfortable, establishing a home turf. Or maybe he wanted to keep me separate from his life. Either way, it's none of my business.

Raul is on his best behavior, as charming as can be. He holds doors open for me, offers me his arm when appropriate. We spend the morning and early afternoon walking what seems like miles past famous buildings and through museum halls (even I know about Picasso) and finally, to a large indoor market. Raul is not the only one who can be charming. I am the ideal site-seeing companion. I listen and nod attentively to his anecdotes. I stare meaningfully at paintings. I pose for photos in front of places starred on my paper map. After yesterday, I feel vindicated. I have re-assured myself that I can be a professional. I observe myself carefully and approve. A warm smile here, an encouraging laugh there. Raul is captivated, as planned. He pulls me from stall to stall in the market, which at times smells strongly of antiseptic and other times of blood, metallic and sharp. It is noisy and colorful and I am for once, engaged rather than pretending to be engaged. He feeds me an olive and the tang tickles the sides of my tongue. A piece of salami that tastes like the salt blocks we give our horses to lick. I liked it once too, just to try it.

"I could get used to this." I say, looking at a row of tomatoes that look too red and too shiny to be edible. "It's all so fresh."

"Nowadays most people buy their food in supermarkets. But I still patronize the market." Raul tell me as we approach a butcher's stall. He greets the stocky man behind the counter, who leans over to grasp Raul's hand. They exchange a few words I can't understand. Lotta good my Spanish does me here, where they don't even speak it. Who knew they didn't speak Spanish in Spain? While they're chatting, I look at the pigs' feet on display. Funny the things you can find in common with people you can't even communicate with. I grew up eating pig's feet, as well as cow brain, chicken feet, frog legs. My classmates would probably consider that backwards. White trash. But fly halfway across the world and you might find it served as a delicacy in some fancy restaurant. Nothing is exactly one way or another,

defined in black and white. It's all depending on the context. Which makes forming an opinion a pretty tricky thing. But you've gotta have opinions if you want to navigate through life. Otherwise you'll be adrift, without a rudder to get you where you wanna go. I guess the only safe thing to do is hold your opinions loosely, be willing to let them go if they prove limiting. Raul is gesturing to me, so I step forward and smile brightly at the butcher. He winks at me and pulls out a cutting board from beneath the counter. He extends it to me, but Raul intercedes. He plucks up a thin, almost transparent slice of what I think is ham. He tells me to open up and I do, letting him lower it into my mouth. It's delicious and I'm moaning approval through a closed mouth when Raul leans over and kisses me, before I can even swallow. The butcher gives a sharp whistle and I'm so taken aback by the kiss that I forget to keep chewing. I almost choke on the ham and both the butcher and Raul are laughing. Raul licks the salt from his lips. I make sure the ham is well and down before I reach out and grab Raul's face in both hands and give him one hell of a kiss. A kiss that should tell him not to fuck with me. I push him harder than I intend and he takes a half step backwards. I lean to whisper in his ear.

"Tell him the ham was delicious."

On the walk home, I'm thinking about that kiss and about how I normally don't like kissing clients unless I absolutely have to. It didn't feel wrong. Maybe it's because Raul is attractive, not to me necessarily, just by any standard, and it doesn't look so odd that someone like me would be kissing someone like him. And his lips were soft and for a moment, when I was close to him, I had a hand on his chest and it felt sturdy under his t-shirt. I really shouldn't be thinking about this at all. A big rule of this work is absolutely, under no circumstances thinking about sex when I am not having sex. That makes it easy to minimize the effects. No anticipating, no remembering. It exists in the moment and then it disappears, without consequence. If I thought about sex with a client beforehand, I doubt I could do it. And now I'm thinking about what it might be like with Raul and I am dreading it. I'm dreading it because I don't know how I'm going to feel, which is in itself a ridiculous question because I shouldn't be feeling any type of way about it at all.

Raul drops me off at the apartment so I can take a shower and a nap and collects me again for the evening. We take a taxi to a different neighborhood and even though I'm trying to pay attention, I can't make heads or tails of where we're at. We're in the taxi maybe twenty minutes when he asks the driver to pull over. Even the buildings look different here, closer to the earth. Everything cast in orange from the streetlamps. Raul leads me through a shadowy archway into a small room with stone walls that reminds me of a cellar. It's packed with bodies. There are a few small tables crowded in the center, but mostly people are lined against the walls. Candles on each table and even set into the walls. Raul plants me in a corner and goes to the bar to order. Someone's starting to play music, guitar I think, and I

shimmy over to see a man in the center of the room, holding an acoustic. His beard, white and curly, is so long it curls in his lap. Even from here I know what it must feel like, if I were to twist it around my finger. He begins to sing. Softly at first. His voice is strained, the way a haunted house might sing if it could. The woman next to me bumps into me, but when I look at her I see she's closed her eyes and is swaying to the music. Raul returns with two glasses of wine. He presses against my back, just slightly. It is expected, given how cramped the room is, but my attention is alert to it, trying to sense every subtle change in pressure. There is a shift in the room as the man with the guitar sings louder and plays faster and faster. Something almost like salsa I think, but I'm not sure. The musician strums so fast his hands blur and he hits the guitar over and over. I imagine the guitar crying out, both the man and his instrument pushed to their limits. Those seated at the tables drum their hands too, copying the man. They bounce knees, impossible to resist this man and his wild heart. Those of us standing swing our hips and take small confined steps. I close my eyes too and lean back into Raul, letting my skin absorb the vibrations from the music and the energy of the room. The man's voice reaches up and up and I feel it carry me up too. Raul sways and I move with him, without thought, as if we are two limbs of the same body. My arm grazes the wall and I startle, shocked by the cold of the stone. Raul brushes the hair from the back of my neck and blows his breath on me.

Outside the air chills me. I feel dizzy and take a couple deep breaths to steady myself. I can still hear the music, but faint. Raul reaches for my hand and I take it, more to balance myself than anything.

"Uh uh, no resting yet. We have one more stop." he chides. I tell him he needs to feed me first and he laughs. I don't know why men are always surprised by my body's basic needs.

"How unacceptable of me. Come." He pulls me down the street and I follow. A little ways off, Raul leads me to a small grocer. The door is closed but there is a small light on inside. He knocks on the door. A moment later, the sound of a lock and a head pops out through the opening. He says something in Catalan and even I can tell he's grumpy. Raul and he go back and forth and eventually the old man widens the door and ushers him through. I lean against the wall until he's back, carrying a brown paper bag and looking smug. He says we can eat while we walk and he reaches into his bag and pulls out a block of cheese. He hands it to me to hold while he takes out a baguette and begins to part it with his hands.

"So good. How can bread and cheese be this good?" I say between bites. He laughs again. Normally it might bother me, a client laughing this much, but the bread and cheese have my full attention. Raul has once again led me somewhere completely new. This time we're approaching a large plaza. I ask him where we are and he sweeps his hands wide and pronounces, "The magic fountain." I almost snort. In front of us there actually is a fountain, in

the middle of the plaza. Sure it's big, but I don't see nothing magical about it. It looks to me like a round pool of water. I ask him why it's named this and he tells me that it grants wishes. He digs in his pocket, and pulls out a pair of coins.

"Just when I was beginning to like you, you ruin it by being so cliché." I smile at him so he knows I am teasing. But I don't take well to the superstitious. Mountain folk are all superstitious. That's why they get stuck living their same lives over and over again, believing in fairytales. Same goes for the Church crowd. Even though Mama made us sit our butts on that hard pew every Sunday of my life, it didn't rub off on me. Never could get over how ridiculous it was that people actually believe God's up there paying attention.

"What are you gonna wish for?" I ask him to interrupt my own judgment.

"I don't have need of the coin anymore, since I think you're beginning to like me." He hands me his coin.

I laugh and take it. He is far too clever. I walk to the edge of the fountain. There are innumerable coins, different glittering shapes and colors, winking at me from the bottom. I bet there's a whole world down there, money from a whole bunch of countries.

"What a clever trick" I say to myself. I turn the two coins over and over in my hands. Raul hears me and asks what I mean. "Magic," I turn back to him. "The best lie ever told."

I toss in both coins, one after another, not bothering to wish for anything.

I'm thinking about all of those coins and about how many people have let their lives go by in quiet desperation, hanging on to some flicker of hope. Hope like poison. Signs that don't mean nothing, but are taken as proof. At that moment, the magic fountain shouts to life. And I do mean shout. Thick jets of water shoot high into the air, so high I have to bend my neck back just to see where it ends. Mist falls on my skin. Colors: purples and blues and reds play across the surface of the pool and project up. A familiar classical song that I can't name plays and the water listens, it skitters and bobs and dances to the music. A million different forms. It is kind of cheesy, but kind of magnificent too.

CHAPTER

He looks at me as we approach the door of the apartment and asks, "Do you want me to come up?" and because I am a professional and I refuse to let him shake me and because I know that it has to happen sooner or later, I say "Yes" and we are unlocking the door and walking up the stairs. In the bathroom, I wash my face with the coldest water I can and I

floss my teeth and I don't stop moving for a second because that's another way I can keep myself from thinking. I undress in the bedroom, hanging up my dress, and call for Raul and he is in front of me and he looks kind of surprised, but then not surprised at all and he is touching me and I close my eyes to keep from seeing his body, but I still feel it, slender and firm and smooth. I hear the crinkle of plastic and I know he is putting on a condom and for a split second, less than a split second, I feel offended. Which makes no sense because I insist on condoms always, you have to in this work, but that feeling is still there maybe because of the ham and the kiss and then he is inside me. I gasp like in a stupid romantic movie and cling to him like in a stupid romantic movie and finally I am not thinking at all, not even a little bit.

Afterwards Raul doesn't immediately get up and neither do I. He just slowly slides the condom off and ties the end and sets it on the floor. I reach down for the cover with my ankle and move to pull it up, but Raul places a hand on my belly. He inches closer to me so that his torso presses against my shoulder. He begins to touch me and I ask him what he's doing.

"Both of us should" he says like it's the most obvious thing in the world, but if I had a cookie for every time I orgasmed with a client I wouldn't even be left with a crumb. Not even my boyfriends in high school cared about whether I finished. In my experience it's not a thing that men think about. They assume that their pleasure counts for both. If they cum, then what else matters? It hasn't bothered me much, that's just less time I have to spend in bed with a client. Sometimes a client will want to finger me or even go down, and I let them think their hands are magic. The only time I orgasm is when I do it myself, and that's usually only so I can fall asleep faster. So I let Raul amuse himself. He's rubbing me and then it starts to feel good, like really really good and I'm scrunching my eyes shut real tight and holding my breath and I can't believe what's happening and then I'm cuming hard, right into his hand, and he's murmuring in my ear and kissing my neck and he won't let me stop.

Raul and I fuck again and I keep my eyes open this time. I let him pull me into the shower and rub soap over my back and between my thighs. He wraps me in a big puffy towel like the kind they have in nice hotels and I sit on the sofa while he cooks something, even though it's well past midnight. He looks at home in this kitchen.

We eat the dinner he's prepared. It's simple, but well-seasoned. This time I turn down the glass of wine he offers me. I tell him that I prefer he not spend the night. He doesn't miss a beat, nods and says "of course, as you wish" and leaves a half hour later. I'm too tired to wash the dishes, so I leave them in the sink for tomorrow. Not like Mama's looking.

I turn off everything, all the lights and the TV, and sit on the floor. I wonder if I have fulfilled my end of the deal. Was today's sex enough to pay back the plane tickets and the apartment? It doesn't seem exactly fair, but who knows how Raul sees it. Maybe the going exchange rate for sex is different in Europe. He has been nice to me so far and I think if I called him and said that I was over it, he wouldn't argue. Would he cancel my flight? I have to consider it. Regardless of how nice he's been so far, that is still within his power. So maybe it's about playing this part, seeing him one or two more times and I get off scot-free. I get up off the floor and head to the bedroom. The sheets are still strewn about, half off, half on the bed. I check for wet spots before laying down. The last thing I think about is his breath in my ear.

I get two days to myself while Raul is dealing with business. He offers to come over late, but I tell him that the jet lag is still fucking with me. He doesn't question me, even though jet lag works the other way around. Who knows if he buys it. I want to see him, which means I shouldn't see him until I have to. I keep my feet moving so my mind won't. I pass both days wandering around, marching from street to street. He's given me money for food, so I spend it in cafes and food stalls. Everything is so salty, I imagine myself swelling up like a sodium balloon, bouncing over the tops of buildings. I eat a lot of potatoes. It's cheap and filling, so I can pocket the rest of the money. I pretend I'm a regular college girl studying abroad, buying myself a souvenir with money that Mommy and Daddy gave me. The first time I saw a classmate wield a credit card that was in her Daddy's name, I felt like someone punched me. That seemed like something for the uber-rich, the Vanderbilts, not Stephanie whose Daddy was an accountant. I spot a leather coin purse that I like. The leather is soft as down and I can tell it's real. Too expensive, but it's a treat for myself. For coming halfway across the world and keeping my cool.

I see other girls, about my age, and try to guess where they are from and what they're doing. The American ones are easy enough to identify. They are blonde and overly excited in baggy t-shirts and leggings. They chatter chatter chatter and cling on each others' arms. There are too many of them and it takes me a moment to remember that it is Spring Break. That's why I'm here too. I am too embarrassed to speak English, I don't want to be like them, these American girls who seem so out of place and don't realize it, so I do my best to avoid interacting with anyone. Men say things to me, I'm not sure what, but in that universal 'man to woman' tone that I could recognize in any language. They goggle me as I walk by them. Women too. I keep my eyes forward, but it is good to know that I am considered beautiful here too. I was not sure if being considered beautiful in America would translate to being beautiful somewhere else, somewhere foreign. It is good to know that I am not limited in this way. That I can cast a wide net. The consistency is comforting, like you can really count on something that holds true in multiple places.

On Thursday, Raul drives me up the coast. He told me in advance that we'd be going to the beach for the weekend. I only brought one bathing suit, but he said that the beaches in Spain are nude, so not to fuss too much anyhow. Raul says he normally takes the train but that he thought I would enjoy this way more. His Mercedes inches bit by bit through traffic until we are clear of the city and the road opens up. He takes the scenic route for my benefit and my eyes are glued to the landscape. Well, mostly glued. I take a peep at Raul every now and again. I've been thinking about him. Naked. Lowering himself over me. Sliding his hand between my legs. I turn back to the window. Suddenly the ocean blooms on the right like a sunrise and doesn't leave our side the whole way. A strip of white sand separates the water from the road and we bob up and down like the road is doing its best to imitate the ocean. Raul hugs the bends and I roll the window down to surf my arm on the wind. This is my fourth time seeing the ocean, twice in the span of a few months. The second time, I was in high school. Me and my friends – two girls from English and a dropout – drove all the way to the East Coast, twelve hours, to find ourselves at dawn on a ruddy little beach with sand the color of dirt. We ate Twizzlers and Combos and played the same Shania Twain CD over and over again. We didn't have a plan – or any money – so some of us slept in the car and some of us slept on the beach. If you'd asked me then, sand in my hair, whether I'd find myself on a beach in Europe three years later...I'd have called you a worse liar than the devil.

The ocean is different here. Different from the Dominican Republic too. Funny thing. We pass through small towns that hug the water line, playing footsie with the waves. I wonder what it's like having your front yard be underwater. Eventually, Raul pulls off onto a small road. We drive downhill, so steep I feel my body shift forward with gravity. The road ends in bright blue water, like someone got tired halfway through paving it. There's a house to the left. Raul climbs out and walks our suitcases inside. I check to make sure the emergency break is engaged before following him.

"Private beach. Very nice." I say to express my appreciation. Remember to be polite, I tell myself. Let him find no fault. Inside, the house sparkles. The front of the house is entirely glass. I almost have to squint to look outside. There is a loft that I can see from downstairs and I know that's where the bed must be. The kitchen has mint green cabinets and smells of lemons. The few pieces of furniture are bulky, made of wicker and worn in the usual places. They hold faded cushions of once-bright patterns of palm trees and coconuts. Raul is familiar as he opens the fridge and pulls out a bottle of water. I think this might be a family place.

"Total tranquility," he says, "and privacy". I smile at him and ask if I could get a water too.

"You can do whatever you want," he responds and opens the fridge door for me.

"Whatever I want?" I ask. I figure out what part of the glass wall is a door and slide it open. I think for less than two seconds about what I'm going to do before I do it and I am lifting my shirt over my head and pulling down my shorts and I am naked as I walk towards the water.

I lose my confidence as soon as I feel the water on my feet. Fuck, it's cold. I can't turn back now after that display, sure that he's watching me openly. I force myself into the water inch by inch, refusing to stop until I am up to my chest. I make sure not to get my hair wet. I breathe hard, body trying to process the cold. I begin to count, trying to broadcast 'tranquility' from the back of my head. Once I reach sixty seconds, I allow myself to turn around and emerge from the water. Raul has come out to the beach to watch me. I lift up a hand to beckon him towards me. I flirt, trying to convince him to get back in the water with me, knowing he won't, so I won't have to either. That's called Game Theory, which I learned about in Sophomore year. His laugh carries on the wind and wraps around me like a scarf. I walk towards where he's sitting on a towel. Sand sticks to my feet and I try to look graceful trudging up the beach. He appraises me. I like the way he's looking at me. I place my hands on his knees to lean over him, water dripping onto his clothes, to kiss him. He pulls me down onto him and I straddle his lap, drying myself on his linen clothes.

"Your skin will burn." he says to me and I say "Fuck me" and he is kissing me again. He reaches his hands down to unbutton his shorts and I prop up a little to give him space. He maneuvers his cock out and I press down, filling myself with him. I think for a moment that there is no condom but I don't care, this is what I want. I've been wanting it for three days, trying not to want it. I want him so badly I'm scared I'm gonna blow it all up like dynamite with a short fuse. Raul groans in my ear as I bob up and down on him like he is the wave and I am a buoy lost at sea and he bites my nipples and I tell him to slap my face and he does and he tells me to touch myself and I do and we are both cuming cuming cuming.

I do end up getting a sunburn, but Raul has packed aloe vera and that night he rubs it on my body. I have decided to stop thinking about what I should or shouldn't do and give into this new machine that is inside of me, sucking up the atmosphere, reckless, so reckless. It happened too quick this change, this switch. Just yesterday, I was training my mind, thinking to myself over and over that I would be polite on this trip, but not too nice. But all the machine wants to do is lay in bed and be fucked over and over again by this man. I find myself putting my hands on him in the kitchen, reaching for his cock while sitting on the couch. I exist to be used by this man, to cum in his mouth. I agonize over his body. I tell him to punish me. To worship me. I don't leave the house once in three days. Raul leaves to go into town, to buy groceries and make phone calls. Once, while he is gone, I am reclining naked on the porch when I hear someone approach. Thinking he is back, I look up and see a squat older lady walking up the porch steps. She's bent over, lifting one leg at a time. When she finally looks up and sees me, she startles, her hand flutters to her chest. She starts

rattling off, Catalan I assume. I'm covering myself with the pillow as best I can, knees to my chest for modesty.

"I can't understand you, I'm sorry" I say, but of course it is no use. I don't know what to do except call Raul, so I hold up my cellphone, but the lady just backs up and turns around in a hurry, waddling down the stairs as fast as she can go.. I go inside and wait for Raul to get back.

"It must have been the maid." he says when he comes back. "I forgot to call and tell her that I would be up this weekend." He frowns briefly, but brushes it away with a flourish of his hand.

"I brought you something from town." he says instead and pulls out a pink cake box from his grocery bag. Four pastries glisten inside.

"Let me feed you one" he says and I let him and he kisses the powdered sugar from my lips. "You will make me fat" I complain to him and he laughs.

"You will be even more beautiful" he says, as if that could possibly be true. Even knowing how corny it is, I smile because that is what I do now, I smile at everything he says. There is still of course the part of me inside of my head that scowls at this, that rebukes myself, eyes rolling, telling myself how ridiculous I am being. How beyond ridiculous, but utterly irresponsible this has all been. How could I possibly justify this, this total lapse of judgment and character. The worry that I am a pebble sinking to the bottom of a well. But that voice doesn't last for long. It gets swept up in the breeze or pushed under the mattress every night where Raul and I sleep tucked into each other. I find myself too thinking about whether I have to go home so soon, whether it might be better to postpone my trip. Maybe I could email my professors. Tell them I got sick and can't travel yet. When I think of leaving this place, of leaving Raul, I feel panic bubble inside me. It is a fear I have never felt before. In my life it has always been about moving forward. Nothing worth looking back at. But now I find myself wanting to pause time, to suspend myself in this moment. I am, for the first time, unsure about what to do.

I mention this idea to Raul, but he says he wouldn't ever want to get in the way of my studies. That it would be a dream, but school must come first. He says he'll send for me once the semester ends.

I spend my hours on the beach next to Raul thinking and planning. I do not need to work anymore, to see other clients. I cannot even tolerate the thought. Surely Raul will cover my expenses, since he won't want me working either.

I tell Raul I love him on our last night.

He doesn't say anything and we are in bed and I'm not one hundred percentage sure that he is awake. In the silence, I can hear my heart. I can hear the pressure in my ears. The weight of a quiet room. The weight of the linen sheets gathered around my ankles. The weight of my body pressing into the mattress. The weight of my recklessness.

I had wanted to say it a few times. More than a few. In any moment, I would feel it climbing its way up my throat, taking up the space in my mouth. Swallow it down. Keep the lid on, at least buying myself some more time. It should not be possible to fall in love with someone – a stranger – so quickly. And I know, a part of me does, that this cannot possibly be love. Not real love. But I can't seem to convince my body that it is not. Because what else could this feeling be? My body is like a child, I can't just explain things and expect it to understand.

So I said it. I could have not. I could have continued to keep it down a little longer. But I am also curious, about what happens next, what could happen. He has to love me back, after these past few days. I've done everything I can think of to make sure of it.

I don't hear Raul's voice until the next morning. He is up and I can hear him making coffee in the kitchen. I convince myself to join him. He is acting like a man who hasn't been told any secrets. Who is not carrying any weight at all.

"Good morning" he says as he hands me a mug of coffee. He slides the milk across the counter to me. I can do this. I can be normal. And I am normal, all day. We do normal things like lay on the beach, cut tomatoes for lunch, drink a second cup of coffee in the afternoon. I manage to steady myself. And I do feel lighter for having told him, even if he didn't hear. It was about saying it, not him hearing it. I am almost giddy with the eased pressure. But I am also hyper conscious of appearing too needy. Men hate that. I tell him that I'm going for a walk and he looks up, surprised but not displeased. Surprised because I have not expressed any interest in leaving the house before now.

"Stretch my legs." I provide as explanation, like that makes any sense at all.

The short incline of a drive (which has my ankles immediately straining) spits me out to the main road, which doesn't have anything much in terms of a sidewalk. I hug the edge of the road, but there are barely any cars, so I drift a bit towards the middle. After a few bends it opens up and there's a clear view of the sea. On my left is a wall of rock that shoots straight up and to my right is the cliff edge. The water from this height looks even more impossibly blue than from the house. It is not one color, but multiple, like someone has drawn lines through the ocean and separated the shades of blue. The beach below is dotted with bodies and umbrellas. Up ahead I can see the town, a cluster of white washed buildings

crowding around the beach like spectators in a stadium. I don't feel like walking all the way into town, but I fancy stepping over the road bumper (a thin, low to the ground grate that is all that separates the winding road from the plunging depths below) and finding myself a seat on the cliff top. I graze my inner thigh passing over the metal and it's blazing hot. I step my way carefully to the edge. Seated like this I feel like a bird of prey, perched over the beach, dizzyingly far below. I have often been a predator in my life.

Like that time in ninth grade when those boys from out of town drove up to the house, thinking nobody was home, and tried to dig up our copper. I came out the back porch with one of Daddy's Winchesters. The one he inherited from Papa Tom. They heard that rifle cock and high tailed it out of there.

I've been hit, but I've never really that I've been out of my depth. Violence is a big part of growing up anywhere, but especially where I come from. It is part of the life blood, like the nutrients you get from your Mama when you pass through the birth canal. It sustains us. Without a baseline of violence, I think a lot of it would fall apart. We'd have to reinvent ourselves and the things that matter to us. I don't know many people that have the courage to do that.

When I was little, Mama would hit us with a switch and Daddy would hit us with a belt. I preferred the belt, because even though that metal clasp made itself known, it was a loud, dull kind of pain – unless buckle collided with bone and then you'd be sorry – but it was better than the sharp, biting sting of the switch branch. Plus, Daddy didn't have much stomach for hitting us. He believed in it, but he didn't particularly enjoy it. Not like Mama. You got the feeling Mama liked hearing us scream.

When I got a little older, that age where girls start turning on each other, some of the older girls would pin me to the ground and try to spit into my mouth or force me to eat worms. And when I got a little older than that, the age where boys start wanting what they want, the boys at school would push me and pinch my elbow or pull my hair, which make no mistake, is its own kind of violence. And in the beginning, before I learned how to vet proper, some of the clients would hit me. It never hurt, not really. Hatred has a way of numbing pain, not letting you feel it. Hatred can be good that way. I like feeling angry. Sounds weird to say it like that, but I do. Anger is pure and clean and gives you a sense of purpose. You can do a lot with anger. Some people make a whole life out of being angry, or a career. Some people don't have much else to motivate them.

But now I'm thinking, maybe starting to think, sitting on this rock, looking at the great blue beyond, that there are other things that could motivate you. Like wanting to be a better person, not because you're scared or running away from something, but because you got

someone who's watching you, expecting something of you. Someone worth being better for. I hear how cheesy that sounds coming out of my own mind. And I'm not about to go changing myself for this man, but it might be a good idea to think about what kind of woman he might want me to be. In an adult way. My whole life, I've been working for me, blinders on, thinking about how to get to that next place. I wasn't thinking about Mama or Daddy or Jill or Laurie or anybody. Me, first, always. I had to stay focused. Like when you find a four leaf clover in the grass: look up for a second and you've lost it. But I've got my life on track now, kind of. My grades are good. So maybe it's time to look up a little.

Mama always let us pick our own switch. Laurie would hunt for the smallest, smoothest one, but I knew Mama would take one look and make her regret trying to take the easy way out. So I went for the gnarliest. The bent switch, thick and covered in blunt edges. I wasn't going to let her win. Because I wasn't afraid of what Mama could do to me.

CHAPTER

Raul manages to call off work – a conversation he takes down to the beach. I can't hear him, but I watch from the glass, his arms animated. So instead of heading back to the city, we spend two more days at the beach house. Raul convinces me to go into town with him for ice cream. I try a couple flavors and land on lemon, which Raul balks at, but I figure has the least amount of sugar. I really have gained a couple of pounds, but that will be easily remedied. I've got skinny bones and about eighteen years of calorie deficit to make up for. Raul grabs my hand and holds it as we stroll along the boardwalk. He has chocolate hazelnut running down his chin. I try to wipe it with my napkin, but he dodges me. I start chasing him and he's laughing and when he finally lets me catch him, I say it again, before I can stop myself.

"I love you."

I picture myself chasing after the words, plucking them out of the air to unwind them letter by letter like pulling a loose thread. I want to peel my skin off and hand it to him. I feel hot all over, hot enough to sweat.

Raul graps my napkin hand, which is still suspended in mid-air, and holds it. And then he says it.

"I love you too."

Just like that.

I want to ask him to say it again. But I don't. I just bury my face in his chest and he wraps his arms around me. I feel like maybe he is dripping ice cream on my back but nothing has ever mattered less.

He holds me all night. I tell him my name. The real one. He asks me if I want kids one day. I tell him I want to stop working and he says I must stop working. He will look after me. I am his now. I am too excited, too full of joy to sleep, like a clock that's been wound and just can't keep from ticking.

We drive back to the city early the next day. I feel something shift, like sand under its own weight, as Raul locks up the beach house.

The whole car ride, I cling to him as much as I can. His hand on my knee, my hand on his neck. When he pulls up the apartment, he doesn't park. He says he really has to check in with work, but he'll see me tonight.

We spend our last days playing the same routine: Raul leaves for work, I wait for him to come back. When he's here, we're locked together, hand-in-glove. He says he likes knowing that I'm waiting for him all day. That it turns him on. I tell him that he can tie me to the bed if he likes. I ask him what else he wants me to do for him and he smiles and kisses my forehead. So he fucks me in the ass that night. I've never done it before, it's not on my list of services I offer clients. It hurts, but I can tell Raul's really into it. I want to be able to give him everything he wants. I always suspected I was a loyal person and now I'm seeing it come true.

I tell him I love him over and over, like someone's paying me to say it. He says it too. And he tells me he's going to take me to Florence. To Prague. I suck his dick as he names cities I've never heard of. We haven't used a condom since the first time. He asks if he can cum inside me and I say yes.

On our last night, we look up flights. I tell him I can leave the day after my last exam. I want him to buy it right then, but he says he'd rather go through his travel agent, so he'll call the next day.

After he falls asleep, I cry. I cry because my life has changed. Because I'm going to see all of Europe. Because I don't have to work anymore.

CHAPTER

He has to work so he can't take me to the airport, but I tell him that's fine, I can easily make my way.

Making his way to the door takes ages, because I keep reaching to him for one last kiss.

"I will think about you in every moment" he says finally. "You belong to me now".

When he leaves, I feel deflated. But there is too much to do to wallow in this right now. I gather my shit from the apartment and pack. I clean the dishes and hunt for the trash receptacle outside. I head to the airport earlier than I need to, but I can't find a taxi. By the time I am at the check-in line, I am running late. I approach the counter with my bags and give the lady my name.

"I'm sorry, I don't see your reservation". She stares at me. I stare back.

"Uhm, well there must be a mistake, I definitely have a ticket." I hand her my passport. I drop my backpack and rake through it for my notebook. I scan the pages and find it. I wrote down the reservation number.

"Hmm sorry, I don't have that in my system. Oh wait –" She clicks a couple times. "It looks like the reservation was canceled."

It's not hitting me what she's saying.

"I need to be on this flight." I tell her emphatically.

"It's not full. You can purchase a seat."

I stand to the side. I don't want to get out of line because it took forever to get to the front, but the people behind me are getting annoyed. I need to call Raul. I know it will charge me but this is an emergency. I try and it doesn't work. Some automated lady telling me the phone number is invalid. I have to add a 0 or something. I finally get it ringing but Raul doesn't answer. Fuck. I try again, no answer. I know he's working.

I nudge myself back in front – the next person is audibly pissed – and ask her how much the ticket is.

"A seat in economy...is 1,460 US dollars".

"Jesus" I say. That's most of my savings. Like all of it. Plus not working the past two weeks. But I don't have a choice. I know Raul will pay me back. Probably get a refund from the airline since it's their fault. Some weird error on their end. I give her my card and kinda hold my

breath while she runs it. She prints out my boarding pass and I resist the urge to slap her and tell her that her company can go to the dogs.

It's not till I'm in the air that the emotion of leaving finally clocks me. At first, it's a wrench in my belly, almost like a cramp. It twists up my gut and then it twists up my lungs. My armpits start sweating and my face feels like it's burning. I can't fall apart right now. I turn my face towards the window to hide. Even as I feel the tears on my cheeks, I know I'm a cliché. I wonder how many stupid girls have cried on this exact flight. Although I do admit that airplanes seem like the best place of all for crying. In this odd limbo between where you're leaving and where you're going it's like the regular rules don't apply. Even cramped together we're each in our own private worlds. We're all coming from different places and flying for different reasons, but we're here together sharing this part of the journey. When else in life are you such a passive participant in something as dramatic as barreling through the sky, skipping over borders and oceans? We sit, like patients in a waiting room, with nothing to do but think about the affliction that brought us there in the first place. And hope that the people next to us don't sneeze on us or kick the back of our seat. Some people read or watch movies but I am too scattered, too brain full to do anything but sit and squeeze the tears out of my eyes. Maybe being on a plane brings out your true nature, the way drink does. Some people are pacified, dulled, falling asleep to Brad Pitt. Some are irritated, cursing at the sound of a baby crying, when on the ground they would not flinch. And then I guess there's me, someone who does not cry, not on the ground, crying over nothing, over leaving a man that I will see in a few short weeks. Because what else is there to do here in the sky, scared and uncomfortable and alone, but not alone.

As soon as I land, I try calling Raul. I hang up almost immediately, remembering too late that it's the middle of the night over there. At home, I crash, sleeping through to the next day. I've missed my first class, but I somehow manage to drag myself to the next lecture. I forgot about some assignments I was supposed to do over break and prepare myself for an all-nighter. The homework these first days piles up so high, I can barely see over it. Professors giving their last hoorah before finals.

I still haven't heard from Raul, which is odd because he asked me to let him know when I made it back safely. But he was never very responsive before the trip. He's older and busy with work, so I'm not too worried. But I miss him a lot. I look at the photos of us, the few he tolerated me to take. I also snuck a couple when he wasn't looking. I write down our conversations in my journal, trying to get the words exactly right, before I forget. I stretch my memory for every detail: what he was wearing, what we ate. I compose a thank you email, telling him how excited I am to come back, to start our life. I research the most famous places to see in Florence. At the bottom of the email, I attach the list of the ones that interest me most, like the Uffizi.

I ask my classmates if anyone is looking for housing this summer, because my apartment is available to sublease. Raul could probably pay the rent while I'm with him in Europe, but I'd like to not bother him with it. Show him that I don't need much. Rent for May is due soon and I haven't been able to tell Raul what happened at the airport. He'll send me the money as soon as he knows, but I am starting to stress a hair. I definitely don't have the money to front the rent and I have no way to make the money, not in time, even if I was working.

Exam prep starts heavy and I feel like I've got an avalanche nipping at my heels. I go to study groups and spend more than one night on the floor, slumped against the couch, having fallen asleep reading. I'm having a hard time concentrating. It's been a week and I have not heard from Raul. I send him another email asking him if everything is okay. I am now worrying that something has happened to him. I try and think of how to get in touch, but I don't even know his last name. Or his address. Or the name of the company he works for.

My landlord calls me to remind me about the rent. I tell him that the money is definitely coming, there has just been a bit of miscommunication. A holdup. I consider texting Ali, or David, or Don, or one of my other clients but I cannot. I promised Raul and besides, I just can't. I don't have it in me.

My first exam, I am a mess. I dream about Raul on the nights I do sleep. I am so in love with him, I feel like I am a person I do not recognize. I studied hard, hard as a coonhound whose caught the scent, but I am tired, so tired. I get through it. I feel like someone I can't see is calling the shots, like someone just out of sight is holding the remote control. I find myself in the exam room, not sure how I got there. I feed myself, although I can't tell you what, it don't register. I have several missed calls from my landlord. No missed calls from Raul.

But when the professor sets the timer, I'm awake. Everything fades and it is the paper in front of me and my brain somehow activates and syncs up with reality. The remote control operator has done his job. I make it through each test this way, putting all my resources into these few classroom hours. My last exam, Circuits, is on Friday, my very last day of term. This will be by far the thorniest test.

Waiting outside for the professor to let us in, I pull out my phone to call Raul again. But I notice something: his WhatsApp photo is gone. It has been replaced by the default gray placeholder. Everyone around me begins to file into the room, but I am staring at the phone, not quite sure what this means. Someone calls to me and I turn and follow my classmates, dropping my phone into my backpack.

I do not remember the exam, except that I was flowing in and out, the way a drowning person slips in and out of the wave. My mind would float up and out of the room and I would have to lasso it back down, forcing it to think about the diagram in front of me. I was the only one left in the room when the timer buzzed. I looked up to see the professor staring at me. I still had several questions left blank.

"All done?" the Professor asks. I fumble my way out of the seat and hand him my booklet. "It's nothing to cry about Charlie, I'm sure you did fine." I say nothing and leave. I touch my face and find it wet.

Numb – like my whole body's a funny bone I keep jabbing – I walk home. I look again at the WhatsApp profile. I am staring at it when my phone rings. In shock, I almost drop it, but fumble to answer, desperate. It's my landlord and he is talking. I don't hear him though, because I'm too busy apologizing and tell him that it's been crazy with exams. But he stops me "Charlie, Charlie", just my name again and again until I stop talking. Then he is the one apologizing, but he doesn't sound sorry at all. He sounds firm and says if I don't have the rent payment by end of day then I need to move out. I thought I had more time, at least a few days, but he says that he needs to guarantee a tenant through summer if I am no longer able to afford the apartment. I am begging him and I can hear his voice hesitate, but he just repeats "end of day" and ends the call.

After he hangs up, the truth of everything shoots into me like an iron spike driven into a railtrack. My first thought: Raul doesn't exist. Or he did, but now he doesn't. He is gone, he has been taken somewhere. Why? I can't stop asking myself. Why. Why. Why. It doesn't make sense. But now I have no money for rent and the semester is over and it's too late. It's too late to fix it.

I half run, half walk to my advisor's office. He is out, so I wait in the hallway, pacing, and when he walks up, I pounce on him.

"It's too late to apply to any summer jobs. I asked for everyone to submit their applications two months ago." Tony is exasperated, as he often is with me.

Outside again, I run through my options. I can try and ask some of my clients for a loan. But I know what that means in terms of repayment and none of them would front me that money without going through the whole goddamn horse and pony show and I don't have time for that. Could I crash with a friend for a few weeks while I look for cheaper housing? I don't really have any friends I could ask. The only one I might be able to ask is Jenny, but she doesn't stay for summer.

I have to accept that there's no way I can get the money for rent today, even if I could convince him to wave the late fee. So I no longer have my apartment. Even working miracles it would take several days to find a suitable apartment. But there's no money. Like any money. Summer means my meal plan, included in my scholarship, ends. My scholarship covers a dorm, but not for summer term.

There aren't options. Not under the rug, not shoved to the back of the drawer. Not between my legs either.

There's only one place for me. I don't want to look at the truth of it, like a sun that burns too bright.

I have to go home.

CHAPTER

Packing my apartment later that night, I reason with myself. Maybe it will just be for a couple weeks, while I figure out the next steps. Put together a plan. I can't bring myself to call them to tell them I'm coming home.

The next morning, I walk up and down the stairs like Sisiphus loading everything into my car. I haven't slept. Took me three hours to haul my furniture to the GoodWill. Back to whence ye came. If I were in the mood for perspective, I might find some kind of irony in this full circle shit. Another hour to beg my landlord to hold on to my sofa – the only thing too big for me to move on short notice – until fall when I can come back and get it.

Even without the furniture, my stuff barely fits into the Mini. I wouldn't bother cleaning the apartment if it weren't for the sofa favor, but I do a lousy job. Sue me. I close the door and slide the key under the mat. Its tail is poking out a bit and part of me hopes someone sees and decides to take up squatter's rights. Maybe smear some human shit on the walls. Serves him.

I don't listen to music on the drive home. My mind feels blank and porous, like one of those padded cells they keep loons in. About right picturing my subconscious as a prisoner. If I was the kind of person that could afford to go into shock, I'm pretty sure that's what this is.

I'm lying. I got company in my cell and it's Raul. I haven't quit thinking about him since he went MIA. My mind always seems to tug on itself, dragging my attention back there, as if I

haven't already spent hours excavating that burial site, looking for clues in the dirt. Shovel come up empty.

I've always liked puzzles. As a little girl I would get my sisters to come up with riddles to ask me. They were awful at it, but Nana bought me a booklet once for Christmas. Took me less than a week to solve them all. And once, Daddy made me a wooden cage with a little ball inside and I had to figure out how to get it out without breaking it. Logic and puzzling is what brought me to engineering. Logic can be relied upon to resolve your issues. But not this one. Logic don't extend to Raul. Or at least, I can't find it. I'm missing some crucial piece of the formula. I have thought and thought, pulverizing my mind into mush. Reviewing every moment of our time together, of the emails before, of the things he told me. Scraping through every follicle and fiber, looking for the lice. What else can I do, awake at night, staring into black, unable to sleep because of the pain of missing him. The heartbreak has flattened me, made my world into something two dimensional, like I'm a doodle in somebody's sketch book. Nothing seems to be powering my body except its own knowledge of what comes next.

Before I returned my computer back to the library office, I typed 'heartbreak' into Google. I wanted to understand what this is happening to my body. Turns out, it's withdrawals. When you fall in love, a bunch of ooey-goopy hormones flood your pleasure receptors. Making you high. And when the source of that love is removed, the happy juice gets flushed straight down the drain. The brain is left dry and seizing like a fish flopping on a boat, wondering what it did wrong.

I don't know what I did wrong. I review it again. I have six more hours of driving to review it. All of the times he told me he cared about me, all of the plans we were making for the future. The way he held me, how I was always the one to pull away first so I could go to sleep. The times he would reach out and grab me, when I was walking by, and pull me to him. The first time he told me he loved me, he looked straight into my eyes. I am knocking on the door of a room that doesn't exist. It's like having a funeral without a body, just ain't right. I am seriously considering pulling out each strand of hair on my head. I don't entirely trust my hands to keep themselves straight on the steering wheel.

This is the voice that runs the show in my head now. It's not the only voice, but it's so, so loud. The other voice – the one I recognize from before all of this started – is there too. Soft, but steady. This voice knows that I will not hurt myself, not really, no matter how much I might flirt with the wild, revenge fantasies. This voice knows that there is no answer, that no matter how much I think about it, I'm not going to figure it out. This voice is probably me, the real me. Or what used to be. But now I am a person that does not recognize herself. I have been folded and re-folded like so many origami cranes. Each of the creases just

another memory that's not safe. I don't know if it's the love or the pain that's turned me into a stranger. Maybe each emotion has its own identity and life is a series of stolen identities.

I don't believe in destiny. This didn't happen to me for some deeper, purposeful reason. I would slap someone dare say that to me. This happened because I was a foolish girl who could not see what was coming down the bend. Mama ended up being right after all. Too arrogant by half. And now I'm a foolish girl who can't control my emotions. Still in love with a shadow, with a man who doesn't exist, not for me. A foolish, foolish girl who's mind no longer belongs to her. Who no longer knows what she wants. No. I do know. I want to destroy him, destroy myself, destroy everything. And I want to get back to school, to skip summer and become successful and make enough money to hire someone to find Raul and torture him and kill him. I would pay for that. Good money. I would pay for an operation that takes the part of my brain that can love and removes it and squishes it and tosses it into the gutter like a slug. No more deviations. Look how dramatic I can be. These are the fantasies that entertain me now, trees flashing by my driver side window. Twelve, fifteen miles above the speed limit. I wonder how long I could close my eyes for.

Before I get to the schoolbus junkyard, I have to pull over. My hands are trembling. Breathe in for four, hold for seven, and exhale for eight. I went to a meeting of the meditation club once in first year because they had free sandwiches. I didn't stay the whole time, but this breathing exercise seems something to hold onto.

It's late by the time I get home. I stopped in all the usual places for food and gas and for stretching my legs, but my body feels stiff and coiled up like something might spring out of me at any second. There are lights on inside. Jill should be home unless she's working night shift. Supper done and dishes cleaned. Better knock, wouldn't wanna spook Daddy. Neighbors and out-a-townners alike trying to sneak on our property to hunt deer and squirrel.

So, knock. Wait. I go to knock a second time, but the door swings open. Daddy's looking down at me. He's a hard man to surprise.

"Charlise. What you doing here, honey?" Before I can answer, he calls over his shoulder to Mama, "Mama, did you tell me Charlise was coming home today?"

Mama: "Charlise? She's not coming home today."

Daddy" "I'm here looking at her!"

Okay, enough of that. I slip past Daddy. Mama's sitting at the kitchen table sewing. Cloth napkins I think. Green plaid pattern.

"Exams finished yesterday, so the semester is over." I offer, thinking this might fly.

"You told us you was staying in the city." Mama looks at me suspiciously. Should have known.

"Told us you had work."

I can tip toe around that. "They didn't need me to stay on for the summer. They said I could pick back up when classes start in August."

"That still don't explain why you didn't tell us you was coming."

"It slipped my mind. I was busy with packing up and studying." I know Mama ain't gonna let this go, but I sit down anyways. "I'm sorry, I should have called."

Daddy comes to my rescue, "Well we have room for you here. And I won't have to hire a Dawson boy for the farm."

Mama purses her lips like she wants to say more about it, but she picks her needle back up and Daddy pats my shoulder.

"Welcome home, Charlise."

CHAPTER

Anger is my most important resource now. Anger means energy. Anger is pure, unlike love. Anger is the sweat that drips from my forearms into my gloves. Anger is my lower back straining like I'm two decades older than I am. The soil is dry and puffs up into little clouds that coat my shins and face. Nothing good will grow in tired old soil. It needs to be turned. And someone's gotta turn it. I am a soil-turner, a machine with one purpose. And anger is the gas for that machine. Daddy didn't waste any time putting me to work. The morning after I arrive he hands me a pair of gloves and a list of about a million things that need doing. That's alright. I don't mind. I need something to do. Something to direct all this anger at. It's too hot and too tiring to think about Raul. I think about getting down to the roots of this weed and pulling it out. I think about laying this irrigation track down as straight as I can. I think about tossing handfuls of fertilizer over the ground. Acre after acre. I relish in smelling like animal shit. I don't need to wash my hair or clean my nails. No need for a farm girl to look nice.

The first night I left my shit in the car and went straight to bed. I was the only one in our room, which I noticed but didn't have the energy to think much about. Daddy had me lacing

up my work boots at five thirty, but when I'm back at the house for lunch, I ask Mama where everybody's at.

"Jill's pulling a double." She says like that's everything.

"And Laurie?"

Mama doesn't look at me. But I wait.

"She ain't here no more."

"I thought she'd been staying at home since Christmas?" I ask, stunned. As usual, I'm the last to know.

"She was, yeah. But she left a few weeks back."

"Left where? What do you mean?"

"Don't know. She was just gone one day. Haven't seen her." Mama looks at me now, pointed.

"We phoned but couldn't reach you."

I must have been in Spain when they called. Oblivious. Falling in love with an asshole.

I sit back and rub my dirty face with my dirty hands.

"You don't know where she's at?"

"That's what I said, ain't it? Mind yourself." Mama snaps. That's the limit of this conversation. I'll have to wait for Jill to learn more.

When Jill gets home late that afternoon, tired doesn't even begin to describe how she looks. She falls onto the couch and leans her head back, eyes closed.

"I'm happy to see you. But lordy, these doubles." I give her hand a squeeze and sit down next to her. I get to study her closely with her eyes closed like this. She looks like she's put on a few pounds. Jill takes after Daddy's side. Big hips. Big ankles. Big bone everything. She's starting to swell up, kids or no. Better find herself a man before it goes too far.

I shake my head. Gotta stop thinking like that. What does she need a man for? She's got family and a good job and a place to sleep. Jill was never one to date. Even in high school, I don't remember her going steady with anyone. She was always a home-body, like to stay in when the rest of us were going to Friday night football games or down to swim in the Hooch.

Laurie was the worst, had one beau after another. She couldn't keep the boys away from her. I always thought Laurie was the prettiest of the three. Or at least, she could have been. But she didn't appreciate it enough, didn't see the potential in it. She spent it on the neighbor boys, on the high school drop-outs. She didn't realize that hair and skin and makeup, that's just one part of it. And that's the part that lasts the least amount of time. Being beautiful is about restraint, in the way you move and speak and in who's allowed to have it. Laurie was never one for restraint. She was always looking for a good time. Seeing her at Christmas. I wonder if she realizes what all she's lost. Maybe when it happens little by little, you don't notice till it's too late.

Laurie smoked her first cigarette at twelve. An older boy gave her a loosey. There's an older boy at the crux of everything painful.

But at a certain point the music stops and you're the only one left dancing. That's not a good time anymore. That's everyone else gone home. I didn't know how serious it was until I saw her at Christmas. Before, I just thought she was acting out, getting back at Mama and Daddy. Laurie was a loose idea in my mind, a ferris wheel of unrealized concerns. But seeing her. She wouldn't have given up her good looks willingly.

Jill was never a stand-out, but she's pleasant and laughs easy and works hard. And you can tell just looking at her that she gives good hugs. I think a certain type of man would welcome that gladly. Probably the best type of man. Lying back on the couch, I notice that even though she looks a bit more weary every time I see her, it hasn't hardened her face. Exhaustion is a surface level affliction for her, not a spiritual one.

I ask her about work and she says "same old, same old" but that the new warden has been restricting free hours and the inmates been getting stir crazy.

"It's gonna come back to bite us, the staff on the ground. Nothing gonna come from pulling their strings even tighter. They're already locked up, what else need doing?"

I stroke her hair. Tell her she's right, because I don't know anything about it, but what she's saying makes sense. I tell her she shouldn't be working so hard and she just laughs.

"Ain't no other choice honey."

I know what she's left unsaid. Jill's a sweetheart and she doesn't give me shit about it, but everyone else certainly likes to make it known that I have abandoned my family. It was better when Laurie was at home and working, least that's two outta three. But now Jill's on her own supporting Mama and Daddy. The farm don't pull in money like it used to, but Mama and Daddy won't acknowledge it. The farm, the land, that is the family. And Daddy won't be

the generation that tosses in the towel. But small farms ain't ever gonna earn like they used to. I could be shot in this household for saying that, so I keep it to myself. But I'm not gonna let their denial govern the future I make for myself. And that right there is why I no longer feel welcome at home. Why Mama barely talks to me but to snarl. And Daddy's hurt too, even though he's too sweet a man to let it make him uncivil. They had children because it meant more hands. Meant securing the future of the land. They didn't raise us to leave. Everyone in this town is trying their damndest to hold the seams together. Sometimes people leave. But no one new ever comes in. That's a net negative. No one seems to want the world to happen here. And for the most part, it doesn't. You can still look at any kid in town and see their Nana or Papaw's face in them and know who they belong to. You can't find my town on a paper map. The closest bus stop is still an hour away. Folks still prefer well water over the city plumbing. People burn their trash because the dump site is two hours away. I only got out because the government introduced a new program ten years ago to provide access to standardized tests in every little corner and alleyway of the country. And because of a Teach for America volunteer that took interest in me and changed my whole fucking life. But if I had been born in Laurie's year, it would never have happened for me.

"Jill...where's Laurie at?"

Jill opens her eyes and looks at me sideways. She sighs.

"I was waiting for you to ask." She sits up a bit. "She and Mama got into it one night and Laurie left. She must have gone in the night because she was in bed when I was."

"Any idea where she's at?" I ask, knowing the answer already. She shakes her head.

"Not a clue."

"But no one has tried looking?" I ask, more forceful than I intend. Jill gives me a look.

"I know I ain't been around," I rush to add, "but I'm here now. At least for the next two months."

"Two months, right. As you be saying." That's as close as Jill gets to expressing her mind.

The first week is a nothingness beyond the ache of my lower back and the cry that comes from the cuts on my fingers when I wash my hands. This pain is good. It's taking over my attention. The physical pain blocks out my mind from focusing on what else. I see myself getting a little reckless with it. Not wearing gloves on the day we hacked back the blackberry bushes. I used to love these bushes, this weed that grows like it's got something

to say, along our drive and every other backwood corner of the county. Blackberry cobbler is the easiest thing in the world to make. One to one ratios of sugar, milk, butter, and flour, a divine recipe. It's the first thing Mama let me make unsupervised. Though she'd still keep her hawkeye on me from the edge of the kitchen, making sure I didn't make any waste.

But too much of a good thing and all that. The blackberry bushes are always trying to take over the drive, like they don't want us to have any visitors. So we trim them back every summer. Trim is a polite word, it's more like a massacre. No way to be gentle with a blackberry bush. And they make their protest known, staining us from head to toe with their purple blood. By the end, I had thorns wedged so deep into my palms, I could barely see them. Good. It would take me an afternoon to tweeze them all out. Daddy just shook his head at me. His daughter turned imbecile in the city.

It is worst at night. I'm not free to cry because Jill is only a few feet from me and she'd pick up on it before I let the first tear drop. It hurts something awful trying to keep your body from doing what it needs to do. So I wait for the dawn, on days when Jill has to get up even earlier than me to go to work. I hear her, in the dark, shimmy into her uniform and close the door gentle. And then it's a sob that almost splits me in two leaving my body, it's been trying to come out for so long. I shove the pillow down my throat, like I'm trying to suffocate myself. I stuffed this pillow myself few summers back. They're getting thin.

Raul's profile photo hasn't changed. It's still just that gray anonymous cutout. Could be anyone. He could have been anyone. Everything to me, absolutely everything. I re-read the emails. The texts. I curse myself for not documenting more. For not sneaking a look at his license when he was in the shower. Or not asking him what company he worked at. I bet he realized from the jump how stupid and naive I was. It must have been so easy for him. And me the whole time thinking I'm slick. Thinking I'm the one pulling the strings.

I think about the incident with the maid. What that might have meant. She was surprised to see me, but Raul shrugged it off like it was nothing. And him and his phone calls that he said was always work. Didn't want to bore me with it, so he always walked outside to take them. Was he even rich? I guess he bought the plane ticket, but the apartment and the house could have been borrowed or rented. And the car he drove wasn't anything special, but I assumed it spoke to his character. Not a showboat.

I don't know. I don't know anything. Nothing gets me closer to an explanation. And the hate isn't working like it's supposed to. I want to hate this man. And I do. I hate him so much I could let the rage eat me alive. Turn me into a brilliant flame. Burn the house down and myself with it. But the hate isn't doing anything for the missing. The missing him is stronger. The loving him, or loving what we had, or what might have been, whatever it is, the love is still

there and I don't know why. It should have evaporated with the heat of my anger. I tell myself it's just a matter of time. It will go. It will go. Say it over and over again.

Mama and Daddy don't ask me much. Mama wanted to know why I was "let go", always looking to know what I did wrong. I told her it was just a demand and supply issue. That I didn't fight to stay. She raised her eyes at that. "But you love being in the city" she said and I shrugged. I don't want to get into it with Mama. Although I'm too big now for hiding, that was my tactic as a girl. I'd hide myself in the cannery or in the stable or in the chicken coup and wait for her to occupy herself with something else, usually Laurie. Laurie and I took turns taking Mama's rath. We were like prisoners of war, sharing our rations, making jokes about freedom. Mama was never a happy woman. So now I just hide my words, choose which of them will be less problematic. I don't always know what's gonna set her off.

The only person she don't dare talk down to is Daddy. She knows he wouldn't put up with that, not even for a half second. Daddy's so sweet he drinks honey in his coffee, but the core of that man is iron. Neither of them come from a world where women talk back to men. Jill, Laurie, and I don't talk back to Daddy either. I could get close to it, whining a bit, trying to be cute, but it could only go so far. Deciding to go to college was the first time I ever stood up to him and it wasn't something I was going to budge on. If it meant losing my family, then I was willing to pay up. It weren't even direct disobedience. They never came out and said that I wasn't allowed to, but I knew I was going against precedent. Mama and Daddy have been preparing us to take over the land since we were little. And not just take over, but expand. They figured three could do more than two, especially once we got ourselves husbands. A retirement plan that started crumbling like pie crust too long in the oven soon as I announced my plan. That's the problem with having kids. They become their own people. And they'll end up choosing themselves over you every single time, which parents never seem to expect. Even if they did the same thing to their own parents. Everybody wants a baby. But a baby is only a baby for so long. It's an adult much longer than anything else. But nobody ever thinks about having an adult. Because they be wanting something that belongs to them, body and soul. Women want that from their man, to be the only thing in his world. And when that inevitably fails, they settle for second best. Make something that has no choice but to love me the way I want. But one day that baby grows up and decides his world is bigger than her. And she's back to being alone. With a husband who barely sees her and and grown kids who think of her only occasionally, out of obligation.

But Mama was gonna fight against that eventuality tooth and nail. She and Daddy had a different plan. Keep us all together, till the end of time. Work together, eat together, die together. It's the only thing they ever counted on. But good old country folk should know better than anybody: you can't count on a goddamn thing in this world.

So when their youngest daughter decided to swing a hammer at their agenda, it didn't go over so well. Daddy didn't talk to me for weeks. And all Mama did was talk. Tell me how selfish I was being. How I was too stupid to make it in college, who was I kidding. When I told her I'd already been accepted on a full ride, she switched up. Told me instead that the city was an ugly, dirty place where good girls go to lose their morals. I could have laughed in her face at that, little did she know. I didn't know then what I'd end up doing, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't already floating on the periphery. I'd had some practice already in high school. Too small of a town to do much, but I'd been propositioned. She asked me, rhetorical of course, how I could go on and leave them after everything they'd done for me. Given me a roof over my head, the bread in my mouth, the clothes on my back, on and on. I tried to tune it out. I half believed they would kick me out before it was time to leave – take back that roof and those clothes and the food. Those last months were hell at home. But Daddy finally signed the papers I needed him to sign. And he started talking to me again. Daddy still thinks I'll come back after. And I have to admit, I let him and everyone else believe it. It's easier than that. But Mama, she sees through me. She knows.

So while Daddy is pickled as a peach that I'm home for the summer – him thinking this is a sign of me knowing where my rightful place is – Mama is only skeptical. I'm doing my best to hide my mood and maybe it helps that my last months at home before moving out were sulky and bitter, so it's not too much of a deviation. But I'm trying, I really am. I compliment Mama's cooking. I do all the work they give me, zero complaints. I set the table before they ask. I force myself to stay in the living room after supper for 'family time'. Even when I feel my insides collapsing into themselves like a black hole, when I want nothing more than to curl into my mattress, I sit still and smile pleasantly and ask Jill about work and Daddy about the price of grain.

I've had a lot of practice these past couple of years in pretending not to feel what I'm feeling. With the clients, it's pretending I'm interested in their company, pretending I'm mesmerized by their massive, powerful cocks. Swept away and breathless by how good they fuck me. They believe it. Astonishing. Leave it to a man to be that delusional. In the first months, before I learned to select my clients more carefully, I was disgusted by all of them. The best I could do was aloof, mask my disgust in indifference. That seemed just fine for them, they liked me haughty. But later on, it was easier, because I was spending time with clients who I really did think were interesting. Maybe not attractive or charming or funny, but at least interesting in some way. As businessmen, I started paying attention. To phone calls, to the way they spoke about their work. Maybe I could learn something from it. The sex was always just sex, that part was never in the slightest interesting to me, but it got easier to let my body do the pretending while my mind cut itself off. It's not so different from the millions of wives who moan and shiver and orgasm on cue, faking every bit of it, while their partner has absolutely no clue. Letting him believe he's some sex god who knows how to

please his and all other women. Hilarious to me how ignorant they all are. How easy to fool. The difference is while that wife is left, once again, with nothing, after a joyless fuck, I am rewarded with a nice fat wad of cash. I should buy them all dildos with the money I earn. Show them what they're missing.

This kind of pretending, it's still pretending, but different. Rather than transforming disgust into indifference or indifference into pleasure, this is trying to put a ribbon on devastation.

I was wrong about everything. About myself. Falling in love with an asshole. With a con man. Which, I think, he must be. Because what else would explain this? Being played is its own kind of shame. But compromising yourself along the way is worse. Much worse.

So, I guess, in some twisted turn of irony, being at home is exactly the kind of punishment I deserve. Got too big for your britches? Thought you could handle life on your own? We'll show you. Booted me right back to where I started. So with every fucking muscle ache and dirty fingernail and reproach from Mama, I take it and stack it up and point at it and say "see? This is what you deserve". More salt in the wound. Pain becomes softer with time, just a memory, but a scar never lets you forget.

Even with not wanting to get on Mama's bad side, I try one more time to ask about Laurie. Mama's oiling the cast iron skillet and I take a half-step back, just in case. She doesn't put it down to turn to me to say, "Charlie, if she wanted to be here, she would be."

Jill knows a little more. She asks me one night, rolling onto her side, "Honey, are you good?"

I wasn't expecting that question, but maybe I haven't been as convincing as I've thought. Maybe she's heard me crying.

"Mhmm. What do you mean?"

"Well you seem a little...put out." I can't help but chuckle at that.

"I thought I was doing a good job."

"Something's up."

I shrug, knowing she can't see me.

"It's just hard being home."

"Is that all?"

"It's enough. Mama's on my back from sunup to sundown."

Jill sighs.

"I know. But that's nothing new."

"I think she hates me."

She says nothing, which is unexpected. I've said this before and usually Jill is quick to rebuke it. She's always defending Mama, which annoys Laurie and me to no end.

"Wow." I say to fill the silence.

"Mama's just not good at showing herself."

"She's never liked me."

"She's never understood you."

"And? You don't need to understand someone to love them. What parent understands their child?"

"It's worse since Laurie."

Unprompted. The elephant.

"Laurie was always her favorite."

"No, you were."

"The insurance policy."

"The baby."

"You should be the favorite. You're everything they want."

Quiet. Then, "I'm just meeting their expectation. Nothing special about that."

A few days later, I bring up Laurie again.

"Are you awake?"

"Yeah," she mumbles back.

"If Laurie came back, would Mama and Daddy let her stay?"

That's the main question been on my mind. Jill shuffles around.

"I don't know. They're not really second chance people. Never mind third, forth."

"But for family?"

Real long silence.

"Hasn't made much of a difference before."

"What do you mean?"

"Aunt Holly?"

"Okay...?"

"Aunt Holly was cut from the family when she got pregnant."

I sit up.

"What?"

"It was a Melungeon. The father."

"Aunt Holly lives in Murray."

"Yeah, because she didn't have no choice. Papa Tom didn't want to see her again after he found out."

"Is that why we've never met her?"

"I found out that she asked Mama to put her up and Mama said no."

Aunt Holly was barely a character in our lives. An occasional Holiday card. I knew about her because of old pictures of Mama growing up. We were told that she abandoned the family. Which is why she didn't come to gatherings. Why Mama never let us write back or send a card in return.

Jill continues, "Mama has her opinions about right and wrong."

The next day, I'm walking lines, armed with a pump in my right hand, spraying insecticide. Even with gloves and a bandana pulled up over my mouth, I feel like the poison is leaching into me. I know I'll find my hands red and raw when I peel my gloves off. Funny in the city how you never see dead birds. There are so many pigeons, you would think that their bodies

would line the streets. But out here, death is another farmhand. He toils, digging his hands into the soil, into the sky. He is, if anything, a hard worker. When you spray, it isn't just the insects that die, it's the birds too. I've seen their frozen, soft bodies in the fields, like they fell from the sky. I've seen hawks tear field mice in half. I've heard the coyotes at night, celebrating the hunt. I've seen the mauled carcass of my own dog down by the creek, ripped apart by a black bear. There are deaths, both intentional and unintentional.

When I was eight or so, the mean old cat that lurked around the farm gave birth to a litter under the front porch. Cats like to do that, seclude themselves when they give birth. It's the same as when they die, they like doing their business in private, which I respect. Daddy let us pick one out because we could do with another cat to hunt the rats in the stable. The rats always spook the horses. But the rest he tossed into a potato sack. In front of the mill stone, he held the sack behind his head. He brought it down so quick and so hard on that stone. The sound of bone. Of shards. Twice. Three times. I didn't see any blood though. Burlap's too thick for stains to seep through. Daddy's not a cruel man.

I get to the end of the row I'm working and I know what I need to do. I have known, but it has taken its time in settling, like a fat man working his way into a chair. I need to find Laurie. I need to bring her home.

CHAPTER

I have only a vague idea of where to start looking, but that will have to do. Chase is a boy who Laurie used to buy weed from in high school. No idea how he got his hands on it, unless he grew it himself. Chase was a few years older than Laurie, a known type in the town. Never graduated high school, although that in itself isn't much of an anomaly. He has spent a night or two in the cell at town hall. There's only one government building here and it doubles as a meeting place for the rotary club and the junior league and the 4H club. And it has a single cell. More of a closet really. Barely enforced, right next to the sheriff's desk. Pretty sure there's not even a latch. It's for punishing petty crimes, the guys who won't get booked and sent to real prison. Sometimes the sheriff just wants to teach a teenage boy a lesson. Small town reckonings. Chase is harmless, but he's foolish. Gets drunk, causes a scene. His mama used to call the sheriff on him and now his baby mama does the same. Everyone trying to knock some sense into him. But he never caused any problems for Laurie. I only went with her once or twice to his trailer, but I remember which one it is. Unless he's moved, but I doubt it.

I refuse to drive the Mini around. Might as well attach a siren to the roof. Far as I know, I'm the only one who's ever driven that kind of car around this town. I ask Daddy if I can borrow

the truck to go visit a friend from high school. He says fine, yes, but be back before supper to help Mama. He likes the idea of me spending time with someone here.

I don't remember Daddy driving anything before the truck. It runs on diesel and I wouldn't be surprised if it outlives us all. This is the car all three of us learned to drive on. Daddy made sure we knew basic mechanics. He used to time how long it took us to change a tire on his pocketwatch. Those heavy truck tires, I could barely push one upright. Laurie always won those races. I don't know where she got her strength from, she and I have identical frames. She used to complain about the farm work making her arms too big. She'd stand in front of the mirror, arms extended, massaging her biceps, like she could mold them smaller that way. Delusional is what she was, her arms weren't big at all. Just toned, like the rest of us. Jill's the only one who struggled – and still does – with weight. She takes after Mama. Big hips, big knees, big everything. They're both built like Rottweilers. In high school, Jill tried to eat less. Sitting at the kitchen table, she'd stare at her plate, pick around the potatoes or the cornbread, bring a single greenbean to her mouth, dainty and miserable. Mama wasn't gonna let that fly, "Jill!" she'd snap, "I didn't make this food for you to waste". Call her out just like that, as if Mama didn't know what she was doing. Jill didn't have much of a chance, with those genes, and us eating something fried almost every night of the week. And Jill loves butter. They found her once, as a toddler, under the table, eating an entire stick of it. She was a hungry girl who grew into a hungry adult. We all have holes and we all have things we use to try and fill them. For Jill it's food. For me, it's anger. For Laurie...I guess it's the mess she's in now.

I drive the miles south to the trailer park where Chase lives. No official sign, just an empty lot someone logged. There are about thirty or so trailers propped up here. Which means maybe one hundred and twenty or so people. It's a fluctuating population. Nephews crashing for a few nights to get away from drunk fathers. Girls hiding their swelling bellies for long as they can, buying themselves time before getting booted. Fluctuations in the micro that are really just patterns of the macro. Movement without change. There's forest enclosing us on all sides. Yellow crab grass and dirt patches. An improvised gravel drive runs its way to a deadend in the center of the field, trailers to the left and right. Pink plastic bikes and dolls and deflated PROPERTY OF dodgeballs in front of some of the homes. A few grills. One ominous weightlifting bench. Chase's trailer is one of the first. One of the ones with toys lying in the grass in front. I stop the truck and just wait. It's simple what I'm here to ask him. There's a ticking coming from the engine as it cools down. I swing the door open. That's loud too. Everything about this truck is noisy. I keep it hanging open as I walk to the front door. Knock, knock. I step back. The white paint is chipping to the right of the door, reminding me of a lotto scratch off. I hear a scrambling inside and someone's hollering. The door bursts open and there's a woman, sixty or so looking down at me from a cloud of smoke.

"Yeah?" she asks.

"Is Chase home?." She doesn't move. Just stares at me through her personal fog.

"I'm a friend from school." I add.

"A friend from school." She repeats, slowly, before yelling "CHASE!" over her shoulder.

"Godamnit woman, I'm right over there, I can hear you fine." Chase ambles into view and pushes the woman away from the door. Now he's looking down at me. He squints. And then, "Charlie?"

"In the flesh."

"When did you get back?"

"I'm not back, I'm just home for the summer."

Chase is wearing Dickies, with likely, nothing underneath. I'd prefer not to see his nipples, but he's got the zipper near down to his bellybutton. His nails are jagged and dirty and bitten down to the quick. Lots of excess skin. I shuffle a bit then stop myself. Plant my feet.

"Is that right."

"I've been working a lot with Daddy."

"Sure, sure."

"So, Chase. I have to ask you something."

"Shoot."

"Do you know anything about where Laurie might be?"

Chase leans back a little, eyes me.

"Why would I have something to be knowing about your sister?"

"Look," I uncross my arms, start over. "We haven't seen her in awhile. I thought maybe you have."

Chase steps outside and brings the trailer door closed behind him. I have to take a step back to keep us from bumping noses.

"I don't need details. I just want to find her."

"Don't be saying nothing to Mama, nor your folks either."

"I won't, I promise. They don't even know I'm here."

"Your business is your business, and mine is mine."

"Agreed."

Chase walks over and picks up a plastic folding chair that had fallen over. He sets it right and plops himself down.

"I reckon I seen Laurie maybe...five weeks ago."

"Where?"

"Right where you're standing. I had told her not to come round here no more, she knows I don't do—" a glance at the trailer "my business at home no more."

"What did she want?"

Chase snorts. An ugly sound.

"Same as usual. She was in a bad way, so I told her to get lost."

"And?"

"And it took a hot second, but she left."

"Five weeks ago?"

He scratches his chin. "Maybe six."

I exhale all the air I didn't know I was holding. I feel so tired. I sit down on a cinderblock next to the trailer. It scrapes the back of my thighs.

"Was she with anyone?"

"Nope. Well, actually she was waiting on somebody to pick her up. I told her to wait on the street."

"Did you see who she went with?"

"Nah, I ain't seen him. But I ain't have to see him. I know who it was."

I can't tell if he's being thick on purpose. I raise my eyebrows. He sticks his pointer finger in his mouth and starts chewing on it.

"Willy Atkins."

The name means nothing to me. Which is odd, because I could probably name everyone in this town if you gave me enough time. But Chase says that he's not from here. Drifted in a few months ago from who knows where. Chase didn't explain – no surprise – how he knows him, but I can fill in the blanks. Said he's trouble.

Knowing Laurie, I'd bet he's also charming. She goes for the snakes.

Chase couldn't tell me more than that, but it's a lead. If I have him pegged correctly, the boys at the pool hall might know something about this Willy Atkins. The owner of the pool hall worked out some questionable agreement to maintain a seven-days-a-week liquor license, which makes it the only establishment in the county where you can get booze on Sunday. There aren't that many places for sinning around here. Not a lot of places for secrets either, but far too many for hiding. Man invented forests for hiding.

The best time to go would be Friday night, that's bound to be the busiest. Increase my chances of meeting someone who knows something. But it's also the most conspicuous. What's Old Tom's girl doing at the pool night on a Friday night? That's not something I can risk getting back to Mama or Daddy.

The next couple days I act like nothing, head down, work work work. Yes Ma'am, No Ma'am. I don't even tell Jill what I found out, not yet, not until it's something. I think about what Raul would say if I told him about my mission. I read our emails, the texts. I think about how it felt to sleep next to him. I think about what I did to make him disappear. I've gotta find Laurie.

I ask to borrow the car again Friday midday. Daddy says fine fine, as long as I finish the spraying. When I came home last time, I told them I had a nice time seeing my friend, even though nobody asked. I had to pull off the road and sit in the truck for half an hour since seeing Chase only took ten minutes. I drive over to the pool hall. I thought about it more and decided to go Friday, but early, so I can talk to the barman. I came here once in high school, some boy I was seeing dragged me here. He was clearly a regular and I got the sense that he wanted to show me off to the boys. All I remember is that you could hardly see through the smoke. Grey and oppressive and stinking of Pall Mall. Most of the light came from the neon beer signs lining the walls. Men in white tanks, denim jackets, some in leather. Balding. Pony tails. Rat tails. I sat myself on a torn red bar stool, sticky with dried beer, and sipped a water.

The stool squeaked as I turned to watch him slap backs and twist a pool stick in his hand. He would lean over the table, find my eye and wink, smooth as can be. Too much of a small town boy to realize how corny that is. He was a nice boy, a little full of himself. Occupied with the same things as everybody else: scoring booze, dating the hottest girl in his class, hating his Daddy, scared shitless for what would come after high school. I wasn't captivated by him, but he was something to do. He could be funny and he didn't hit me. That might not sound like a lot, but for many women here and elsewhere, it's enough. Maybe if things had been different, if I hadn't met Mandy, if I had cared more, if I hadn't read the books I'd read, I would have moved in with that boy, whose name I don't remember, and packed his lunch in a brown paper bag, and wiped the messy face of his son, and watched stretch marks creep across my belly on my third pregnancy, and then watched the kitchen clock day after day, counting down the seconds till his shift ended. Thoughts like that unsettle me. Would that have been a happy life? It would have been a flat one. A steady one. But no, even that is an illusion. I've seen lives like that one play out before me my whole life. They contain their fair share of tragedy. All the little girls, and the grown ones too, thinking that they will be the one to break the pattern. They won't be like their mothers and love men who were made to hurt them. Not knowing, never knowing, that all men are made for destroying the women around them.

The parking lot – which is just a rectangle of chunky gravel someone spread out – is empty, spare a couple of F150's. I gotta be quick because anybody could recognize Daddy's truck. I step inside and look towards the bar. Some rock song is playing, but it's turned down low. First glance there's no one inside, but then a man comes in from the back.

"We don't open till six." he says, curt but not rude.

"Hi, yes I know. I wanted to ask about someone."

The manager or bar man or whoever he is looks me over.

"I stay out of family matters. If you don't want your man coming down here, you tell him yourself."

"No, nothing like that. I'm looking for someone. Willy Atkins."

He walks behind the bar, like he didn't hear me, and starts stacking glasses. I am about to repeat myself when he says, "what's a girl like you looking for a man like that?"

I almost roll my eyes, the line he uses. Heard it from some rented blockbuster and thought it sounded cool. I bet he's tickled pink he finally gets to say something like that.

"I have business with him." Stick with the mystery angle.

"Business." He repeats. He finishes with the glasses and puts both meaty hands down flat on the bar.

"Speaking of business, I've got one to run. And a big part of this business is minding my own. So why don't you do the same and run along."

Looking at his beady eyes and his thick pig neck I can tell he's set. Strike out. I climb back into the truck and slam the door too hard. I enjoy a brief fantasy about throwing a rock through one of the windows. Imagine the shatters of glass taking hours to sweep up. Him breathing in trillions of microscopic glass particles and coming down with a nasty, wheezing cough that cuts up his lungs.

Obviously he knows who Willy is. So he's been here before. Enough times for his name to be known. If I knew what Willy looked like, I could stake out the parking lot. Tuck myself somewhere dark and wait for him to pull up. Then follow him once he'd left. And maybe he'd catch me and beat me silly and then I'd have bigger things to think about than my sad heart. But as it stands, I have no more leads.

It takes about a week for the next idea to hit me like a sack of lard. Of fucking course. I'm taking down laundry from the line when it nearly doubles me over. Someone like Willy has bound to have been arrested. Seedy ass character from the way Chase told it. If this were a movie, I'd go to the library and flip through old newspapers. We don't have a library, but we do have town hall. Town hall must keep records. And arrests are public information, so they have to let me look at them. I know that because I looked into it when I first started escorting. I wanted to understand the consequences of getting caught, if it would show up on my record. The idea bubbles inside of me like boiling water, so much so that I want to rush off right now, leave the sheets blowing in the wind and hightail it to town.

My chance comes to hitch a ride with Jill the next morning. Most days, Jill gets driven to and from the prison by a woman she works with, Sadie, who lives a few miles down the road. A monolith of a woman who must have about ten kids by the state of her van. Cheerios wedged into door cracks, unwrapped pampers loose beneath seats. I am in no position to complain and I stay quiet in the backseat next to a window that won't close all the way. They drop me in front of the grocer's because I told Jill I needed to buy tampons. It's the only thing I could think of that wouldn't invite more questions. I wave goodbye and wait for the van to turn the bend before turning in the direction of town hall. The building itself sticks out, like it was copy and pasted here from some other place. Maybe the person who constructed it had a different vision for what our town might become. They were certainly ambitious with the columns. Inside, it's empty. I walk down the hallway to the left, towards

the mayor's office, where I expect to find Mrs. O'Kneel. I've never spoken to her directly, but I've seen her in the Rotary meetings that Daddy used to drag me to. And everybody knows about Mrs. O'Kneel, even children. She's the only full time state employee besides the sheriff. The mayor, the fire department, city council, they're all just volunteers who spend most of their time working day jobs. The fingers of the State don't reach real far into the mountains. So if you need a marriage license – which most people don't bother with – or have a problem with a faulty payment, or aren't getting your social security, Mrs. O'Kneel is who you've got to come talk to.

"Hello, Ms. O'Kneel." I say as I approach her desk. I decided to wear overalls today to avoid raising suspicion. She's bending over, riffling through a filing cabinet. She straightens up when she hears me.

"Hey honey, what can I do for you?" She's got lipstick on her teeth. She knows my family, so I've got to be discreet.

"I was hoping you could help me locate a record."

"What kinda record might that be?"

"An arrest record."

She runs her hands over her skirt like she's wiping dust off. I can tell her earrings, blue plastic teardrops, are clip-ons by the way they remain locked in place when she moves.

"We've got last week's paper right there." She points to an end table by the mayor's closed door.

"It's not from last week. Actually, I don't know when it happened, I just have the name."

Now she looks at me close. "Does your daddy know you're here?"

"It's a...personal issue." I say, hoping that's enough. It must be, because Mrs. O'Kneel lightens up her eagle eyes, puts her hands on her hips, and says,

"Well honey, I'm afraid it ain't gonna be easy."

"Is there a search you can do, in the database?"

She looks at me like I suggested we call the Pope himself.

"Database? Honey, we ain't got no database. We keep paper records."

She grabs a ring of keys from her desks and motions me to follow her. She walks down the hallway and stops in front of an unlabeled door. She unlocks it, pushes the door open, and switches on the light.

"Arrest records are usually kept by the enforcement agency." She explains, "But we're too small to bother with more than one office."

Inside the room there are rows and rows of cardboard boxes, in the middle of the floor and pushed up against the wall.

"We don't keep minor offenses more than six years. That's the law."

I approximate, "I'd say last five years."

She indicates a row of boxes. "Stick to this side. They aren't labeled, but they're mostly organized by year."

So it's not as haphazard as it looks.

"I haven't had the time to fully sort things out." Mrs. O'Kneel pauses, surveying the boxes with a frown.

"Thank you." I say, interrupting her reverie.

Before closing the door, she fixes me and says "Nothing leaves." I nod.

I realize once she's left that she never asked me who I was looking for. Maybe that's why Mrs. O'Kneel's outlasted every mayor since before I was born. Discretion is likely one of the main qualities of a job like hers, even in a snoozeville like my town. She knows who's in trouble, who's broke.

I sit down, criss-cross-apple-sauce, and pull the first box towards me. I probably have an hour, hour and a half tops before Mama or Daddy starts getting antsy at me being out. It feels like they're even more oppressive than when I was in high school. Back then, I could lie to them about participating in some school activity and they would have no clue. But now they reckon I got nowhere to be, so why ain't I at home?

I slide the first folder out of the box and leaf through it. Gamin Rodgers, possession. Not my guy. The next one, Jameson Hill, domestic assault. Teddy Peters, domestic assault. Kelly Milton, domestic assault. The idea that 'Willy' isn't his real name comes to me, but there's nothing I can do, but keep looking for the one name I have. Folder after folder. I get more efficient at checking names and start moving faster. Even still it takes the better part of an

hour to go through the first box. Nothing. The pads of my fingers feel too smooth and my lower back is aching from bending over. I'm stiff from so much manual labor after three years of lifting nothing heavier than a pencil. I stand up and pace a few times around the room. This is going to take longer than I have.

I switch up my strategy. I should start from the most recent dates and work backwards in time. Chase said he comes from out of town, so if his name shows up, it'll probably be from the past couple years. And if he's as shady as Chase made it sound, he may have had a run it quite recently.

I walk to the box at the end of the row, the one still being filled in, and sit down. This is the last box I'll have time to go through today, so God let him be in here. Johnny Willows. Hannah Galloway. Alan Long. Chase Daniels. Big shocker that one. I'm on February 9th when I see it.

William Atkins. Possession. And there it is, his photograph, a low quality mugshot. He has dark brown hair and eyes to match. High cheekbones. He looks smug in the photo, even with glassy eyes. And he's cute.

My eyes continue scanning the page and that's when I see it, right beneath Willy's report: Laurie.

CHAPTER

I get back home by a combination of hitching and walking. Which is how a lot of folks, especially young people, move around, on account of there being no stranger danger. It helps that everybody knows where everyone else lives. I get dropped off at the start of our driveway by a farmer I semi-recognize. I hop down from the truck bed, signal my thanks, and start the two mile trek up to the house.

All I can see is Laurie's photo: boney face, greasy hair, barely open eyes. I wonder if Mama and Daddy know. They must. Daddy's a figure in the community and people would have talked. That might explain why she left when she did. Things seemed okay after Christmas, but then she went and left a few weeks later. Maybe when Mama and Daddy found out, they kicked her out. That's what makes the most sense, except Jill didn't explain her leaving like that. Jill might not know the whole story.

At home, I try not to let my unease show. Daddy says it's time to turn over the rest of the fields, so I prepare myself to be dirty and exhausted for the foreseeable future. And the next day, as I'm raking and raking and raking, I realize it's been at least two days I haven't thought

about Raul. But once the shock of seeing Laurie arrested wore off, he weaseled his way back into my brain. Reminds me of Daddy's war with the moles. Their underground tunnels pose a big threat to the stability of the land. Daddy's tried everything from pouring cement down the holes to poison, but he can never eradicate them entirely. That's how Raul exists for me now: a pest that's drilled too far and too deep.

I still love that man.

At night, when it's just me, I pull out my journal. Next to the entries from Spain, I attempt to write poems. I need to take what's inside and get it outside. Heartbreak is supposed to be beautiful. But everything comes out sounding too stale and melodramatic.

you threw me aside / like something past its expiration / a fuzzy thing left too long on the refrigerator shelf / I didn't realize what was happening until it was too late

If I came across that written somewhere, I would roll my eyes. I'm mad at myself for writing it.

The man across the ocean / with hands that used to hold me / you ruined everything / will you ever decide to want me again

That one is even worse. I hate admitting that a part of me, no matter how small, is still waiting. Waiting to jump at the chance to make things right. Like maybe he'll call me tomorrow or next week and will have some incredible, end-of-the-world story to explain everything and we'll laugh and cry and he'll rescue me from my parents' house and I'll spend the last month of summer vacation with him in Europe.

I really believed I would see Italy and Paris and Greece with him.

But that's not going to happen. I'll make it to fucking Greece on my own somehow. Once I graduate and land a good job and move somewhere far away, I'll have money to take my ass to Greece. Enough money to hire a PI to find Raul. No. I will have long since ceased to care. Adios.

Since I cut things off with my regular clients, I haven't heard from them. I'm not surprised. You wouldn't call a bank once you closed your account. I never took down my profile though, so I'm sure I've received a lot of messages. Work is something I can always go back to. Just revert to the life I was living before I met Raul. It was a fine life.

But I haven't checked my messages. I'm not feeling ready for that. I'd be fine if no one ever touched me again.

No.

No.

Not true.

I'd like it to be true.

But really, it's the opposite.

I am dying for someone to touch me.

But not just anyone. I couldn't bear to be touched by just anyone.

I want to be touched by someone who loves me.

And that, I very much believe, might never happen again.

CHAPTER

Now that I know what Willy looks like, I can start searching for him more broadly. I know the spots around here. The places people go to hide from the rest of us. I know there's a chance that he and Laurie split ways, but he'll have seen her more recently than any of us. I'll start with the Hollow. I know it might save me time to ask the Sheriff directly. Since he made the arrest, he might have an address for Willy. But Sheriff Henderson is friends with Daddy.

The Hollow is the place parents tell their kid to avoid now because that's where the bums hang out. No one openly acknowledges our town's budding population of drug addicts, which made it easier for them to take claim over the Hollow. Drug addiction is a new phenomenon for the community. There were always drunks, semi-functional men who cheated on their wives and fell asleep in their neighbor's cow pasture. But with more and more folks commuting out of town for work, drugs have been tracked in like ticks on shirtsleeves.

Just like the mountains used to be the best place for brewing moonshine, these woods provide cover for a surprising number of meth labs. Someone could blow the story wide open: Appalachia's clandestine industry. All you need to make meth are poor people and a healthy disregard for the government, both of which we supply in abundance. Someone somewhere must be making wheelbarrows of money off of it.

Heroin is an out-of-towner though. It's ironic what gets through. I can guarantee you there's not a single person in town that can tell you what kombucha is. The textbooks I used in high school were too old by a decade. Yet heroin took no damn time at all. It feels rigged, like a bouncer at a club who only lets in the worst sort. From the way Daddy's generation talk, folks around here used to belong to themselves. People were safe to live and think as they wanted, untouched by the world. I don't know if that does more harm than good, but at least participation was optional.

God, even being here a month has rubbed off on me. Which sounds silly, given I spent 95% of my life here. And even though that other 5% is the part I consider important, more telling of who I am, it feels distant. The city feels distant. University feels distant. JavaScript feels distinct. My life feels distant. Did I ever really belong there? Was I ever close to being *that* person? I don't know.

I consider telling Jill about my plan, what I've learned so far about Laurie. Maybe asking her to come with me. It would be better than going alone, but Jill sucks at keeping secrets from Mama. I have to take the Mini, since Daddy's using the truck all week for hauling. I don't want to draw attention, so my best chance is to pull over somewhere close and walk the rest of the way into the Hollow.

I get in a row with Mama when I tell her I'm going out to run some errands.

"What kinda errands?" Mama asks.

"Just some personal things to take care of." I say, trying to sound light.

"Charlise, I am not running a hotel for you to come and go as you please." Mama's voice has that edge that serves as a warning sign.

"I know Mama but I've barely left since I got home."

"These past days you've been in and out. Doesn't seem right to me."

"I'm just getting reacquainted with the town. It's been awhile."

Mama looks at me, distrusting as usual.

"I don't want to hear about you getting into no trouble."

"Mama, what are you talking about?"

"I'm just saying Charlise, your Daddy and I won't stand for it."

I force myself to take two deep breaths.

"Mama, I am a grown woman. When I am home, I obey your and Daddy's rules, because yes I am under your roof. But I should be free to go out now and again."

I finish my speech, thinking that sounded quite adult and reasonable. I can tell Mama thinks so to, or at least is having a hard time coming up with a rebuke.

"So Charlise is grown, is she? I'll remember that. Get on then, but when you're needed, you're here."

"Yes ma'am."

I don't want to push it, now that I've reached this truce, but I want to scream at her, *'haven't I been here, busting my ass off every single day, zero complaints?'*

But Mama will never see things the way I want her too.

It takes me about forty-five minutes to get close to the Hollow. It's easy driving till the last five miles when the asphalt gives way to potholes and dirt. The Mini isn't great with bumps, so I take it slow, wincing everytime I hear the carriage scrape. This road is a cut-through that connects to the next town over, Lula. If you drive a truck, it saves you half an hour, cause you don't gotta take the highway all the way down and loop back up. I have to keep my windows rolled up since the Mini spits up torrents of dust that stay in the air long after I've driven past. A quarter of a mile from the bridge, I pull the Mini as close as I can to the treeline and park.

I emptied out my car before coming here, not wanting to tempt passing cars. I catch myself. I'm still thinking like I'm in the city. Daddy's truck doesn't even have a working lock. Better safe than sorry, especially being in junkie territory.

I walk towards the Hollow. It's a beautiful day. The woods are greenest in summer. Fat, slow flying bugs float by like they have nowhere to be. I hear half a dozen different bird calls ring above my head. I can name half of them. The first sign of human life is a single dirty sock that's half buried in the gravel.

The Hollow is what we call the area underneath the bridge that marks the official county line. The river serves as a natural border.

We have three big rivers that run through our county and one in particular, the Hooch, winds back and forth in slippery indecision, not sure whether it wants to go East or West. The bridges that piece together our county occupy the better part of the free time of teenagers

in the area. If you're looking for a kid on any odd day of summer vacation, good chance you'll find them flinging themselves off one of them. We used to come here as often as we could. Styrofoam coolers full of homemade booze and Mountain Dew. The skimpiest bikini you own, stuffed at the bottom of your backpack so your folks won't find it.

The Hollow used to be the most popular of the bridges, because it's equidistant to kids from both towns. That, and it's far enough away from parents on both sides. But a few years ago, a boy died here. Jumping off the bridges is their main attraction. We all did it. But Easton, a boy in Laurie's year, jumped bad one day, too close to the bank, and hit his head. He bled out in the river while his girlfriend screamed her head off. Far from parents also means far from anyone who can help when you need it. They say his head was caved in. That you could see pieces of brain carried off by the river. Kids stopped hanging out at the Hollow after that. It was there for the taking by the rougher element. They like it for a similar reason: far from prying eyes. And as Daddy always says, 'out of sight, out of mind'. Small-town folk take that doctrine to heart, when it's convenient.

Before the bridge, there's a small trail, wide enough for two feet, that leads down to the river. I walk slowly, keeping my eyes in front of my legs. The trail opens up at the river and I see the first tents. There are about ten or so, each spaced a few feet apart. I see there are more across the bank too. The tents look standard camping types, in typical shades of camo-green and hunting orange. A couple look brand new, but most are worn, spread thin by the zippers. Strewn with heavy plastic tarps, for the rain I suppose. A couple even have laundry, drying in the sun, lain across the top. And it's lively. People are scattered about, some outside, some half-in, half-out of their tents. A lot of bare feet. A lot of empty bottles and plastic wrappers littering the ground. Ho-ho's I notice. No one seems to pay me much mind. One lady who's brushing her hair with her fingers, looks up at me and grins.

I realize that I don't have a plan. I didn't think past getting here. I decide to keep walking, poke around and see if Willy or Laurie turns up. I make myself walk slowly to appear less suspicious, even though no one seems to care that I'm here. Because of the heat, the tent door flaps are unzipped and cast open, making my canvas easier. I regret the open door policy as soon as I look in one tent and see a man jerking himself off. He's choking the head of his penis like a jar of jam he couldn't get the lid off of. Not Willy from the little I saw of his face. I'm at the end of the row. I eye the tents on the other bank. The river is too deep and wide to cross, so I walk back up and over and down the other side. Fewer tents on this side. There's a couple lying together that sends me into high alert, but once I get closer I see the woman isn't Laurie. Neither of them are here. But they might have been at some point. I need to ask the people here. So stupid of me not to bring a picture of Laurie to pass around. Would she have used her own name? I'm unprepared for this, but fuck it, I have nothing to lose.

I cross back to the other side, approaching a group of three women I saw sitting together. If you squint, they'd almost look normal. Only one of the three is excessively dirty. Benefit of living next to a river. I imagine them all sitting front to back in a long, snaking line, bathing each other, like lovers. Or monkeys. Their hair is the most evident failing: matted and greasy and knotted. One of them has cut hers off, to save herself the worry I bet. Smart, but makes me wonder whether it's worse to look dirty or crazy in this country. One of them is skinny, knees like two softballs under a pair of tight pantyhose. The dirty one looks like she has the flu, but the one in the middle is a healthy weight, even a bit plump. T-shirts and jean shorts. One of them is wearing two different flip flops. The other two are barefoot. Nothing remarkable about that. Growing up, I spent less time out of shoes than in. I try not to stare at the track marks that dot their skin like constellations of bad news. I get close enough to them and sit back on my heels.

"Hi" I start.

Not a peep.

"I'm Charlie."

The one with the shaved head looks at me and asks, "What do you want?"

"I'm looking for my sister."

She snorts. A beastly sound. She points to the other two girls.

"Is she your sister? Or her?" Then she points to herself. "Am I your sister?"

"No." I say like an idiot, because what else can I do but play out this little game.

"Well then beat it."

"I think she may have come through here."

"Lotta people do." She says.

"What's your name?" I ask her, trying to sound friendly.

"Nunya. Nunya Business." She grins real wide, looks at the other two to see if they caught her joke.

"She might have been with a man. Someone named Willy Atkins."

One of the other girls, the plump one, glances up.

"Do you know him?" I ask her.

The other girl, Nunya, snaps at her. "You keep your trap shut."

The girl looks down at her toes, face gone pouty.

"Why can't she talk to me?" I ask the ring leader.

"Cause we's don't know you. You could be tryinna start trouble."

I lift up my hands, palms out.

"I'm not looking to start any kind of trouble. I just want to find my sister. *She's* in trouble."

The ring leader smiles again, all teeth, "If she's with Big Willy then you can bet she's in trouble."

"Please. Help me. Tell me where I can find him."

The ring leader digs her big toe into the dirt. She starts humming. Not a tune I recognize.

"Whatcha gonna give me if I tell you?"

All three girls, even the one who hasn't spoken, smile now. They look excited.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"Whatdya think, you some kinda idjiot?"

I know I have ten bucks in my pocket, which is probably a fortune for these desperate fucks. When I pull it out, I practically see their eyes dilate. The ring leader reaches for it, but I stand up.

"Only after you tell me."

She digs her toes further into the dirt. She looks like she could strangle me. Like she's debating it. The plump one starts scratching her arms vigorously. The quiet one stays quiet. Still, like she's playing a one person game of freeze.

"He pass through sometimes, that man you're looking for." She finally says. She reaches for the bill again.

"Uh, uh not good enough."

She crosses her arms and crinkles her nose at me.

"He mostly stay up in Jasper."

She looks at her friends and snickers, "With the rest of the freaks."

"When he was here, was he with someone, a girl?"

She rolls her eyes. "I mean yeah, duh, Willy's always got some'n with him."

"Where in Jasper?"

She looks at me like I couldn't possibly be any stupider.

"That's insider information."

I move to put the ten dollar bill back in my pocket, when the third girl, the quiet one, jumps in, "the old train depot. The one that don't run no more." This comes out a rush of words. I wait for her to say no, but she's clamped shut again, intently picking at a scab on her finger.

The ring leader is glaring at her so hard I'm afraid her scalp might start smoking.

"Yeah..." no-hair says. "That's the one."

She sticks out her palm and I place the crumpled ten dollar bill in it. She snaps it back fast as a spring and stuffs it in the cup of her bra. A bra that's got nothing to fill. She stands up and pulls at the other two girls to follow her.

"Pleasure." She sneers at me.

I scramble my way back up to the road and speed walk to the Mini. Untouched, of course. Nothing to have worried about. Jasper. How in the world am I going to get myself to Jasper.

Back at the house things are quiet. In my head, a different story. Daddy's looking over the family finances, doing the "books" he calls it. He has his dollar store readers pushed real low on his nose and his serious face on. He's still got his work clothes on, stained green at the knees, which he'd probably wear to bed if Mama'd let him. Mama frets about, glancing over her shoulder, pretending to clean the kitchen even though there's not a speck amiss. Daddy makes a "hmm" sound and Mama practically takes flight, all a flurry. The door swings open and Jill comes in. I've forgotten what she used to look like. All I have now is this new image of her, always tired, always sagging. She sets her bag down, kisses Daddy on the forehead and flings herself down next to me on the sofa. Jill's movements are audible now, another recent development. There's a noise for when she sits and stands, like her body's a thing that

needs the extra stimulation to do what she wants it to. It doesn't flow easy like it used to, with that constant underlying pulse that energizes all young people. Her movements have a process now, a calibration period. I feel her sink in next to me, eyes already closed. I place my hand on her knee and she smiles.

"Long day?" I ask, because this is what I say now.

"Mmm." She responds. Eyes flicker open. "The usual." She squeezes my hand. "What did you do today?"

I know that it's time to tell Jill. I can't make it to Jasper on my own. I'll need her help to convince Mama and Daddy.

"I'll tell you later." I say and wink.

"Mysterious." Her eyes are closed again.

In bed that night, once we hear Mama and Daddy close their door, Jill rolls over.

"Alright, spill the kidney beans." We used to say this to each other as kids, always picking a different bean.

I turn to face her.

"So..." There's really no good way. "I've been looking for Laurie."

Jill breaths out a sigh. "Shoulda known you'd meddle."

"Meddle? She's our sister."

"Don't bite my head off. So you find her?"

"No, but I think I'm close."

"So, what now?"

"I need to go to Jasper. And I need you to come with me."

"Jasper? Ain't nothing in Jasper but--"

"-Laurie" I cut in.

"I was gonna say God's asshole."

"Jill!" I'm stunned, Jill never curses.

"What? I'm grown."

"So you'll come with me?"

"Hold on, I ain't agree to that."

"I need you. No way Mama lets me go by myself. It'll take at least two days."

Jill rolls back onto her back. She fusses with the sheets. I wait for her to settle down.

"What are we supposed to tell them?" She finally asks.

"Uhm. That we're going...camping, maybe. Or to see a friend of yours that moved."

"No. I meant after."

"I haven't gotten to that part yet."

"Charlie, they're not just gonna take her back like nothing."

"You don't know that. Anyways, we gotta find her first."

"So, you don't even know if she's in Jasper?"

I'm quiet. Jill sighs.

"I'm off next Tuesday. We can go then, but I have to be back by my Thursday morning shift."

I'm tempted to squeal, but I don't wanna wake Mama or Daddy. Instead, I reach over the space between our beds and offer my hand. Jill takes it.

That next morning at breakfast I nudge Jill with my foot under the table. We sit in the same positions we always have, me next to Daddy and Jill to my right, next to Mama. The only difference now being that empty chair across from us. Jill clears her throat. We agreed that it should come from her so that they'd be more likely to say yes. Jill hasn't asked for anything since she was fifteen years old and wanted a front on her allowance to perm her hair. I guess that incident turned her off the whole concept of asking for things.

"Mama. Daddy." She looks at each of them like she's holding court. Her voice is light, with none of the edge that mine gets when addressing my folks. Mama looks up, but Daddy's still preoccupied with his over-easy.

"I was thinking. Do you remember my friend Suzy?"

"Suzy?" This from Mama. She's the one we have to play to. Daddy paid no mind to our school friends unless they were the wrong gender. The corrupting gender, as he calls it.

"Yes ma'am, Suzy. We were close in Junior High. You remember her. Short hair. Her Daddy drove for the Wriggley plant."

Mama's forehead wrinkles with the strain of it, but there's a faint look of recognition. We were counting on this. Pick someone who Mama can't easily verify and we can exaggerate Jill's friendship.

"Well, she lives in Jasper now and she just had a little boy."

"A little boy." Mama repeats.

"The darn cutest thing to hear her tell it. And she's invited me to come visit."

"Up to Jasper?"

Jill hurries in, "I haven't seen her in ages and I have Tuesday off and Charlie--"

She turns to me, "-Charlise said she'd go with me."

Jill is all smiles and I'm worried she'll blow it. But it'll be worse if I speak up, so I let her handle this.

"Did she now." Mama's giving me her eye.

But then Daddy comes to our rescue between sips of black coffee.

"Good thing too, long way to go, don't want you goin' alone."

"But can you spare Charlise?" Mama wouldn't ever contradict Daddy. The closest she gets is that question in her voice that's there right now.

"For one day, don't see why not. Fields are turned, she seen to that. Fertilizing don't need happen for another two weeks or so."

I could leap across the table and hug Daddy. He's always been more lenient in summer. Looking forward to harvest. Plus, getting older's made him soft. Mama can't say nothing now that Daddy spoke, so that settles it. I already know she's going to grind us until Tuesday, but I don't care. We've got it. Thanks to Jill and thanks to Daddy.

I avoid talking to Jill much through breakfast or the rest of the day. We can't look like we're gloating. Or worse, conspiring. Due to Jill's schedule, the next chance we have time to talk alone is the next night, lying next to each other.

"So, what's the plan?" She asks me. I can't see her face, since there's no moon out tonight.

"There isn't one. We just go and look for her."

Jill chews this over. "Is it dangerous?"

I think about the three girls at The Hollow.

"I don't think so."

"Think. Great." she says.

"I keep a hunting knife in the Mini."

Jill's eyes go wide. "Really?"

"Yeah, Daddy gave it to me when I first left. He tried first to give me a gun, but he compromised with the knife."

"Have you had to use it?"

It hasn't seen blood that knife, or at least, not on my account. But I used it as a threat a couple of times in the early days, before I learned to tell which clients were unsafe.

I consider telling her more than I should. "No. But it's there just in case."

"And I have my baton."

"No, Jill." I groan, "you can't bring it. They'll think you're a cop."

"That might help."

"No, definitely not."

Mama is a shrew the next two days. She brings me to my knees – literally – scrubbing floors, washing windows, brushing out the ashes from the wood stove. I pour castor oil into the holes dug out by moles. She even has me go out and walk the perimeter of the property to make sure our flags are still in their rightful place. The family that owns the adjacent land, the Hulseys, have been encroaching for years. In high school, I'd stumble across one or more of their goats that had wandered onto our land to graze. I once spent four hours trying to lasso a billie with a rope and tug it back to the other side of their fence. They claimed that they'd figured out how to undo the gate, but we don't buy it. They let them out on purpose. No love lost between us. It started some thirty odd years ago when the lot of land next to ours, the one closest to the road, went up for sale. It's not a common thing, land being sold. Most families – like ours – hold on to their land like it's the only thing that matters. Because for them, it is. Land makes the man. But the woman selling it was a recent widow and couldn't manage it herself, deciding to move in with her sister instead. Papa Tom had a right to that land, it being next to ours. There's no written rule, but people around here recognize that kind of claim and hold to it. If we wanted it, we had the right of purchase. But the Hulseys went behind Papa Tom's back and made an offer, higher than asking. The snakes. Of course, the widow, being a country broad and a loyal neighbor, stayed true to Papa Tom and we got that parcel. But we never forgave the Hulseys for their treachery. And so they let their livestock do as they please on that acreage, as if to say *'this should be ours'*.

I don't mind this chore, even if it takes a good part of the day. It gets me out of the house and out from under Mama. God that woman is unbearable. She's not always like that. But she's a woman who runs on rage. It's why she has so much energy. I must get that from her. Or I got it from the world and she got it from the world too. Maybe that's just what life does to women. Women are supposed to be angry. Unavoidable with all the shit they put us through. But you'd think we would've evolved by now to be harder than this. To be prepared for the disappointment life leads us to. Maybe we're in the process of evolving to that state and I'm just one of the inputs into the evolution machine, helping it progress an inch further with my sacrifice, letting it grind me up into corn oil. But it should've happened by now. Women have always suffered, since the very beginning of womanhood. Every woman I know has had a hard life. I used to think it was just here, in this small, poor town where they don't have a second of a chance, but I see it in the city too. Different problems, but it hits you all the same. It's like women are aliens, planted here for some sick inexplicable reason. I'm not cut out for this. I mean honestly, how much are we meant to endure? And when you look, when you look close, at the city women or the country women or the rich or the poor, the source of their suffering is always singular: some goddamn pig of a man. It's always a man. And the worst part, is we know it. We know it so well. It's the men. And we don't stop ourselves. We know what they're like and we go towards it, fucking moth to a flame. No

sympathy from me for that. Well, I'm breaking that fucking cycle, I sweat to God I will. No more men. Never. Never. For as long as I breathe.

On Tuesday, Jill and I pack up Princeton. We can't bring a tent or any camping stuff since we're supposed to be spending the night with Suzy. Just one overnight bag each. We can't pack much food for the same reason, so I swing by the grocer before heading out and Jill pops in to buy provisions. On the drive up, the few radio stations that reach our town bleed to static, so I let Jill flip through my CD collection and play what she wants. I haven't burned a CD since high school, so there's no recent hits. Only the left speaker works, but the Mini's so small inside we hear just fine. As the crow flies, Jasper's around 100 miles from us, but in mountain territory, that'll take you over four hours. There's almost nothing to see on this drive, save trees and more trees. It's considered a scenic highway. And it's the only road on this side of the state that feeds into Kentucky, so you get some through traffic. The families living along this route set up little stands to sell produce and baked goods. Daddy always stops for boiled peanuts and that's my plan too. I tried explaining boiled peanuts to someone in the city and I never quite found the right words to make it sound appetizing, but trust, they are a gift from my people to this world. We stop for the peanuts and Jill makes two ham and cheese sandwiches in her lap for lunch. The sun is shining, but the mountain air keeps things airy and I could see myself falling asleep right here, leaning against the warm metal door of the Mini.

Jill and I talk about random shit to pass the time. We haven't had time together like this in years. It's nice. Jill's funny, much funnier when she's away from Mama and Daddy. She tells me stories from the prison. Like how a few weeks ago, one of the inmates went on hunger strike because the guards confiscated her wig. They be saying wigs aren't allowed because you can hide things in them, but the prisoner says it's her basic human right to wear one. I ask Jill what happened and she says the prisoner ended up in the health ward strapped to a food tube. Too weak to fight them off. Not all of the stories are sad though. She tells me of a different inmate, a lifer, who started making origami with the napkins they pass out at meal time. Others noticed her doing it and got interested, so she taught them all to do it. But she only knew three different origamis, a frog, a rose, and something else, so they all got together and petitioned for an origami book. Their request was granted, so now they have an origami club and make all kinds of shapes from the book. Their next ask is for real origami paper because the napkins are hard to use, especially for the complex shapes with lots of folds.

Jill says she likes working there because it helps her feel grateful for her life. That no matter what, at least she's free.

She opens the glove compartment. I see her see the knife. But she ignores it and pulls out a napkin and starts fiddling with it. After a minute she provides me with a rose.

"Cute." I say and place it on the dash. "They let the staff join the origami classes?"

She shakes her head, "Not really, but Jeanie's nice. She showed me."

"Is Jeanie a friend?"

Jill looks a bit surprised by the question. "No, she's an inmate."

"But like, if she was out, if you met somewhere else, would you be friends?"

She thinks on it. "Yeah, I guess we would be."

"What's she in for?"

Jill looks stern, "We're not supposed to talk about it."

I egg her on, "Come on, it's just me."

"She ran someone over with her car."

"Christ, on purpose?"

"She says as much."

"Why?"

"She says he assaulted her. Some pal of her old man."

I let out a long sigh, "Did it make a difference in her trial?"

Jill gives me the side eye, "Take a wild guess."

"Yeah."

The good thing about the Mini is that it doesn't use a lot of gas. Part of the reason I got it. That and vanity. Plus, Daddy insists on me keeping an extra gas can in the trunk. Mountain thinking. So there's no reason to stop for now. Jill's brought a novel, some thin paperback, that she's cracked open.

"How can you stand to read in the car?" I ask her.

"It don't bother me none," she mumbles back.

So I'm left alone with my thoughts the last hour of the drive. The sun's still shining bright, but the air streaming in from the window is cool. In July of all things. I'm nervous. The driving is good. Driving in the mountains is especially good. Curves and inclines keep my attention on the road and off of speculation. Jill has to put her book down on her knees because the road is whipping us side to side. As kids, when we took trips into the mountains to see family, the three of us would play Spaghetti. I was always smooshed into the non-existent middle seat as the youngest and had hips pinching into me from both sides. We'd get away with Spaghetti, falling over each other, until Mama barked at us to settle down. I get real car sick too and it was worse when I was little because I couldn't see over the dash to steady my vision. The first time I threw up, Mama and Daddy were concerned, pulling over to wipe me down and check my temperature. But after the second time, they started making threats. I wasn't allowed to eat before car trips. If I started looking green Laurie would dig her nails into my arm hard, like the pain could keep me grounded. Didn't usually work. I'd say "Mama" and the car would lurch over as quick as quick can and I'd fling myself out on the ground, heaving what needed to come out. I hated that Mama and Daddy only gave us attention for the things we did wrong.

I see the old city limit sign that means we're approaching downtown Jasper. It's a stretch calling it downtown when it ain't more than a strip of corner store, farm supply, and postal. Jasper isn't in a valley so much as it's hanging off the side of the mountain. The only flat thing in town are the rail tracks. And about the only thing that comes through these small mountain towns are the train cars that carry coal and other goods north to south and south to north. Before Jasper was called Jasper, when it was nothing but a patch of forest, they laid the railway here. A camp was assembled here to keep the workers fed and sheltered. These camps would be packed up and moved further down the line as construction progressed. But in the case of Jasper, and other towns that still dot these hills, there was a mine close enough by to justify continued residence. Not a strategic enough location to see the town boom and expand, but close enough to maintain a small population of working families. Now, it's mostly old folk, the occasional mountain farmer, and the unofficial junkie population. There's no working population really, but it's one of the only towns on the journey north. People stop to stretch their legs and fill up their tanks. You gotta stop here or you'll be shit out of luck for gas. I ask Jill if she wants to go straight there and she says "where else?" and I don't have a response for that, so I keep driving. Plus, it won't stay daylight forever. Darkness is a different species up here.

The train tracks are a mile out of downtown. We're there in no time at all, but we'll have to walk in, because I can't take the Mini over the gravel. Even if I could, I wouldn't want to. Jill and I get out of the car. We can see the depot from here.

"Should I bring anything?" she asks.

I think about the money I had to use last time.

"You got singles?"

She checks and nods.

"Leave your wallet here, just take some bills." I advise.

I lock the Mini and we start crunching our way towards the depot. As we get closer, I see its broken windows. A few are covered up with garbage bags or bed sheets. Even at this distance, there's trash everywhere. A lot of burnt wood. The walls of the depot look barely held together. Yellowed paint. Splitting.

This feels different from the Hollow. It's quiet. There's something lying on the steps of the depot and I realize it's a person. I hear Jill gasp next to me. I put my hand on her.

"It's okay." I say.

In front of the steps I pause to look at Jill. She looks nervous, but nods anyways. We walk past what's on the steps and push back the black tarp that's serving as a doorway. It takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to this new darkness. Shapes begin to take form. There are bodies everywhere. Mostly laying down, but some of them are sitting up, like prop dummies. There are mattresses strewn across the floor. Couch cushions. A couple of car seats. The smell is horrific, indescribable. It has a physical force to it, like it could shove you on your ass. I can't see the floor for the amount of trash covering it. Every step elicits a crinkling of plastic. So much for lowkey. Someone has hung sheets up over the windows to keep light from coming in and the air is heavy and damp like bad breath. Someone, somewhere is moaning. Other voices can be heard chatting softly, so many ghosts. I look at Jill. Her eyes are wide, looking scared out of her mind.

"Do you want to wait outside?" I whisper.

She shakes her head, subtle as a twitch.

I pick a direction and begin to step my way through the maze of mattresses, trying not to step on anything. Jill sticks to me like a backpack. A lot of skin. Not naked, but near enough. Pieces of fabric hang loose on their bodies, or bunched around knees, not bothered to have been pulled up. Somehow more obscene than nudity. I pass a woman, I think a woman, who is face down on a twin mattress that's covered in deep brown stains. She is wearing a floral moo-moo. No part of her is moving. Across from her, back against the wall, is a man. He

holds his face in his hands and watches us through his fingers. He sticks his tongue out, a pointed gray snake.

"Keep your eye on him," I whisper over my shoulder to Jill. I keep looking. Don't think, just scan, scan, scan.

Two people fucking. I can't make out the person lying down, but the man on top is frantic. Boney ass jabbing jabbing jabbing. Grunting grunting grunting. The feet don't look like Laurie's, too small. And Laurie has higher arches.

Jill clings to my wrist. I look back to see the man still watching us. But he hasn't moved. He is hitting himself in the forehead with the pad of his hand, soft but rhythmic. I keep stepping my way through, searching faces in this artificial night, willing the light to stretch. A lot of them are lying face up, which helps the search. Some eyes closed, some open. They stare up at the ceiling, looking at nothing. Cheeks so hollow you can see the outline of their teeth under the surface. Skeletons desperate to come out. Skin that's been so stretched and dehydrated it can't even bruise anymore. The color of old paper. The color of maggots. Unnamed things squirm and dart about, under mattresses, over trash. I see a cockroach crawl out from the pant leg of a boy. I can't breathe. I look up from the boy's ankle and see Jill, healthy Jill, like a memory from a different place, and then she is running, as fast as is allowed in this labyrinth of bodies and I run after her. A few more steps and we burst past the tarp and nearly trip over the body on the stairs, but we are outside, back in the world, where the air is breathable and the light is clean. The world that belongs to us, to the living. Jill is hyperventilating, doubled over. I check myself over, touch my face, rub my arms, make sure nothing is on me.

"She isn't in there," Jill says when she can speak again. She is shaking.

"We didn't check all of it," but I know what Jill means. She means that Laurie could not possibly be in that place.

"Please, let's just leave."

I want to leave too. But I know I have to go back in, to finish looking, or the whole trip will be wasted and we won't know for certain. And I don't want to live with that seed of doubt.

"Stay out here. Keep watch." For what, I don't know.

She shakes her head, but doesn't say anything. She walks over to the tracks, a safe enough distance and sits down, bringing her knees to her chest. I breathe in deep, like I could hold

this clear, white oxygen inside of me. Wield it like a shield against whatever sickness blooms inside there.

I climb the steps one at a time. I consider tearing the tarp down, to let more light in. But I don't want anyone getting mad at me, no knowing what they'd do if they got upset. I go left this time, instead of right. It's a bit more alive on this side. More people sitting up, or at least, slouching. The two people closest to the entrance are laying down facing each other, noses almost touching. They hold hands and talk to each other, too low to make out what they're saying. I look at a few more faces, a few more bodies. Still no Laurie. I tell myself that no matter what, I'll be able to recognize her. Even skinny and sick, I could see her. I see a woman who's picking at scabs on her arm, digging her nails into her skin. Every step I take there's something I'm stepping on. Thank Heavens for the thick soles on these boots. My eyes have adjusted to the dimness again and I continue, as efficiently as I can, to advance. I try to treat what I'm seeing as snapshots, unattached to me, like scenes from a movie I could be watching: a woman whose hair grows in sparse patches, even though she can't be more than twenty. A man who lays in a small pool of his own piss. My eyes skip past the countless needles. The images glide over me, non-stick. Scan, scan, scan. There's nothing for me to do, but look for Laurie. Carry out the mission. But as much as I want to find her, part of me hopes she isn't here, that she's not one of these.

I've covered most of the building and even though every molecule in me protests, I know I'm going to have to talk to some of them. My body flashes with heat. I tell myself there's no danger. I'm healthy. There are people I can ask, those that seem alert enough for conversation. I make my way back to the couple holding hands. I squat down.

"Excuse me." My voice barely makes a sound. I try again, louder. Their eyes shift over to me.

"I don't want to interrupt." Why am I being so formal? I sound ridiculous to myself. I unfold the photograph I remembered to bring. I show them, but it's hard to see with this light.

"Have you seen her?"

Their eyes slide over the photograph. Nothing registers. They turn their gaze back to each other and resume their murmuring.

Okay, bad choice starting with those two. There's a woman a few feet away who's sitting against the wall. She looks bored, but awake. I approach and she tenses. I hold my hands up and smile. She watches me warily. I extend my hand, offering her the photo. She takes it and looks at it.

"Do you know her?" She traces her pointer finger over it. "Do you know her?" I ask again.

"Maybe," she says. "If I had something that could help me remember..."

I take the photo back from her.

I try a group of three who are crouched together. They speak in low, anxious voices. They stop talking as soon as I'm close, eyes narrowed.

"Fresh meat." A young girl says and pokes me in my leg. I step out of arm's length.

"She's a cop." the other girl says, frowning at me.

"No I'm not." I show them the photo.

"No one who looks like that here." The man says.

"What about a guy named Willy?"

Nothing. I take out a piece of paper from my pocket to pass around. I stole the mugshot from town hall, even though I wasn't supposed to.

"What you need him for?" he says to me.

"I just wanna talk." I say.

"You best have something good for Big Will."

"Where is he?"

No response, just a smile with too few teeth. One ugly jack-o-lantern.

"You need something, I can get it for you." The young one cuts in.

The man slaps her hard across the face. She cries out, almost topples over.

"Don't let Willy hear you making claims." The man snarls at her.

The girl rubs her cheek, cowering from the pumpkin man.

"So, is he here?" I address the man.

"Rapping at the window, crying through the lock." He says, chuckling. He starts cleaning his ear, but I don't stick around to see how far he gets.

Don't run. Don't run. I instruct myself as I walk to the exit. The light strings like rubbing alcohol on a cut. Jill stands up and hurries over to me.

"What happened? You were gone forever."

"Willy, Big Will, is here sometimes."

"Sometimes? What does that mean?"

"I don't know."

I walk to the track and sit down. Jill joins me.

"I just need to breathe for a minute." She nods and rubs my back.

"Was it awful?" She asks. Doesn't quite merit a response.

I look around. Trees, gravel, tracks that outrun the eye, the Mini a fleck of blue in the distance. Seeing it helps. The train depot looms large, but from the outside, it might as well be a vacant building, abandoned to history. No signs of what it contains. How many people know about this place? Does anyone in Jasper know? I hear a bird call.

"I think we should wait awhile."

Jill's face tells me she doesn't wait to stay here a second longer.

"Look, we're not driving back until tomorrow anyways. So we might as well wait and see if he shows."

"Can we wait in the car?"

"Go ahead if you want, I'll stay lookout here."

Jill hesitates. "I'll just grab my book."

I hand her the keys and she's off crunching gravel. The metal bar of the railtrack is biting into my ass, but I stay planted. The body on the stairs hasn't budged an inch.

When Jill's back she plops down next to me and opens her paperback.

"I brought you one too just in case." She hands me a second book. It's thick. I turn over the cover.

"Harry Potter?" I can't believe it.

Jill looks at me sheepish. "We weren't allowed to read it."

I actually laugh out loud. This, after everything.

"They're good."

"You read them?"

"Yeah, in middle school. I read them at Katie Bell's house after school. Her parents let her."

Jill looks at me for a beat and goes back to her book. I leaf through *The Chamber of Secrets*, but I can't focus. After an hour, I trek to the car for food and fix two more sandwiches.

Time. A lot of time. It grows dark. Jill finishes her book. She sets it down on the gravel beside her. It's time to go back to the car. It's time to find somewhere to spend the night before undoing it all, repeating the journey, in reverse, back home. But worse, because I have no more leads. I know it's time to go, but I don't move. My ass went numb an hour ago from the mean steel of the track that bores into me with the persistence of a thought.

Jill stirs, making to stand up and I let myself give in. I'm ready to follow her back to the car. But she freezes.

"There are people coming."

I scramble up and look where she's looking. I make out three – I think three – people walking towards the depot from the other end of the tracks. Nothing out that way, far as I know. It's dark now save for the moon and I'm thanking God for its bigness, its divine attention. It's bright as a spotlight tonight, like its expecting a show. The three strangers are closer and I'm

straining with every fiber of my eyeballs to see their faces. One of them – the biggest shape – is definitely a man. I don't know if they see us, but I take a step towards the depot and feel Jill's hand hook through my elbow. I tug her along, because one of the shadows walking towards us must be, inevitably must be, the man I have been searching for.

I lift my arm to wave like a certified imbecile and feel vaguely like I am no longer directing my own actions. It must have worked because the three – who are definitely three and materializing from shape into person with every step – have shifted their course and are walking towards us. I sense Jill practically wilt next to me, but she doesn't backstep.

When they're about thirty paces from us, when the moon is enough and the proximity is enough, I know that there, to his right, is my sister. If we were on a busy street, under the plain light of day, I could easily have missed her as she walked by. Or at a house party, if she had been pouring herself a drink in the kitchen, I would not have seen her, not have known. Only here, only in the sad, hard reality of this three-person line up, her face half-hidden, is the certainty so solid, it takes me breath away.

And I know it before my eyes do. My eyes are merely the middleman, their protest, their refusal to reconcile what Laurie looks like and what this person in front of me looks like, is barely relevant. Because it is known. Too frail, too old, too sick, too ugly, but also, yes, Laurie. Unmistakably Laurie. I know Jill gets it too because her hand on my bicep squeezes so hard I feel my own pulse thump against her fingers. The trio stops in front of us.

Laurie is wearing what at one point might have been something pretty – something pink and cotton, American Eagle-esk, a high-school remnant – but is merely rags now. The dirty, wrung out fabric hangs on her like some modern art piece. Like a shroud on a body. She looks at us and her expression is unreadable. She looks at the man. Then back. The frantic attention of a small rodent. She fingers a thread that has come loose. Her hands look like talons. And she's lost a nail.

I don't want to look away but I do and the man, who must be Willy, is handsome, even with unwashed hair that sits on his head like a wet mop. Even with skin that looks dried out, like someone pressed it between the pages of a heavy book. His eyes are wet, unsettling. I can't see his pupils. He is wearing cowboy boots. I want to keep him in my sights, but I register the girl to his right. She looks young, teenage young. Her head is shaved, except for a fringe of bangs. She's wearing a bathrobe and sandals. There's dried blood under her nose.

Before anyone has time to do anything, Jill whispers, "Laurie." Laurie looks at her. A slight smile. Willy licks his lips and puts his arm around Laurie's shoulder.

"What's this now?" His voice has that quality that makes everything sound like a joke. A joke at your expense. He smiles brightly. Maybe to show us that he still has his teeth.

Laurie is looking down, fingering the thread, shoulders hunched under the pressure of his grasp, reminding me of those rooms from old adventure movies, the kind that start closing in on you after you trigger the booby trap.

He jostles her and she looks up. "Babe? Don't be rude." he says, all charm, teeth resplendent in the moonlight.

"Hi Charlie. Hi Jill." She says, quiet as a lie. Willy throws his arms up, excited, "Charlie! Jill!" he yells into the night. He points at me, "let me guess, you're Charlie?". No one moves. He sticks out his hand. "Don't be rude." He says, a second time, like he is the authority on manners, some hobo hick lord, so I reach out to shake it and as soon as I touch his hand, he encloses it and tugs me to him so hard I trip over my feet and stagger into his chest.

"What are you doing here Charlie?" His breath on my face, rancid, his mouth too big, those teeth too close to me. I try to yank my hand out from his, but his grip is too firm. I feel the bones of my hands compress.

"Willy, stop it." says Laurie from beside him. He releases me and I step back immediately, massaging my hand. Bruises to look forward to tomorrow.

"Awe shucks, I don't want to ruin this little family reunion." He says.

"Laurie, let's go." I say, wanting to get away from this man as soon as possible.

"Go where?" she says, flat.

"Home." I smile at her, just at her.

Laurie looks so pale. Pale and close to tears, but she takes a step forward. She doesn't get far because Willy slings his arm out to block her and says, "Now that just won't do."

He drags Laurie back to him. I can't move. I feel like my feet have sunk into the ground, like I've got concrete instead of muscle. My heart's up to my ears.

Willy's got his hand on Laurie's neck, stroking. "Laurie don't wanna go with y'all. She wants to stay here with me."

I find a voice, someone's if not mine. "How 'bout you let her speak for herself?" I say to him.

Hand on her arm he thrusts her forward. She stumbles but his grip keeps her upright.

"Tell 'em, babe. Tell 'em how you'd never leave me."

Laurie's trembling. She's looking down, hair in her face. He shakes her again, like a goldfish in a plastic bag. She lifts her head and looks me dead in the eye and says, quiet as a falling leaf, "I wanna go home."

Then everything happens too quickly.

Willy snarls, the way a wolf might if you prodded it. He whips Laurie's arm around, throwing her to the ground. She falls hard on the gravel, skidding on her knees like a pebble skipped over water. There's no time for her to get to her feet, because he pounces, landing a kick to her back with his work boot and her face slams down into the gravel. Jill is screaming and the other girl, the unknown witness, she turns and runs, bathrobe come undone and trailing behind her. Willy howls, a string of expletives, and scoops up a handful of rocks to fling at the girl. A couple must hit their mark because she staggers slightly, but doesn't slow until she's disappeared into the woods. Willy's still yelling after her, distracted, as I hurry over to Laurie. She's still face down and I'm trying to roll her over and get her to her feet at the same time, but she hangs like a hunk of dead meat in my arms. "Jill" I call, because I need the two of us to get Laurie to the car, but then I'm flying. Pain. Pain that explodes into my back like a busted firecracker, splitting me into raw sensation and light. There's pressure down the front of my body like maybe I've been buried and I realize I'm laying on the ground. I think maybe I'm blind. The taste of blood in my mouth brings me back. I hear screaming. It's Jill. I locate my arms and push myself onto my back. The effort brings my pulse straight into my ears, like I'm underwater. I blink. I look around and make out the others. That man has his hands on Jill's neck and Laurie is hitting him with her first from the back, pounding him like a cuckoo clock, but she's as small as a pea, too weak, too weak. Laurie's screaming, "Willy stop Willy stop!" and I am on my feet again, somehow, my body feeling all kinds of disharmony, like a closet door you open and all manner of objects come crashing down. Body as avalanche. But avalanche tumbles tumbles and builds up speed and I'm running at this man, Will. I plow into him, ready to bury him in my snow, and we're both on the ground. I'm on top of him, but he grabs a fistful of my hair and yanks like I'm a Barbie whose head might pop off and I feel hair separate from the base of my scalp like I'm being peeled and I wail and claw and spit

into his face, everything I can manage, but the saliva is goopy and comes out like drool. I see blood on his face, my blood. He flings me to my back and his knee burrows into my pelvis like a jackhammer. Cold air. My shirt in his hand is a flash, a waving flag, but it's gone, hands already crawling over my jeans, like two great big spiders unbuttoning them and I flail and wriggle. Wriggle like nothing hurts. I remember my hands and I slap him as hard as I can laying down, but he catches one of my wrists and pins it down. I plunge my free thumb into his eye and he jerks back, roaring, holding his eye. I squirm, but he's back, his eye is red and watering but he's back and he grips my throat with both of his hands. The air leaves my lungs like a deflated balloon, but I see blond hair from above, cascading over his face. Laurie's on top of him, clawing at his head at his throat at his chest, and he twists, shaking her off, ignoring her assault the way a shark ignores the violence of the waves and doubles his grip on me and I try and try to breathe, but nothing comes in. Only his face, red and pulsing above me and his dark dark eyes and the dark sky beyond that and no stars because the moon is too bright tonight and my vision is blurring and I cannot struggle anymore, it is all too much, too hard and I have nothing left in me.

Then, pain. More pain. Pain as air. I am breathing air and it's like swallowing fire, like swallowing swords. Lungs up and down, working working. I lie still and focus on breathing, not so fast. I touch my neck to make sure it is intact, not flattened like a pinched tire. I would like to stay here, still, for awhile, but there is something pulling at me. I try to swat it away, to say "No", but they insist. I am being lifted, like a stubborn toy in the claw machine I never could manage to win at Dave & Busters. I'm a prize. Someone take me home.

"Charlie," a voice in my ear says. I turn and Jill's face is close to mine. She repeats my name. She's holding me under my armpit. Laurie's got my right side. I look down and see him, his name is Willy, sprawled on the gravel. He's got red on him. There's a knife sticking out of his back at an angle. The blood is spreading and spreading and looks real wet. I think I can hear him moaning, but I'm being pulled away. I nearly topple over before finding my feet, but they keep me from falling. Jill and Laurie lead me back towards the car like we're losing a three legged race at the fair. I touch my throat. Still there. I stabilize enough to walk unsupported, but they stick close to my side anyways.

And then it's the car and I lean against Princeton. There's a noise in my head going boom boom boom, like a headache with a voice. I open my eyes to Jill staring at me and she says "keys" and I fumble in the pocket of my unbuttoned jeans and by some miracle find my keys are still there. I unlock the car. Jill helps Laurie into the backseat and then walks around and peers down at me and I say "what" and she says "you can't drive" and I say "you can't drive either" and she says "move over." So I saddle over to the passenger seat and she starts the car. She cranks the heat up as far as it will go. "You have to give it a minute for it to warm up"

I tell her but she says “we need to get away” and pulls onto the road. She doesn’t drive for more than 10 minutes when she pulls over. She doesn’t say anything, but I know she can’t drive either. She keeps the motor running for the heat and we just sit. I touch my head, not wanting to but needing to know and my fingers come away with flecks of blood. Good sign that it’s dried up. My head feels raw and swollen like a big pulpy watermelon. The headache is blocking my thoughts like I’ve got a cotton wad instead of a brain. No need to think too hard just now, so I lean my head back, worrying about blood on the upholstery, when I hear Jill say “Well?”

She’s twisted in her seat to face Laurie, “What the hell was that?”

“Jill” I mumble, but she doesn’t look at me. Laurie is slumped in the backseat, like a baby bird who’s fallen from the nest. She has blood on her hands, maybe mine, maybe his. “I’m sorry” she says in a hoarse voice and Jill starts to say something more, but I cut in – “now’s not the time.” I put my hand on Jill. “We need to find somewhere safe to sleep”. Jill agrees to drive a little further. We make it a-ways south of Jasper and turn into an overgrown dirt road that looks to be a private drive. I pull out the blankets I stashed under the seats two days ago when Mama wasn’t looking and dole them out. I recline my seat back far as it’ll go. The last thing I remember thinking is how I probably won’t be able to sleep after the shock of tonight.

I wake up to blue, blue light, a fogged over windshield, and a crippling headache. The tips of my fingers are purple from the cold and my breath curls around me like smoke signals. Jill and Laurie are both still asleep, but I reach over to turn the key to get the heat going. I’ve been sore before. I’ve been sore from rough sex with clients, the kind of sore that feels like someone’s been playing Twister with your insides. The sluggish ache that comes the morning after anal. Before going on the pill, my menstrual cramps could be so bad I’d be doubled over, calling for a hysterectomy. Once, I broke my arm bone being bucked from our horse Santana. I’ve had my foot run over by a tractor, been bit by a dog, hooked by a fishing line. But nothing like this. I’ve simply never had my ass beat. Real coming of age moment.

I give Jill another half hour to sleep while I think through our next steps. When I jostle her awake, she groans in complaint. Doesn’t take much convincing to get her to switch sides with me. And I tell her to let Laurie sleep. She probably needs it bad. My phone’s dead, but I remember my way around this area more or less. Not too hard with so few roads. I drive us south till I see the sign to a campground I was hoping I remembered right. We came here once on a high school field trip. There’s a shower that runs on quarters, allowing you to bathe in cold water for 25 cent increments. I watch the clumps of hair gather lifeless around the linoleum drain. I wash the dried blood from my skin and see the red wash down my body like some kind of old testament plague. I use the blanket as a towel and change into

the extra clothes I packed. Laurie declines the shower, but accepts the old clothes I brought for her. At her current size, her old hoodie might as well be a sleeping bag. I fix the last of the peanut butter sandwiches and pressure Laurie until she eats some. At the gas station in Jasper, she accepts coffee. She throws it up in the bathroom. I buy her some mint gum for that and pop a stick myself. Neither Jill nor I thought to bring our toothbrush. Amateur hour. All three of us are moving like goddamn zombies and the gas station attendant eyes us wearily. I don't even bother to mean mug him back. Maybe he knows about the depot. I just ask for a bottle of ibuprofen and he points wordlessly to the back shelf. I dry swallow twice the recommended dosage. I pass the bottle to Jill and then we both eye Laurie, not knowing. I scoop out two and hand them to her. Back on the road Laurie passes out again immediately. She's so quiet I keep glancing over my shoulder to make sure she's still breathing. Silly.

Winding road. Throbbing head. Ibuprofen didn't do much. Bruises already blooming on my arm. Jill and I both have faint bruising around our necks.

"Outlets." I say. I haven't used my voice much today and it comes out stripped, like it's been sandpapered. I repeat myself, louder.

"What?" Jill says. Jill looks fuzzy, like her lines are starting to collapse. I look at those five little fingerprints on her neck and my eyes start to well up, so turn my vision back to the road. Need my eyes clear to drive.

"Turtlenecks." I say.

"Oh." Jill says. "Yeah."

I'm suddenly annoyed. "Look, you have three hours and – " I check the car clock "twenty-eight minutes to get yourself together before we see Mama and Daddy."

I need to put things in order. "We'll get turtlenecks and make-up and I'll put my hair up and we'll be fine, we'll look fine."

"And Laurie?" Jill says, coming back to planet Earth a little.

"Yeah, I thought about it before we left. We'll put her in the coup."

"The chicken coup?"

"Mhmm, it's far enough from the house, but we can still keep eyes on her. No one goes there anymore."

"What if...what if she needs a doctor?"

I glance back at Laurie. She seems to have all her bones in place.

"She'll be fine." I say, although I am not sure. "She needs rest and food. A little fattening up."

"But," Jill whispers now even though Laurie's out like a light "She's sick."

"The main thing is keeping her away from the stuff."

Jill considers this. "What about...like, other diseases?"

I'm surprised Jill knows enough to ask this, but I guess she's seen it at her job.

"That can wait. For now. First things first." I look back at Laurie again, chest still rising and falling. "Get her clean first."

I detour on the way home over to I-90 to exit at the Outlets. I leave Jill in the car with Laurie, borrowing her wallet, and go in to buy us make-up and outfits that a Mormon would think a little much. We change in the car and then I pull through the Wendy's drive thru for lunch. I'm fucking ravenous, otherwise I wouldn't dare. I haven't touched fast food since middle school but I guess being almost murdered puts things into perspective. Laurie won't eat her burger, so I get her a baked potato instead and nearly force it down her throat. I tell her I'm not moving the car until she puts down at least half of it. Jill and I both watch her eat like she's our newborn just learning to swallow solid food.

"Now that you're good and awake." I say as I pull back on the road. "We need to talk."

Laurie's sitting up, but still looks tired as a seven day work week.

"We're going home." I say, starting with the obvious.

"I know." Laurie says. Everytime she speaks it sounds hollow, like she's speaking to us from the back of a tunnel.

"What I mean is, we wanna put you up in the chicken coup."

She doesn't say anything. Neither does Jill, who seems fine to let me handle this part on my own. She's barely said a word to Laurie.

"Just until you're better." I clarify. "And then, we go home for real."

"Mama and Daddy don't want me home."

I look at Jill, trying to get her to tap in. She's better at this than me.

"Jill," I say, pointedly. She sighs and gives in, "They will. They do."

"We'll make sure they do." I say, cause goddamnit if we went through all of this for nothing.

"Pull over." Laurie says.

"You're not getting out of this." I say, anger bubbling up.

"No, please, pull over!" Laurie looks panicked in the rearview. I jerk the car over and quick as a beat Laurie is climbing over Jill to get outside. She doubles over and pukes. Jill recoils and we wait for Laurie to finish vomiting. I hand her a Wendy's napkin from lunch and the rest of my sweet tea.

We spend the remaining half hour of the drive going over our plan. Laurie reclines back, eyes closed, but I choose to believe she's listening. She looks like she hasn't slept in a month. At the entrance to our driveway, Jill and I check each other. Apply a little makeup. I pull my hair back, looking myself over in the rearview mirror.

"Can you make it on your own?" I ask Laurie for the umpteenth time. I really think we should go with her, make sure she gets to the coup, but it's too big a risk that Mama or Daddy will come down and see the car parked on the driveway.

"She'll be fine." Jill says.

Laurie climbs out of the car and I hand her my backpack with the rest of the food. I took my wallet and valuables out at the Outlets. She shoulders it.

"One of us will be by before dark, as soon as we can."

She steps into the woods.

Fuck, we should go with her, I know it. There's nothing to keep her from bolting except how fucking sick she looks. And she promised, but I don't know what that's worth.

At the house, Jill and I walk slowly from the car. Mama eyes us suspiciously and says "I don't recognize those shirts." and Jill explains – in a voice that will surely give us away – that Suzy wanted to go shopping now that she's lost her baby belly. Mama keeps pegging us with questions about Suzy and the new baby and we stumble our way through the answers we rehearsed in the car. Jill asks where Daddy is and Mama says he's out hunting and I near piss my pants. Out in the woods at the same time Laurie is making her way to the coup. But I remind myself that Daddy doesn't hunt anywhere near the direction of the coup. Before Mama can interrogate us any further, we dash up the stairs to "drop off our bags" and "shower".

In our room, Jill and I inspect each other. I tug up the neck of her shirt. I pack a backpack for Laurie, pulling the sheets and blanket off her bed. The pillow doesn't fit. I also toss in a couple paperbacks. I go towards the single window at the head of Jill's bed. I slide it up and undo the screws that keep the screen in place. I slide it out and place it on the bed. I used to do this to sneak out in high school. We all did. Laurie to smoke, Jill just to have some time alone. We had this rule, I don't think we ever agreed on it explicitly, that only one of us was allowed out at a time. If I came in and saw the screen loose, I knew I was to stay in until whichever it was came back. When you live in a house as small as ours, sleeping next to your sisters every night of your life, you learn to protect the private spaces. That's why the woods are a blessing too. The one place where nobody can see you and, if you're far enough, can't hear you. Sometimes, If I was really fed up, I'd drag a horse blanket out deep into the woods and lay down, looking up at the tree canopy. I'd watch the ants crawl by, crying into horse hair that made me sneeze. You can set out walking from our house in any direction and find yourself deep in the woods. Appalachian forest isn't dense – not like the pictures I've seen of the Redwoods or the Pacific Northwest – our trees are thin and there's lots of space between them. So much space that in winter, you can see for ages, how the land rises and falls like ocean waves. The air is light and crisp, all year round. You can always make out the sky.

I scootch over the windowsill and hop down, careful to avoid splinters. I know there are other things I need to bring, but I'll figure that out later. Right now, I need to get there fast as I can to make sure Laurie kept her word. Jill knows to cover for me if anyone asks, say I'm napping after the drive. We still got two hours before supper. I steal down to the coup. It's situated off from everything because of the smell. Ours isn't as big as the industrial coups – the kind you can smell from miles away if you're down wind, but it's still pungent enough to

carry. Daddy had his sights on expanding it, adding more chickens. He dropped that idea after the massacre – as I refer to it in my head – and it's been left to rot on the west side of our property. I used to walk this path every morning as a kid to collect the eggs and spread corn for the hens. It takes me fifteen minutes to get there. I see the screen door is wide open.

Laurie's laying on her side, face down in a heap of vomit. I rush to her over and her face flops in my hand. Vomit dribbles down her lips. I slap her cheeks. Her eyes flicker. I see the whites of her eyes only. I reach for the backpack she took earlier and tear it open, find a bottle of water and dump it on her face. She gasps and her eyes fling open.

"Laurie" I say and she's on her hands and knees, coughing like she's got something lodged in her throat. She spits a couple times. I take deep breaths to slow my heart rate. I realize my palm is resting in her vomit. I wipe it off on the dirt best I can. I help prop her up against the wire mesh and clean her cheeks with the corner of one of the sheets I brought.

"I'll bring more water to clean that up." I indicate the vomit on the floor. She looks at it, but doesn't bother scooting away.

"What happened?" I ask, once she's caught her breath.

"I fell asleep." As if that explains anything.

"These are the withdrawals." I say, knowingly.

She doesn't respond.

I crouch in front of her. There's a little water left in the bottle and I make her drink it. She needs more water. That's the most urgent thing.

"How do you feel?"

She sighs, "Like absolute dog shit."

It's not irony exactly. I must look smug because she glares at me.

"What?" I say, "you did it to yourself."

"Real helpful Charlie, thank you."

"Just stating facts." I say, shrugging.

I pull out the rest of what I brought down and assemble a makeshift bed for her. She turns one of the paperbacks in her hand.

"You'll be out here awhile, so I figured..."

She doesn't say anything.

"Because you are staying, for good?" I didn't mean it to come out like a question.

She puts the paperbacks down.

"Don't look like I have much choice in the matter."

"You're not allowed to fucking pout. That place you were in was a goddamn disaster and you know it. You could have fucking died. We both could have." My voice is louder than intended.

"We'll talk about it later." I say, forcing myself to sound calm.

Laurie crawls onto the sheet and pulls the blanket over her. Her eyes are closed before I stand to leave. As I move to shut the screen door, I hear her say, real quiet, "I won't leave."

I go down again after Mama and Daddy have gone to bed. I bring Jill with me. I guess we're breaking the one at a time rule, but I want to keep Jill in this with me. I know she loves Laurie as much as I do, but she's clammed up around her. I think she's scared of her.

When we make it to the coup, Laurie is wrapped in a tight monkey paw of sheets and blanket. She must be sleeping. Only a little sliver of face is visible and I check that there's still air coming in and out of her nose. When I get close I can feel the heat radiating off of her. Her cheeks and forehead are red, like poppies blooming on her skin. I start peeling open the blanket, which she's clutching to like a lifeboat, and she wakes up.

"Stop. Cold." She moans.

"She's got a fever," Jill says from behind me, "leave it."

I let Laurie roll herself back up, shivering like it's winter rather than summer.

Jill volunteers to run back up to the house to get some fever pills. I start humming a little tune, thinking that might be soothing, but I realize it won't make a difference, she's in a whole different universe, steaming as she is. I rack my brain for what I know about treating a fever. And not just any fever but a "my body is trying to recover from the shit I put it through" kind of fever. I know the basics: fluids, fever pills, and sleep. Well we can provide all three. But beyond that, I don't know how to gauge, how serious this fever is, what it might mean. So I know right then it's gonna be a long night. Because no way can we leave her here on her own. A few more nights like these and I'll look as old as Jill. I take my beauty sleep seriously. I barely party. I don't pull all-nighters. I try and arrange clients earlier in the evening. I won't risk wrinkles.

Jill gets back and we sit Laurie up long enough to coax the pills down with some water. She coughs up the first time, dowsing her shirt, but we try again. She disappears back into her cocoon, no "thank you" or nothing. Fine, she gets a pass this time. Lots of passes we're handing out for this girl. Jill and I sit awhile next to her until I tell Jill to get back on home. She starts to protest – weakly, but I love her for the effort – but I point out she has work in the morning.

"I'll be fine." I say, meaning of course, that we'll be fine.

I watch Laurie breathing till I feel dizzy and eventually lay down next to her. I wonder what effect blood has on soil. Like whether it's fertilizing. If you did a controlled study, watering one patch of ground with blood and the other with nothing, would the crops on the bloody side grow faster or healthier? And how long does it take blood to clear out once it's been spilled, or does the soil suck it up and hold on to it forever? Because there was a whole lotta blood the day the chickens were killed.

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I know it's getting light. Laurie's beside me (breathing fine) looking pitiful. At some point during the night she'd cast off the blanket and it ended up bunched down by her ankles. And her clothes and sheets are slightly damp. Her face is puffy, skin dewy, but her color is better. Her lips are cracked worse than a city sidewalk. I make a mental note to bring down some grease. I nudge her awake and get her to drink a whole bottle of water. She looks at me in between gulps. I stand up and fold the blanket. Nana made each of her grandkids two blankets each, one crocheted at the time of our birth and a second, quilt, when we turned thirteen. The quilts we keep on our beds but I don't know where the baby blankets ended up, probably packed in the attic.

"Your fever broke." I say, before scrambling back to the house, hoping I haven't missed breakfast.

Jill and I take turns with Laurie duty. It's mostly me though since I'm around the house all day. It's primarily to bring her food and water, but it's also for vigilance. I'm not worried about her skipping out, because she's in no physical state to leave. But she's sick. She says everything hurts. Headaches, stomach pain. The only thing we know to do is keep her hydrated and fed. Jill started paying attention and told me that at the prison they treat addicts in the medical wing, hooked up to an IV full of electrolytes. They have special medicine for OD's, but they don't bother giving anything but fluids for withdrawals. Fluids and time. And they're put on watch to make sure they keep their hands off any contraband. Personally, I'm not sure we should be modeling our treatment plan off a maximum security state prison, but I have even less authority.

I know she could've picked something up, from needles, but we can't bring her to the doctor just yet. I ask Jill if she could smuggle out some antibiotics just in case and she looks at me like I asked her to seduce the warden himself.

I spend as much time with her as I can, which isn't a whole lot, since Mama is extra weary since we got back. Something about wearing turtlenecks in July. The only thing that saves us is Mama being a prude. She'd no less inquire about our bodies than invite the devil himself to have lunch with us. The bruising around our necks has faded enough that we can ditch the high collars, but she's watching. Once, she spots me with the backpack and asks me why I'm taking it to the woods. I tell her I like studying in the woods, and since I'm going back in a few weeks, I've gotta catch up on my reading. She purses her lips but lets me get on.

I'm visiting Laurie one morning when I smell something awful. "You've been shitting too close." I complain to her. "You gotta walk further into the woods."

She blushes, "It's me, you dufus. I haven't had a shower in days."

So that's me lugging two milk jugs full of water, a bar of homemade lard soap, and a dish towel down to the coup. I make her strip down and stand outside so I can wash her.

"I can do this myself." she says, but doesn't make a move for the soap.

"Yeah, yeah." I say but really I'm looking at her body. The first full appraisal I've been able to do. I don't like how prominent her spine is, makes me think of a worm wriggling, so I make a

mental note to start bringing more fatty foods. She's got bruises, old and new, streaking her hips, her arms, her legs like watercolor paint. My eyes skip over the angry red marks that dot the crooks of her elbows. She rubs herself down with the soap and the dirty water pools at her feet, mixing with the dry soil to make mud. Years since I made a mud pie. Afterwards, wrapped in the blanket, she does look better. She manages a smile.

"Thank you." she says.

"Don't mention it."

"I finished the books."

"That was fast."

"Not really, ain't got nothing else to do."

"Every time I come down here, you're sleeping."

"Well, yeah."

"That's good," I nod. "Sleep is what you need."

"I haven't thrown up all day."

I smile, because the way she says this is like she's so proud. So proud of her body behaving the way it should. I wonder how long it's been since she felt control over it.

"That means you can eat more."

She gives a groan. I don't want to push it, because this is the most she's talked since we got her back.

"What about...Little Debbies?" I say. She brightens a smidge.

"You got Little Debbies?"

"No." I laugh, "But I could probably get some."

"Too fattening."

I look at her, wrist bones and knee caps and clavicles, all too prominent.

"You're skinny as a toothpick. You need some fattening up."

She pinches the skin on her arm and waggles it at me.

I laugh, a real belly laugh, "You've got to be joking. That's skin."

"Loose skin."

"Alright sure, but not fat. It'll get better. Exercise."

Laurie looks down at herself.

"I can barely stand up, let alone go for a jog."

"You used to like running."

"Running away." Her face breaks into a full smile. "We have that in common."

I snort, "Yeah, real similar situations."

I know as soon as I say it that I shouldn't have.

Laurie's face darkens.

"I'm sorry," I say, "that was...unnecessary."

She shrugs. "Truth enough though. At least we managed to get one of us out of this hell hole."

I gather up her dirty clothes in a bundle and take them up to the house to sneak into my next load. The one benefit of Mama having me do all the washing. That night at supper, Mama and Daddy say they'll be going into town the following day. By that, they mean the Tractor Supply Store and Ingles Supermarket in White County. Knowing Daddy, he'll make a day of it. He gets a real kick out of an outing. They'll eat out at some fast food chain where Mama will hem and haw and proclaim she hasn't eaten french fries in ages. They'll actually go inside and sit in a booth, unlike normal people who go through the drive-thru. Then they'll

drive impossibly slow looking for the most optimal of parking spots, Daddy letting everybody take the right-of-way. Then he'll spend two hours trying to get Mama to buy something for herself and she'll complain about the prices, but finally settle on something "for the family" that she'll cradle in her lap the whole drive home.

Jill's off, which I suspect, is partly why they picked the day. I live independently for nine out of twelve months of the year and they still don't trust me to stay home by myself. So with Jill to watch that I don't get myself into whatever they imagine might be trouble and a handwritten list of chores to occupy myself with, they pack themselves into the Chevy and head off.

I talked to Jill last night about using this chance to bring Laurie to the house. She could have a real shower, sit on something more comfortable than dirt, and get reacquainted with a living space that's not falling apart and insect-ridden. Jill agreed, anxiety so evident on her face it might as well be tattooed.

"Relax, Mama and Daddy will be gone for hours."

Approaching the house, Laurie slows her pace. We cajole her inside like she's a feral cat. After her shower, Laurie sorts through her old clothing to pick out some clean outfits. We help her carefully raid the kitchen, pinches here and there so Mama won't notice. With her hair clean, she looks a lot better. A lot of her bruising has subsided too. Can't do anything about the scarring, but if Laurie's careful with her clothing, it won't be too noticeable. And she's keeping down food. I think the worst of the withdrawals are over. She says she's still in pain, still getting headaches, but she's not fainting randomly like the first couple days, so I'll take that as solid progress.

"Let's sit down." I say, oddly formal. Laurie takes the armchair and Jill and I drop onto the sofa.

"Okay...I think we need to have a talk."

Visible tension.

"Laurie. We need to know you're gonna get better."

I should be recording this silence with a stopwatch. It must be some kind of record between the three of us.

"So?" I prod.

"I am better."

"For now, but what's gonna keep you better?"

She shrugs.

"I need better than that."

"I'm really trying, really really trying."

Jill speaks up, "And we see that, we do. It must be...hard. But if you could tell us why you started, maybe we can avoid it in the future."

"Am I on trial here?"

"You owe us." I say, forcefully, and Jill places a hand on my knee. Okay, tact. But she's being a little shit.

Laurie hugs a throw pillow, one Mama just sew a new slip cover for. She's never satisfied with the pattern and re-upholsterers the whole living room twice a year. This time it's a burnt orange color with green accents. A nauseating effect, but Laurie holds it like an anchor.

She looks at the space between our heads.

"I didn't mean it to happen." She finally says.

"But why did it?"

Tears start running down her face, which she doesn't bother wiping away. Laurie was never much of a crier, but it seems that's all she does now.

"I was unhappy and looking for something to do and I met Will and he was nice to me. I didn't plan it. It didn't start out..."

She doesn't finish, but sighs and starts again.

"I didn't even know what it was the first time. It was fun until it wasn't. It was scary. There's a lot I don't remember."

She lays the pillow in her lap and smooths it with her hands. "I tried to stop so many times. But Will was always there."

Jill reaches her hand across and Laurie stares at it before taking it. I grab Jill's hand too so we're all linked, a sister chain.

"Willy's gone. He ain't ever coming back." Jill says, in that same tone of voice you use with a spooked horse.

"Fuck," I say. "Is he? Did we?" I hadn't thought about him or the knife in his back since it happened. Fuck. How could it be possible to forget something like that? I must have blocked it out, I was so rattled that night. We could have cops on our doorstep at any moment.

Jill shakes her head. "Nah, I saw him moving. He was stopped, but not..."

"Who stabbed him?" I ask, realizing we never talked about it.

"I grabbed the knife from the car when I went for the books." Jill says.

Jill once cried for half an hour because she hit a bird while driving the truck.

"Wow." I never would have expected. "Good thinking."

I turn to Laurie, "no way he'll come after you after that." I say, trying to believe it myself.

"Yeah," Jill adds, "we have too many guns."

"Prison has hardened you." Laurie says and I laugh.

"But you need to lie low anyways. Get right with Mama and Daddy. Put in the work. Heal."

Laurie nods, sits up straight. "I can do it."

"What's that?" Jill asks suddenly. We listen. Tires kicking up gravel.

"Fuck, we gotta go." I say. We spring up. Laurie shoulders her bag and we send her out the back porch. She sprints off fast as she can manage into the woods. Jill and I scramble around, she takes the kitchen, I take the living room, making sure everything's in place. By the time Mama opens the door, Jill has the skillet out and I'm pouring flour and cornmeal into a mixing bowl.

"We're making cornbread!" Jill half shouts at them.

That night I carry still-warm cornbread wrapped in a cloth napkin to Laurie. She eats it with what I would call gusto, the first time I've seen her get animated over food. I sit on the floor next to her.

"It sucked coming back here after today." She says in between bites.

"Yeah, I know. But I think it's almost time. Next week, maybe. We gotta catch Mama and Daddy in a good mood."

She stops chewing.

"Oh God." she says through a mouth of partially chewed cornbread.

I rub her shoulder.

"Can't be worse than before." I say, a fact of which I'm completely sure.

She finishes the cornbread and leans back against the wire mesh of the couch. Arguably one of the world's least comfortable materials. I fold the cloth napkin into a little square and tuck it into my pocket. I scratch little lines into the dirt, three together at an angle and one at the back. Chicken feet. My imaginary hen runs in circles until ultimately going 'poof', maybe taking flight. I look up because I want to ask Laurie something before she falls asleep.

"Were you in love with him?"

I think I'm too late but she opens her eyes.

"Yes." she says, "or, no. I don't know." She shakes her head like she's trying to wipe clean an Etch A-sketch.

"I was messed up the whole time I knew him. Not so much at the beginning, but I don't know how much I can even trust my own memories."

I wait, not wanting to interrupt.

"He wasn't always like that. He was actually quite funny. He paid a lot of attention to me. Made me feel really...awake."

She laughs, a hard bitter sound. "Until I was the literal freaking opposite of awake. I was his zombie bride...not aware enough to say no to anything. I would have followed him anywhere, done whatever he said."

"I think..." I begin, "that even without the other stuff, love makes everyone into a sort of zombie bride."

Laurie looks at me with a question, but doesn't say anything.

"It turns you into someone you're not. Someone weaker. Dependent on another person. It's one big scam."

I look at Laurie. "Love takes your power away."

"Sheesh," she says "who hurt you?"

We both laugh and I flip her the bird. She grabs my upturned finger and kisses it.

"It's your bedtime," I say, standing up.

"Yes ma'am." Laurie says dutifully. I throw her blanket at her.

CHAPTER

We decide to bring Laurie up before Church the following Sunday. She spends the week reading the books I bring, solving the puzzles from that old puzzle workbook I found buried with our old school supplies in the closet, and taking walks in the woods. The bulk of her physical pain has subsided and we can't wait any longer or we risk Laurie losing her mind out in the woods.

On Sunday morning, Daddy's flipping through the paper and drinking his coffee at the kitchen table. He takes his coffee with a slice of butter the way Papa Tom always did. Mama's in the armchair with the Bible open on her lap, like she's cramming before a quiz. Now's as good a time as any, especially if Mama's feeling Christ-like. I give Jill the look and she slips out of the living room. We agreed that she should be the one to bring in Laurie to increase our chances of this going smoothly. Half an hour later there's a knock at the front door. Fuck. I regret our decision to do it that way, it's too formal. Though I still can't think of a better alternative. Daddy and Mama both look up. Sunday morning being respected as family time, it's highly uncommon for someone to stop by. Before any of us can move a stitch, the door opens. Jill walks in, followed by Laurie. Laurie looks like she could be going to Sunday school in the outfit we chose for her. Her hair is clean and pinned back and she looks a different person than when we found her. She's regained some color and even filled out a bit. I would've preferred to bring her to Mama and Daddy in about ten more pounds, but that takes too much time.

I'm not looking at Laurie though. I'm watching Mama and Daddy. Really, I'm watching Mama. I watch her and see the second she sees Laurie. Even if I were blind, I would've sensed it. Because all the oxygen seemed to drain right out of the room. I find myself counting seconds, half-aware I'm doing it, seconds without sound, without motion. Seconds of Mama's face going from confused to angry to icy. Jill and Laurie and me and Mama and Daddy, we're all stationed like dolls in a dollhouse acting out some frozen family scene.

But the spell is broken by Daddy, who pushes back his chair – a wood on wood scrape that's loud and brutish enough to shock us all back into motion – and stands up. He ambles across the living room and takes Laurie into his arms. And Laurie, like a scared Jonah, lets herself be swallowed by Daddy's embrace. I hear her muffled sobs directed into Daddy's chest. I've stopped counting the seconds, because time is flowing again. Laurie says something inaudible, words born and died on Daddy's chest, but he just lays his hand on the crown of her head. I know exactly how that hand feels. I haven't been hugged like that by Daddy in a long time, but I remember how it feels.

I feel my eyes begin to water and I look up at the ceiling, forcing myself to think of something somber. I've had enough tears to last two lifetimes and all our energies need to go towards Laurie right now. When the threat passes, I resume my post and look back at Mama. The Bible is held limp in her open palms, in danger of slipping out. It might be a trick of the light, but I think I see something akin to relief on her face. But then it's gone. Sealed off to its usual disapproval. Mama's face is as readable as a mask, so whether she's full time stuck like that or she's disapproving of Laurie, I can't tell.

Laurie pulls away from Daddy and Jill leads her into the living room to sit down. Jill and I sit down on either side of her like bookends. Or bodyguards. There aren't seats for the five of us, something we usually remedy by pulling in a chair from the kitchen table, but Daddy decides to stand next to Mama, hand perched on the back of the armchair. Mama looks between me and Jill, eyes skipping over Laurie like empty air. We'd better do this exactly as practiced. Mama hates being deceived more than anything. I try to get Jill's attention. She looks like she swallowed a stick of chalk. Going against our parents is not in her wheelhouse. But Daddy's already given us a leg-up by breaking the tension. Jill finally catches the cue and swallows.

"So..." she starts. "Laurie – I mean, Mama – Laurie is here."

"My sight still works perfectly well, thank you." Mama says in a voice calm as the grave.

"Yes ma'am." Jill gives a shaky laugh. This is not going well. "She came back, decided to come back, because she's doing real good."

Now Mama deems to look at Laurie. Her eyes flick, giving her the once over.

"Mm, coulda fooled me." Mama says.

Daddy remains sentinel behind Mama. I shouldn't have hoped for more. A hug could mean a lot of things, but it isn't explicit approval. He will let the womenfolk say their piece. But I won't listen to Mama talk about Laurie this way, not after all the work she's put in to get better.

"She is better. And she needs to come home. To continue getting better." I say, laying each word down solid, like I'm laying bricks.

"And why are you so invested, Charlise? You ain't even gonna be around." Mama's jabs are always little ice picks straight to the heart.

I sidestep this comment, because this isn't about me.

"She's committed." I say, "and ready."

"We've been told that before." Mama says. "And been made fools of."

"Laurie's sorry for all of that" Jill says, more pleading than I'd like.

"Why don't ya'll let her speak for herself, if she's so keen?"

When Laurie starts speaking, she's not looking at Mama. "I am sorry, for all that." Tears make a kind of sound when they're stuck in your throat.

"Nothing easier than being sorry, whole lot that sorry'll get ya."

Mama's like a pitbull that won't unclench her jaws and it's just not fair. I know Laurie has put them through a lot, but Christ in heaven, this is her mother. And mothers are supposed to be there for their kids. I'm tired of Mama bullying us. For not being like a mom is supposed to be.

"Why are you so... mean?" The words are out of my mouth before I can stuff the thought back inside.

It's like my words set off some kinda chain reaction, because everyone moves at the same time: Laurie wipes her eyes and Jill sits up straight and Mama's bible falls to the ground and Daddy steps forward.

"Charlise, did I hear that right?" he says, in his stern "hell is coming to cut you down" voice and I flinch in spite of myself. Mama looks like she's been hit with a frying pan, slack jawed. The gawl she has to act like this is a surprise, like she's the victim in this family. Oh woe is me, my daughters aren't what I expected them to be.

"What, so I say one thing against years of her abuse?" The smart thing would be to dig myself out of this, apologize to Mama, tail tucked. But the sprig is open and I might never get another chance.

"Mama has always been mean to us." I stand up now, not liking how sitting is making me vulnerable.

I'm looking at Mama and she's looking at me. And she says right into my eyes, "Is that why you left Charlise, cause I done run you off?"

This is about Laurie, not me. But I need to say it. "No Mama. I left because I had a chance. It has nothing to do with you."

Daddy's caught in the crossfires of too much emotion, not sure whether he's been hit or not. He tells me he won't tolerate me disrespecting Mama.

"Oh shush Richard," Mama says – as if everything else weren't enough to upset the balance of the universe. "Charlise been waiting a long time to say all this." she says.

Mama being calm is even more terrifying than her yelling. She turns to Laurie, who's been quiet as a church mouse on the couch.

"Well Laurie, and you? Is it my fault you ran away?"

Laurie looks like Mama just tossed her a stick of dynamite to hold. She looks at me and she looks at Jill and she looks at me again. I give her a nod, even though this is off script. Complete dragon-edge-of-the-map-territory.

"I made a lot of mistakes." Laurie starts, "that's on me—" Mama: *humph* "–but it wasn't easy at home. You're never happy with anything."

"So it's all my fault." Mama in anguish. "When I gave up everything for you girls."

Jill: "Mama, no. It's not like that. We know how much you've done for us."

Me, fixing Jill with a look: "Jill."

Jill: "But–but, what Laurie says has some truth to it."

Mama's last stronghold.

Laurie: "It was a lot of pressure."

Me: "You don't even like us."

I know I have less to lose than the other two. Mama's right, I'll be out of here soon. I don't ever have to come back if I don't want. I'd figure it out. The hard part is getting out, not staying out, and that's been done. I can always sell pussy. But Jill is choosing to upset her whole home balance. She could have cruised through. No rocking the boat. It would have been easier for her. She was managing alright. And Laurie is literally fighting for her survival. Her best chance would have been crawling in on her belly like a snake and kissing Mama's toes and begging her for mercy. She needs a place to stay, to rest and regrow and heal. She has nowhere else to go and yet she is making it harder, way harder, by standing up for herself. Maybe more important for Laurie right now than securing a bed is securing some

fucking dignity. Confronting what may have contributed to this whole mess. I look at Laurie in her oversized missionary clothes saying the things that are hardest to say and I am so insanely proud of her. I resist the urge to wrap her in my arms.

Daddy steps in, "Now girls, let's be fair to your Mama. She don't deserve all this piling on."

"Sorry Daddy," Jill, our diplomat, says. "We're not trying to pile on. But it's important for Mama to know how we feel."

Mama has sunk further and further into the armchair, as if she could disappear inside of it. Escape by upholstery. I'm not used to seeing her make herself smaller. When she speaks her voice is soft.

"It wasn't my job to like you. My job was to protect you, raise you right. Into good, honest people."

We don't say anything. What is there to say to something like that? Mama goes on.

"Do you think Nana liked me? Do you think she was full of sweet words for me and my brothers?" Mama looks between the three of us. "You have each other for that. And Richard always spoiled you. It fell to me to raise you to be strong. Strong enough."

Mama is like a series of dominoes being tipped over, she can't reverse the unpinning.

"I had nobody. I was raised away from my brothers. Back then, that was the proper way. Daddy always working and Mama...Mama hated all of us. I know she did, I could see it. She was stuck with five mouths."

"She ain't pay attention to what was happenin. We's children meant to be always seen, never heard."

Mama's eyes shine something fierce. Daddy's hand falls like a dead leaf to rest on her shoulder. I wonder if she even feels it. I wonder if Daddy's uncomfortable with Mama going on like this.

"So with girls of my own, what to do...keep 'em close. The things that happen to a girl child in this world. And we needed help with the land, of course. No sons."

"Was I hard on ya'll? I did what I could to make things right. But the devil done won anyways."

Mama's head droops like a scarecrow. She must feel the weight of all our eyes. She turns her palms over. Palms that been bleached and calloused and burnt.

We watch Mama in that heavy Sunday silence. Daddy looks like a jar a spilled milk that ain't gonna be able to get back in the bottle. I can't seem to move, but after a turn, I feel Laurie move from the sofa. She kneels in front of Mama.

"No Mama," she says "Devil didn't win. I'm here. I'm okay. I'll be okay."

Mama lifts her head to look at Laurie. She reaches one of those palms to stroke the face of her eldest daughter. Thumb across cheek, like a wound closing over.

CHAPTER

Laurie moved into the house, which is to say she grabbed the sheets and pillow and blanket from the coup and marched it up through the woods. I shouldered the backpack with the leftover food and the paperback books as I walked with her. I felt like a police escort walking the prisoner to his release. Before she was allowed to go into our room, Mama and Daddy had to have the "rules talk" with her. That went something like, *'if we seen you touch anything stronger than coffee, you gone. If you fail to come home, you out. If you leave the house without telling us, you out...'* Laurie takes this all standing up, dancing like a bobble-head, nodding her consent. A bit overkill. But the restrictions could be good for Laurie. Provide structure to exist within and keep her focused on herself, rather than getting a social life running.

Mama thinks discipline is the way to happiness. Well, I'll say contentedness, since Mama don't go in much for happiness. And Daddy thinks work is. Daddy's favorite thing to say to us – as he supervised our mulch-spreading or shit-flinging or bucket-washing – was and still is "work will set you free". He's not saying it to be a tyrant, he actually believes it. And after these six weeks of grueling, sticky, head-hot labor, I think he might have a point. If I had stayed in the city, how would I have kept my mind off of 'that-asshole-whose-name-begins-with-R'? The city offers too much expanse, too much runway. Maybe I would have gotten myself into trouble as a spurned woman. But here, there has been nothing but the toil of my young body under constant sun. Maybe I've stumbled upon some great new truth about how to heal, that the only way to therapize yourself is by

letting the body takeover. Let the body be the thing that feels for once. It's closer to your soul, I think, the body. When the body is engaged, everything else recedes to the background.

This is an undoing, I realize, of everything I have taught myself these past years. To be able to work, I have had to sever that body connection. Let the body stay put while living in my mind. The body as extension of self, not self. And now, I have reversed the flow. Put your whole mind into your body to *keep* from thinking. Two opposing techniques, both utilized for survival. But the dam been removed and my body and its sensations have come flooding through and I don't think there's a way to push it back up. I don't know if I'm still a person capable of my line of work.

When I fell in love, I was so quick to give it up. Thinking I didn't need the money anymore. And not wanting to be with anybody but that one. But now, heart aching, back at home, about to start my final year, I know that I can't never go back. The only thing keeping me doing it was doing it. But then I stopped and that engine done cooled down. And I don't have what it takes to restart it. Maybe because I know what it's like now to have sex with someone you love. Or because I can't stomach the thought of those old men, strangers with receding hairlines, getting access to me, to the inside intimate places of me. Or maybe, just fucking maybe, because I realize I have other options.

I always had options, true, to waitress or bus tables or whatever. But it wasn't as glamorous. Never thinking of the price of the white linen and the Dior shoes. And now I am thinking of the price. The price of letting them win, even just a little bit.

I will never long as I live, let another man dictate my life. I don't want to give them anything, not any part of me.

CHAPTER

Mama and Daddy don't give Laurie any time for R&R, so I'm glad we decided to wait the extra days before bringing her back. Although even Mama can see she's too weak for any heavy task, she sets her up at the kitchen table scrubbing out the stains in our cloth napkins. Even that has her near winded, but she puts on a pleasant face and keeps at it. They're getting an intake of new prisoners this week, so Jill's pulling doubles and we don't see a lot of her. With nothing between Laurie and her, Mama watches Laurie like a hawk watches a field mouse. Never letting it get out of sight.

"Mama," I venture after a couple of days. I'm coming in from outside work and slide my boots off by the porch door.

"Hmm?" She's looking at the Yellow Pages for some reason. Mama knows every number of the people she calls by heart because there's only about three people she's ever wanted to talk to.

"I was thinking that I should go for an annual."

Mama looks up, "An annual?"

"Yeah, at the clinic. Check my blood pressure."

Arched eyebrow. "They don't have...doctors and what not at your school?"

"They do, but it's money. Better at the free clinic."

"You know it ain't actually free." Mama says, as if we weren't all extremely aware of the times we were denied medical attention because the free clinic in Amber isn't actually free.

"Yeah I know Mama. But I have the time's all. And...I have a mole I wanna get checked."

"A mole?"

I nod.

Mama distrusts doctors. As a matter of fact, so do I. But that doesn't change the fact that Laurie needs to see one. And I am trying to make that happen.

"And...I can bring Laurie along too." Mama turns her attention back to the Yellow Pages.

"We don't want nobody sniffing around our family matters."

"Yes, Mama, I know. I'll be...careful. And none of the doctors are from around here."

"Mhmm. You keep quiet in that waiting room."

"Yes, Mama."

Turns out there's hardly anyone in the clinic, because it's Wednesday and eleven in the morning. There's a woman with two toddlers that are running around her like she's a stump in the mud. The collar of her shirt is stretched so wide I can see both of her clavicles. She has on leopard print leggings and pink crocs. One of the toddlers is missing pants, his diaper butt waddling around like Donald Duck. I'd peg her as around Laurie's age. She's too zoned out to pay us mind. A nurse steps out and calls my name. I gave them my name only, just in case. No such thing as preventative healthcare round here. If you're going to the doctor it's because something bad's happened to you. So the waiting room of the free clinic is like one big gossip hall. People are bound to speculate.

Laurie and I stand up and follow the nurse. She gives us a look but doesn't ask why we're both coming. She asks us to wait in a small patient room. I sit on a stool and Laurie jumps up onto the plastic medical bed with the crinkly paper lining.

"Golly, I haven't been here since like...middle school." Laurie says, looking around.

"I know, me neither. I go to the student services on campus though. Did you know you're supposed to get a check-up every year?"

Laurie shrugs. "Mama took care of everything at home. Fleas, lice, pneumonia. I only came here for pregnancy tests."

I pick up on that. "In middle school?"

"Maybe ninth. Less chance of Mama finding out. They give them out for real free. Condoms too."

"As if the boys around here even know what a condom is."

"Remember Mr. West, the history teacher?" Laurie asks me, but before I can answer, the doctor walks in. You ever notice how female doctors always knock first, a little one-two wrap of the knuckles before opening the door, but male doctors just charge right in?

"Hello, Charlise, I'm Doctor Steven, I'll be taking care of you today."

I'm not crazy about that phrasing, but I explain to Dr. Steven that it's actually Laurie he'll be "taking care of".

"What's the concern?" he asks.

"Well...Laurie's diabetic" He looks at Laurie, thin-as-a-rail Laurie, "and her needles" I continue, but Laurie just rolls up her sleeves and presents the insides of her elbows and Dr. Steven sees what's there and just nods and says "I see."

"I'll check for infections" he says, "and conduct a standard physical exam."

"Thank you" I say.

And Laurie asks, "all types of infections?"

"Would you like an STI exam?" the Doctor asks and Laurie nods.

"No problem." he says and turns to me, "Would you like to wait outside please?"

I look at Laurie and she nods, so I return to the waiting room to sit. The mother and her two kids are gone, so it's just me. I get STI (or STD or whatever) testing periodically at the health center on campus, because they make it really easy and private and because it's something the clients ask for. Like a child turning in her homework to her parents, I show them how well I did on my test and they pat my head and say "great, now bend over." And it's almost always a female nurse who does the swab or the poke, but one time everyone was busy except for a male nurse. And they explained to me that it's required for a female chaperone – like another nurse – to be present. I thought this was interesting, so I looked it up later and turns out it's a liability. So even the most educated and upstanding male members of our society can't be trusted to keep things fucking professional when alone with a woman. And what kind of dude chooses to be a vagina doctor in the first place? Fucking creeps probably. And we all just have to sit back and be okay with some crusty man breathing his hot breath onto our thighs and prodding around in our insides. But anyways I guess they don't have that policy here. Too short staffed for the luxury of patient protection.

After what seems like a literal eternity of me counting the tiles in the ceiling and flipping through a Garden and Gun magazine from two years ago, Laurie walks out. She's holding a plastic kid's cup of what looks like orange juice.

"How'd it go?" I ask.

"Fine," she says "they took like a gallon of my blood, but they have to send the tests off to some state lab so won't have the results for a few days."

On the way home, she tells me something else.

"He asked if I wanted to do a rape kit." I'm figuring out how to reply to this when she says "signs of violence."

"Did you do it?" I ask

"Nah," she shakes her head "not gonna tell me anything I don't already know."

Jill comes home that night itching to tell us something. All throughout dinner she's wriggly as a centipede. Once we're in bed though and lights off, Jill spills her beans, "One of the new prisoners is the bathrobe girl from Jasper."

"What?" Holy cow.

"At least, I think it is. Her hair has grown a little, but I'm pretty sure it's her. Amanda Richardson. She looked really bad when they brought her in. Bruises all over."

I turn my head to Laurie, "Is that her name?"

Laurie frowns, "I wouldn't know. I never really knew anyone's name."

Jill's not finished, "The state police have been cracking down apparently, doing like raids in different areas. They went to Jasper and arrested a ton of people."

I let that sink in. If we had waited even a week.

"What about Willy?" Laurie asks.

Jill shakes her head, "I don't know."

"Amanda didn't say anything?"

"You think I just saddled up next to her and said 'oh hey, remember me, how's that psycho friend of yours doing'?"

She has a point. "What did they bring her in on?" I ask.

"They don't tell us that. But if I had to guess, possession, prostitution, maybe even loitering."

"That's bullshit." Laurie says, fire in her voice.

"Shhhhh" Jill and I both. Laurie lowers her voice to a whisper.

"Total bullshit. It's not like she had a choice. That asshole could do anything he wanted."

"Maybe he's dead." I say, optimistically.

"He should burn in hell." Laurie says.

We're quiet after that and eventually I hear faint snoring from Jill's bed. Poor bunny, they are working her to the bone. I think about Raul. I still think of him, every day, but in dispersed fragments. I don't get as worked up as I used to. The near idea of him used to set me off into waterworks, but now I can hold myself slightly apart, like a glass ball in the hand and peer at it from different angles. Even the mystery of why doesn't bother me as much as it used to. I did not know I was capable of love like that. And I don't think I will ever be again. I think of his long, smooth back, the line of it, while he stood on the sand and looked at the sea.

"Are you crying?" Laurie whispers to me.

Fuck, I didn't even realize. I've forgotten what it's like to live with your every stinking bit of being on display. For seventeen years of my life I was denied the luxury of privacy. That's honestly what rich people take for granted the most.

"Sorry." I say. I've palmed the insolent tears from my face.

Laurie reaches out and touches my shoulder. "Don't be sorry, what's up?"

I pause to confirm that Jill's still snoring. For some reason, Laurie's the only person I feel comfortable telling. Probably because I've seen all her shit dumped out like the contents of a purse.

"I met someone."

I hate the phrase 'I fell in love', too pathetic. It's what happened, but it turns me into someone too predictable.

"And he was an asshole?" Laurie guesses, probably due to the tears. She rubs my shoulder more.

"That about sums it up." I say.

"Is that why you came home?" She asks, "To get away from him?"

"Not exactly." I admit, "I came home because I didn't have money to pay for my apartment."

Laurie nods.

"But, it has helped. Being home."

Laurie perks up, "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Mama has a gift for not letting you feel sorry for yourself."

We both laugh, but Jill's breathing catches and we freeze.

"Charlie," Laurie is barely audible. "How bad was it?"

This woman. My sister. We have all forgotten how remarkably clever she is. She could always see me. But somewhere along the way we stopped seeing her. I need Mama and Daddy to see.

"Really bad." I say into the darkness.

The thing about privacy though: sometimes it works against you. Takes too long for anyone to notice when you're not okay. Maybe not being able to hide your bad moods is one of – one of the only – survival advantages of the poor.

CHAPTER

"Mama should start her own rehab program," Laurie jokes. "It's impossible to get anything by her."

Laurie and I are sitting in the tall grass that lines the edge of our corn field. It's still early, so the sun feels like a gift. Laurie's unbuttoned her shirt and hiked up her shorts. My Spain tan has continued to darken with all the work this Summer. I recently started wearing an old baseball hat of Daddy's, thinking about wrinkles.

"Imagine that," I say "Mama leading group therapy."

"She'd enjoy all that power." Laurie grins. "And the free labor."

"It's starting to sound more and more like a cult."

"If that's what it takes." Laurie says, eyes closed, face to the sky, and I finish the sentence for her in my head. If that's what it takes to stay clean.

"How hard is it?" I ask lightly.

Laurie considers the question. She pokes her finger into my calf.

"It's like having an itch. A leg covered in fire ant bites. And you could easily scratch it. So easy just to bend down and rub your leg. But you gotta keep yourself from scratching. And you gotta keep yourself from thinking about scratching. Convince yourself the itch isn't real. It's all in your head."

Sounds kind of like heartbreak. Like trying not to think about Raul or call him one more time. But I wouldn't dare say that.

"So yeah, hard. So hard that I wouldn't be able to do it if I was anywhere else. But here, with Mama...with you...it's not up to me. There's no way around it. And thank God for that."

Laurie lays down in the grass and I lie down next to her.

"I almost left, you know." Laurie says, her voice close to my ear.

"When?" I ask. This is news to me.

"Oh about a hundred times. In the coup. I kept thinking I would just go, get up and start walking. But I was too weak. I made myself sleep instead. Kept telling myself I would go after I woke up."

"I had no idea..." I think for a moment, try to remember if there were signs. "Do you still think about it?"

I feel Laurie shake her head next to me.

"No." She says, voice firm. "This is my, what, fourth or fifth time trying? But it's different. The other times, I was alone. And this ain't something you can do alone. This time it'll stick. I've decided I can do it."

I roll over and wrap my arms around Laurie and we lay like that in the grass for a while. Until we know it's time we got back.

The next couple of days are slow, like even our clocks are getting lazy. It's an in-between time for farming, one of those brief windows where every high priority task has been seen to and there's not much to do besides wait for the weather to turn. Of course there's always work to be done, but with two extra pairs of hands, we're running through the list. Mama and Daddy have both been struggling to come up with chores for us, I can see it. Mama's been coming up with creative, back of the wall ideas for me all summer, but now with the addition of Laurie, they're both desperate. Daddy finally announces a mini-holiday at supper one night and both Laurie and I make sure to keep our expressions somber. Daddy says we've all earned it, but to still mind Mama for anything she asks us to do, and that soon enough we'll all be up to our ears again with farm work. We nod and nod and make sympathetic, respectful noises, as if we too were disappointed. Mama starts up about how we'll still have our regular household work and that she'll expect more help in the kitchen. Fine, fine.

I'm especially pleased because I only have a couple weeks before I leave for the start of the semester and this will give me a chance to spend more time with Jill and Laurie, maybe even get into some fun. To be honest, I've been mulling over the idea of skipping this semester and going back in the Spring. I've already registered for classes, but I could get out of it easy enough. The fine print of my scholarship would allow for it, if there's a good enough reason. I could write a letter to the Dean about extenuating family circumstances. I don't like the idea of leaving Laurie right now. It's a delicate time. The first months are the hardest and she needs the support. Mama and Daddy might be strict, but they don't know what she needs. Not on the emotional level. And if I'm being honest with myself, I'm dreading going back a little. I don't have a plan. I don't have any money. I feel tired. Too tired to figure it all out.

With our new found freedom, I wonder if Mama and Daddy will let me take Laurie out. I feel like a dog who's tugging on a leash to see how far he can run. We're both getting a little stir crazy, literal cabin fever. I tell Mama we're just gonna take a drive, go visit some familiar spots around town. I can tell Mama would like a reason to say no, but she can't come up with anything. I take the Mini, since I'm not hiding anymore and Laurie and I go bumping down the driveway. I have to drive real slow over the gravel since the carriage is low and liable to scrape.

We drive to the high school first. It's about a forty minute drive. Everything in the country is long distance. It strikes me now how I used to make this commute every day, to and from. How many hours of my life. In the winter, I was up before the sun to drive to school and it got so cold, I'd drive to school with gloves on and a blanket tucked over my lap. Daddy even let me start drinking coffee just to have something to keep me awake on the dark drive. Didn't realize what coffee was supposed to taste like till I moved out, since Daddy burns the bean out of his.

Before the Mini, it was the bus. Freezing yellow steel with leather seats so stiff they'd crack open in the cold. You could cut yourself on those cracks. We were near first to be picked up, so the three of us would have to march down to the start of the driveway at 5:30am just to make it on time. Coulda slept the whole way if not for the bus cutting hard angles through country roads, hard enough to thump you on the head if you started to doze off. The potholes alone could cause concussions. First on, first off in the afternoons, save for Trent. A full two hours to go from the door of the schoolhouse to the start of our driveway. Sometimes we'd play bus surfing with Trent, trying to balance on our feet in the aisle as the driver twisted his way through the curves. No hands allowed. Either that or try penciling in answers to our homework, straining to keep a straight line as the bus rumbled. I'd turn in assignments that looked like a Parkinson's diagnosis. Then another twenty minutes to walk to the house, lugging heavy schoolbooks up and over the Hill of Woe. That's what Daddy calls the great big slope of our driveway. The only time we were allowed friends over was to work on a school project and those few times, we cringed the whole way, knowing what was coming.

The drive to the high school shares the same scenery as everywhere else, you couldn't pick it out of a line-up. A two lane road surrounded by trees. The forest is interrupted occasionally by a field or a clearing where they've cut down the trees for lumber. In the exposed sections, you can see the up and downness of the land. The high school itself is a squat one story building in the shape of a cross. Even though our town has only a handful of teenagers to offer up each year, the high school is the only one cross several counties, so it serves teenagers far as Rosland. Meaning, we have enough students to qualify for the big

football league, called 5A, which puts us up against the biggest schools from all over the state. We do okay. Farm boys used to pushing plows hold their own against the city boys who've been in little league since the age of six.

Laurie and I sit in the parking lot outside the school. It's closed for summer and without any movement, it looks abandoned. Like the shell of a horseshoe crabs that sits half-buried in the sand. No more purpose left.

"We should have brought a joint," Laurie says, looking at the building. I give her a look and she holds up her hands, "Only kidding." She smiles. "Lighten up, Francis." Which is something Daddy says and we have no idea where it comes from.

"I've never smoked weed." I say. Laurie looks incredulous. "How are we related?" I hit her arm lightly. "I used to always try and get you to smoke with me in high school." she says, "You were such a nerd, but I thought you'd loosen up in college."

"Still a nerd." I say, like a confession. "Good for you. Don't change a thing." She says.

I roll the windows down and we're quiet for a moment. You can hear the cicadas, even during the day. Like some of them didn't get the memo about being nocturnal.

"I miss it." Laurie says after a while.

"High school? I thought everyone hated high school."

She shrugs. "Not really. I miss feeling like I was headed somewhere." She looks at me. "I mean, I knew I was never going to be anything big, not like a doctor or nothing, but I felt like there were options. I guess I just miss that, feeling like I had options."

I nod, I get it. I do. Even though it's different, because I made it happen, doors close everyday. Everytime you make a decision, you lose options, lose the potential futures, the potential versions of yourself you might have become.

"You still have options." I say. Laurie doesn't agree or disagree, just keeps looking out at the high school. I start the car and pull back on the road.

We eat at Los Gorditos for lunch. That's what we call it, but there's no actual name. There's a small, but fierce Hispanic population that's been in our town for as long as I can remember. They came originally to work in the chicken plants. I heard once, like a legend, that someone

put up a "Help Wanted" sign somewhere along the border with the name of our town on it and a few brave, pioneering souls actually found their way here. I'm not sure if that's true, but for whatever reason, in our tiny, fly-over town full of white bread hillbillies, we have a few hispanic families that have woven themselves into the DNA of the community. People around here are racist as hell if you listen to them talk their politics, but everyone seems to get along just fine. The hispanic kids are pretty popular in school and Jose Gonzalez was the best kicker our football team ever had. The Methodist Church even let them set up their own Spanish church service that runs right after the regular service on Sundays. Of course the tolerance only goes up to a point. No high school girls are allowed to even think about dating one of the boys, even though they all secretly want to. The hispanic families still work in the plants – even the women – cutting off chicken heads and grinding up talons. But there's also Los Gorditos. Los Gorditos isn't an official restaurant, just an awning and a set of plastic tables that a family set up off the side of their trailer. There's always kids playing in the dirt and pickled onions on every table that will burn your nose hairs clean off. But their Tortas are bigger than the size of your head and the best thing I've ever tasted. I've been craving one all summer and Laurie practically squealed when I suggested it. Half-way through I already know it ain't gonna go down well, though I have an iron constitution: one of my greatest inherited gifts from Mama. I wrap up the rest to take home for Jill for when she comes home.

"Let's bring something home for Mama." Laurie says as we get in the car to drive home. I eye her sideways, but admit it's a good idea. Won't hurt to win her some favors. Of course, Laurie doesn't have any money, so it's me forking over at the cash register of the grocer's. Laurie picked out toffee because it's something Mama don't make herself, even though her own Mama used to. Mama avoids caramel in general, says it's too tricky. On the drive home Laurie cradles it in her lap. I tell her she's gonna make it melt, so she holds it up in front of the A/C vent and keeps it like that the rest of the drive home.

Pulling in at home, we see Daddy at the top of the ladder he's got leaning against the house. Cleaning out the rain gutters. That's not something we typically do in summer, but that man cannot sit still. Laurie presents Mama with the toffee like a cat offering a dead bird. Pleased with itself. Mama clucks, something about how it was "uncalled for", but I can tell she's touched. She pats Laurie on the shoulder and tells us both to change out of our 'town clothes' in order to help with dinner.

Jill comes home and I tell her about the leftover Mexican food, but in secret, since Mama interprets any food from outside as an insult to the quality of her cooking. Mama's one of those cooks who monitors how much of what everybody eats and then comments on whether our consumption is on par with her expectations. Daddy's the only one who gets

away with adding salt to his meal. Overall, it doesn't matter much because Mama is an excellent cook. If I ever find myself on death row – which after the events of this summer has a non-zero probability – I'm asking for her cornbread and her pecan pie as my last meal.

After dinner, Mama asks me to help her brush down the horses and replace the hay in their stalls, since she didn't have time to get to it today. I know she means to say that Laurie and I going out today inconvenienced her, but I just smile and say "'course Mama" and follow her outside. I slip my feet into a pair of Daddy's boots that are lined up outside next to the door. There's a little array of them perched like guards standing watch, but I choose the rubber camo ones. I check for spiders first, since I've found creepy-crawlers at the bottom of his boots more than a few times. It's like wearing clown shoes, I have to lift my feet high up and lunge forward to walk. Mama and I alternate stalls, working in silence, listening to the tidal sigh of the crickets. Santana is restless and keeps throwing her head at me. I steer clear of her chompers since she's always been prone to biting. I hush her and take my time until she stands still for me. Then I meet Mama at the end of the stables where she's pulling hay from the bale. She hands me bunches in both hands and I carry them to each stall and shake them around on the floor to cover the dirt evenly. My hands are itchy from the straw. I have a slight allergy, but am too lazy to wear gloves every time. Mama yanks the string bulb and I hear it dangle back and forth. Even if I didn't know my way my heart, the moon is strong enough for a blind man tonight.

Walking back to the house Mama asks, in a voice far too casual, "so, how is everything?" I think I know what she wants to know but I want her to work for it a little bit.

"What do you mean?" I ask back, playing dumb.

A pause. "How is Laurie holding up?"

"Seems like she's doing real well." I add, "Happy to be home."

"Hmm." Mama says, which I can't read.

Our footsteps are softened by the grass. I locate Venus in the sky above us. I think that's the planet always getting called the North Star.

"I'm thinking about staying a bit longer. Going back to school after Christmas." It's out of my mouth before I even decide to say it.

Mama stops walking. I stop too and turn to look at her.

"You won't be doing that Charlise." She says. I wait, looking at the moon. Another day till full.

"I don't think I should leave her yet. She just got back." I say, still looking at the moon.

"Don't you worry about Laurie. She'll be fine."

"You don't know that." This is borderline back-talk, so I quickly add "None of us know."

"You staying here won't solve anything. She's got her own demons to work through."

"I'm good with her. I think I can help."

"Charlise." Mama says. I finally look at her and she's staring right into my eyes. She looks serious as the grave, Mama does. And older under moonlight.

"You've got a responsibility. You done started something and you've gotta see it through."

This is the first time I've heard Mama talk this way about my studying. It's always been that my choice goes against responsibility. Responsibility to the family.

"I can't pretend to understand what it is you're learning or what it is you want to do with it." Mama talks slow, "but you seem to have a talent for it."

"It's just one semester." I say in defense, but Mama shakes her head, cutting me off.

"All it takes is one crack. Nah, you go on back. Laurie will be fine. She got Jill and your daddy and me. I won't let my baby fall again."

Mama starts walking towards the house, not even interested in my reply. I trudge after her, wondering about all the ways I might have been wrong about her. Mama's mean. Always been mean. But maybe she been mean for the right reasons.

Laurie and I let another two days pass before we ask to go out again, this time in the afternoon. Mama must have eaten some of the toffee, because she says yes without much fuss. No questions or nothing. Daddy's at Ed's house playing poker or smoking cigars. Either being code for arguing – which is all it seems that he and Ed do together – so Mama's the only approval we need. We don't have a plan this time, just start driving. You'd be surprised how many roads this town has. People here, like in most small towns, value their privacy and

value their land. So you get a lot of houses buried deep into the forest, far back from the main road. A lot of times families build their houses next to each other, so you get aunts and cousins and grandparents all sharing the same dirt driveway. In the winter, when the trees are bare, you can discover houses you never even knew about just by driving around. It's like the town suddenly feels more crowded, more exposed.

The hard heat of the day has passed and we drive with the windows down, letting the car and our hair fill with hot air. Laurie gestures to the side of the road and I pull over. Another great thing about small towns: you can park just about anywhere. And when another car does finally come through, there won't be no yelling or honking, just a patient pull-around. Laurie and I invented a game in high school, back when the only thing to do was go for drives, where we'd see how slow we could drive. We would creep along the main road, wait for the cars to pile up behind us. We abandoned it pretty soon once we realized that no one minded. Unsurprising in a town where tractors move slower than people. So we came up with a different game: driving on the wrong side of the road, like we were in England. We'd even speak in made-up British accents while we played chicken with the oncoming traffic. That worked better at pissing people off.

But this time I pull over because Laurie's spotted a large thicket of honeysuckle. When I think of summer, I think of the way honeysuckle tastes. How the fragrance spreads out and lingers in the air so you always smell it before you see it. Laurie and I stand next to each other, plucking the flowers and sucking up their juice like we did as kids, the way Nana taught us. Honeysuckle is one of those flavors that's more scent than taste, even when it's sitting on your tongue.

"Mama tried talking to me last night." Laurie says in between blossoms.

"How'd that go?"

Laurie thinks for a second and says, "Okay actually. She was more uncomfortable than I was."

"Figures. Water running uphill and everything."

Laurie smiles, "It was nice though. I mean, I hated every second of it, but Charlie I think Mama's really trying."

I think about this while we get back into the car and start driving.

"What did Mama wanna know?" I eventually ask.

"Just how I'm doing. If I need any help." Laurie has her arm out the window, hand surfing against the wind.

"What kind of help?"

She shrugs. "We didn't get that far."

It's then that I see it. Guarding the sky like a sentinel. It caught my eye because at this time of day the sun sets its dome aglow. The old water tower. We climbed it once, ages ago. Jill wouldn't do it because she was scared of heights, so she waited at the bottom. About halfway up, I got scared too and begged Laurie to come down. She could've gone all the way, but she turned around for me. In my memory it's taller, practically touching the sun. But now it looks stunted, like an aged giant who's spine has sunk into itself. I park next to the chain link fence that borders its base. Laurie looks at me. I look at Laurie. The dust my tires spit up hangs in the air.

"No way." She says, her voice all disbelief.

"Yes way. You're wearing sneakers." I say, as if that's the deciding factor.

"I'm not strong enough."

"Yes you are." And I really do believe it. Laurie looks like a different person than the one we found at the depot a month ago. She's filled out. Yesterday, she grabbed the hose to water the tomatoes in the garden and her hands didn't shake even a little bit. And that handle takes some significant squeeze. I get out of the car and walk around to open Laurie's door.

"Come on lazy butt" I say. Laurie groans and drags herself out.

We stand under the ladder and look up the length of it. It's narrow with white paint chipped in the center of each rung where hands go. I place a hand on the ladder. It's surprisingly cold.

"Are we really doing this?" Laurie asks, her voice a half joke. I place my foot on the bottom rung. I'm a few feet up when I hear Laurie start climbing below me. For a while all I hear is the ping ping of shoes on metal. One after the other until I start to hear Laurie breathing heavy below me.

"You good?" I call, not able to look down.

"Mhmm" She says from somewhere below.

"Don't talk, just breathe deep." I counsel. "We're almost there." I look up and it's mostly true. We're past halfway. Reach, step, reach, step. I'm almost at the top when Laurie calls, "my hands are sweaty."

"Wipe them on your shirt."

My hand touches the metal platform and I lift myself onto it. I inch myself over to the edge, grabbing the rail for support, and look down. Laurie's only a few feet below me.

"Come on, you're close." I say. She exhales in a puff and climbs the last rungs to me. I scooch over and help her scramble to the platform. She leans back against the tank, sweat running down her face.

"We made it." She says once she's caught her breath. She lifts her t-shirt and wipes the sweat off her face.

"Look." I say.

You can see the town from here: the main strip with thin tendrils branching off. You can see out over to the highway too. Not the road itself but the clearing in the trees. It's forest in all directions, but from up here you can see how the ground ripples and rolls and begins to climb up, towards the Northwest. We're technically the foothills. On the ground, you can feel it in the burn of your calf. Driving, you keep your foot hovering over the brake pedal because the road might dip and jump at any moment. Set out in three out of four directions and you'll hit the mountains after half an hour. But you don't see it. Not like up here. Up here, you can see how we're just a step away from the crest of the Appalachian range. You can see the forest transition, like someone's got their hand on the color dial. A gradient that starts with the grassy green of oaks at our feet and gives way to the deep emerald of the evergreens. I scoot my butt to the edge carefully and dangle my legs over. I peer down at my car to see how small it looks. It waits like an obedient dog at the base of the water tower. I do a lap around the platform, studying the horizon, searching for the familiar landmarks I have known all my life, suddenly rendered foreign from this angle. It takes me more than a few seconds to identify the farmer's market, Jaemor, because all that shows is the flat tin roof. I never knew it was painted red. I join Laurie again and sit down next to her. I lean my back against the rounded tank, thinking the metal will be hot from the day. But it's not. It's cool even through my shirt.

"Jill would never have made it." Laurie breaks the silence, laughing.

"God love our sister."

"She's the best of all of us."

I nod, because it's true.

"You're not so bad yourself." Laurie says.

I shrug. "It doesn't bother me."

"What?"

"Being a bad person."

Laurie frowns. "You're not a bad person Charlie."

"I'm not a good person." I say, matter-of-fact.

"What in the world are you talking about?"

I think about school. About not visiting home, not even calling. I think about the things I've done for money. Let people do to me. I'm selfish. I don't say anything. Laurie grabs my hand and holds it.

"You're doing something none of us could." She says. "Becoming somebody, making a big future for yourself."

I roll my eyes, "It's not that big." I consider Laurie sitting beside me, face still red from the climb. "You could have done it."

She shakes her head. "Naw, my head's not screwed on straight."

I pull my hand out of hers.

"Stop saying that. You think of yourself as some fuck up, but you're not. That doesn't have to be what you're about." There is rage in my voice that I didn't expect. The words cannonball out of me and drop to the ground with nowhere else to go. She says nothing and I feel ashamed.

The sun is setting. It's quiet up here, except for bird calls. Laurie hugs her knees and we both watch the horizon darken.

I want to say that it's time to head down, but I don't want to break the silence after my outburst. As I'm debating, Laurie says, in a low voice, "I don't know where to start."

She looks so small. Maybe I look small to her too. I think about how I used to steal her clothes to wear on dates and she'd pretend not to notice. About the time a bully in seventh grade choked me after school and she found that girl the next day and hit her with a stapler. I think about Mama making us hold bars of soap in our mouth when we were caught comparing the curse words we knew. I think about everything that's ever hurt. There's nobody on this planet that will ever know where I come from like she does.

Now I reach out and grab her hand.

"First step is figure out what you want. Then you go from there."

She nods, like I just said something more clever.

"And what do you want?" She asks.

"The same thing I've always wanted." I say. This is the one question I've known how to answer for as long as I can remember. "To be free."

CHAPTER

Everyone who needs student housing is expecting back the Friday before the official start of classes, so I'm packing come Thursday. Mama and Daddy haven't bothered giving me any work to do my last couple days at home, which feels odd. Like they've already moved on from me being home. After a summer of lifting and dragging and cleaning and scraping and fixing, I feel useless to be sitting still watching everyone else flurry around me. My hands liked being busy. And I feel stronger than I've ever been. I deleted Raul's contact information from my phone a couple nights ago. When I think of him, which I still do, it feels different. The hurt has changed. It used to hurt like a lost toenail, an exposed wound that lights up anytime something brushes against it. But the nail grows out, covering up what's raw inside. It used to be an electric current every time I thought of him. Now it's a hammer wrapped in cloth that thumps at my heart. Working on burying its nails. But even though it don't hurt the same, I won't ever let myself forget what men do to women. Not ever.

Laurie said she had a surprise for me and Jill tonight, since it's my last night. She won't tell me nothing since she wants to wait for Jill to come home from work and tell us together.

Daddy's at his church meeting tonight since he volunteers as their treasury, so it's just Mama at home and she's in her room resting. Jill gets in around 6pm, ready to drop after a double. Laurie tells her to get changed into something comfy and come meet us out back of the house. Jill's a good sport, worn out as she is, and comes out looking a bit revived out of her prison uniform. Laurie turns tail and starts marching through the woods, down the trail that leads to the creek, and Jill and I follow behind. This time of day has always been my favorite in summer. The woods grow honey-colored in the soft light that hails right before the sun slips behind the mountains. Soon the big bullfrogs will start croaking and the cicadas will drive out the very thought from your mind. But for now it's still possible to hear the birds take flight from one branch and come to rest on another. To hear a woodpecker pecking on some unseen trunk. The sudden scramble and scrap of leaves and bark that means a pair of squirrels are quarreling. Laurie walks with a long stick in her hand and waves it in front of her as she walks, clearing spider webs. I keep one eye on the ground to keep from tripping over the roots that snake underneath, weaving in and out of the ground like massive worms. The forest has been reclaiming this trail. We don't walk it as often as we used to and Daddy hasn't been out to clear it in at least two years. It's a twenty minute walk to the creek and we walk in single file. I think Laurie and Jill are feeling the woods as I am, eyes flicking from tree to tree, enjoying the cracks of sunlight that sneak in through the openings in the canopy. Our footsteps are muffled, mostly treading dirt. Not like in winter when a single step ricochetes like a hunter's bullet and sets the whole forest off. In summer, living things exist together. We hear the trickle of the creek before we see it. There's a freshness to the air here. Daddy built a wooden deck here when we were little and it still stands, although partially rotten. All that remains of the fire pit are a few big stones in a semicircle. And, to my surprise, the two iron stakes that we drove into the ground to play Horseshoe are still standing proud. As kids we used to come down here on Friday nights to have a cook-out. Daddy would grill hamburgers on the fire and we'd swim in the creek, Mama dangling an old rope for us to clutch on to so we wouldn't float away. Silly to think of that now, looking down on the creek seeing it's only five or six feet wide and won't come up past my hip bones. But God I remember how it used to feel, like we were plunging into dark and unknown waters, with a riptide strong enough to pull us away and away and never be seen again. It didn't help that water snakes weren't an infrequent sighting. We loved the salamanders we'd try desperately to catch in our small clumsy hands. The fireflies that were slow enough to fall victim to our fingers. And after, we'd lay, drip-drying, on the deck and listen to Mama and Daddy tell us stories. And we'd be half-listening, just needing the sound of their voices more than the words. Each of us waiting for Mama to bring out the cast-iron pie iron. When we were old enough, they'd let us sleep out here by ourselves, putting Laurie in charge, flashlights and sleeping bags. But that was ages ago. We stopped coming down here when we got older. Mama and Daddy stopped telling us stories. I don't know why, just suppose that's what's always bound to happen.

But now Laurie is peeling off her shirt and tossing it on the deck. She steps out of her jean shorts too and stands in front of us in her underwear. She does look better, but it's still hard for me to look at her. When someone is that skinny all their bones look broken.

"We're getting in the creek." She says brightly, standing in front of us with some kind of conviction.

"It's too cold." I say. Which was, in my defense, the first thing that came to mind.

"It'll be refreshing."

"Why?" Jill says. Admittedly, we should have started with that question.

Laurie pouts, like she wasn't expecting us to reject her proposal.

"Because..." she fiddles with her bra strap, running her thumb underneath it. "I think it's important for us to do something together."

I turn to Jill to see if she understands, but she looks just as lost. Laurie takes a deep breath.

"I've been through a lot." she says. "You guys have too. I thought we should do something to mark the end of the bad times."

Jill gives voice to what I'm thinking, "So...like a baptism?"

"A little on the nose," I joke, "given our upbringing and all." I have to give her a little shit, given how silly this is.

"Yeah," Jill adds, "bordering on sacrilege. Imagine if Mama knew."

"It's not just Christians that do baptism!" Laurie protests, but she's smiling too because she knows we've already agreed.

My t-shirt's already over my head when I hear Jill say, "well I'm not taking off my clothes" and Laurie tells her that's fine. I kick my tennis shoes off and place my clothes next to Laurie's and we walk to the edge of the creek. There's a bit of a drop-off, so we go one at a time, inching our way down to the waterline. The water runs clear where it's fast moving and you can see through to the large stones at the bottom, grey and red and black. Across the

creek, it's muddy where the water gets trapped and pools together. Laurie grabs a tree branch to steady herself as she shimmies down the muddy bank. She brings a foot to the water and inhales sharp.

"Too cold?" I ask and she smiles, composing herself, "Refreshing."

Proving a point, she steps in with both feet and walks quickly out to the middle of the creek, lowering her body into the water up to her chest, smile glued to her face. She beckons to us and Jill nudges me forward. The water shocks the soul of my foot like a battery. It's not ice, but it's unexpected, like seeing someone you haven't seen in years and years and I wonder how we did this as kids, splashing in totally unfazed. I inch my way out to where Laurie is, but stay standing so that the water reaches to just below my belly button. Now we both turn to Jill and egg her on. "Oh fine" she sighs and edges into the water, her jeans darkening. Her t-shirt floats on the surface of the water like a lily pad as she joins us in the middle.

"Okay, what now?" Jill says, holding her arms stiffly aloft.

"We dunk our heads under." Laurie says.

"Like at the same time?" I ask.

"Wait" Jill cuts in. "If we're gonna do this, let's do it properly." She lets her arms drop into the water. I'm starting to get used to the temperature and that thing happens where the part of you outside of the water actually feels colder. Laurie unpins her dark hair and lets it fall over her shoulders. I feel the gentle urging of the current give way against my legs. I dip my fingers in, breaking the surface, and watch the water curl around them.

Jill reaches her hands out and takes hold of ours.

"I'm thankful for family. For having each others' backs." She says.

Thankfuls. We do them at Easter, sometimes at Christmas. I think Daddy started it, or something that he passed down from his family. We sit in the living room after supper and each say something we're grateful for. I never took it seriously and always tried to say something silly – but not so silly that Mama would thump me with her wooden spoon. We usually can't make it through a whole round without someone making fun of someone else's thankful. But I see what Jill's doing and I think it's exactly right.

I pick it up next, "I'm thankful for our home, for having a place to come back to." I look at my two sisters and squeeze their hands.

Laurie opens her mouth and shuts it. She starts again, "I'm thankful for second chances." She shuts her eyes. "Third, fourth chances."

I look at Jill and we begin to lower ourselves into the water, but Laurie says "Hold on." She pulls us back up. "I promise to stay clean." She plunges herself down, submerging her head into the water. We keep holding on to her hands and she stands herself back up, pulling on us for support. Her wet hair covers her face and I let go of her hand briefly to push it behind her ears.

"I promise to stand up to Mama and Daddy more, when it's the right thing." Jill says and she too dunks herself, t-shirt pooling over her head. When she rises up again it sticks against her body. She wipes the water from her eyes, further smudging the black mascara that stains her cheeks.

"I promise not to disappear." I say and I know it's the thing I needed to say, the thing that wasn't possible to say before, because it was never true. I had fully planned on disappearing. I feel the water swallow me, its lips closing above me, taking me as its own. My hair lifts from my head and swirls above me and I can feel how easy it would be to drift with the current, to let myself be swept away. But I am held, tethered by the hands of my sisters. I find stable ground with my feet and push myself back above the surface, a short range rocket, and breathe, breathe.

We scramble back up the bank and sit on the wood slats of the deck, dark pools of water forming beneath us like mushrooming fungus. Jill leans over to ring out the edge of her shirt and I shake out my hair. It slaps against my bare back. Laurie just lays back, a slight smile on her face, arms resting by her side. The air claims us again, evaporating the water from our skin. I lie down next and then so does Jill. We're lined up like sausages on a grill. We stay like that until it grows dark and the first star is visible through the treeline and we know it's time to head back.

Laurie is rambling about something, some tv show, and Jill is laughing at her, head thrown back. Laurie flails her arms, imitating some character with wild gestures. Jill laughs so hard she needs to grab onto Laurie's shoulder. I follow from behind and watch them. Laurie looks loose and agile and solid. She is young. She is young. She is young. Alive. We are all young and alive, as alive as we can be.

Back at the house, I watch Laurie and Jill disappear around the corner, still chatting loudly. I follow behind, but as soon as I round to the front of the house, I see that something is wrong. Laurie and Jill have stopped in the middle of the front yard and are both looking towards the driveway, frozen. I don't see him until I'm directly behind them. I know it's him even before I recognize his face, even though the last time I saw him he was face down in the gravel. His hair is shorter and he's wearing an oversized windbreaker, even though it's August.

"Get Daddy" I whisper, before I remember that he's out. Laurie has gone limp and Jill's face is pale, like white ash that could blow away with the slightest breeze. I can't think of what to do. I need to get them inside. We're closer to the door than he is. Will glances at the door too, like he can hear my thoughts.

"You thought I was a goner, didn'tcha?" He calls, his voice cutting through me the way a butcher's knife would slice through butter. Butter that's been left out. He takes a step forward, hands in his pockets.

"Ya'll thought I was gonna let you get away?" He chuckles and it's a dirt sound, gravel in the throat. "No sir, no siree. I'm here to take what's mine."

I tug on Laurie and Jill, try to pull them backwards, but they won't budge. I can make it into the house, grab something sharp. I consider turning away, to leave Laurie and Jill standing here and that's when I hear it: the front door banging open. Mama. Mama in her house slippers, worn thin at the heels. Mama in her nightgown, so loose and all-encompassing, in the belly of a fabric whale. She stands on the front porch, feet set wide, planted, holding one of Daddy's hunting rifles, a pump-action.

We're all four of us looking up at Mama, whose face is lit by the overhead porch light. On Mama the light casts harsh shadows, cheeks sunken, a skeleton that forgot to shed its fat. I can see her right cheek twitching from here. I tear my eyes away from the holy terror that is my mother and glance at Will. He hasn't come any closer but he looks at Mama with a smug expression. What's this old bitch gonna do. What are any of these bitches gonna do. I know that's what he's thinking. But before he can put words to air, there's that chhh-chhh, that sharp double-sound, the sound that sounds like nothing else in the world, that can only be one thing, sounds from Mama and echoes out into the night and into my blood and out by the trees and must be like a slap to Willy because I see him shrink to half his size. Later, I liked to imagine that he'd peed himself, just a little, automatically, before the fear of that awesome bitch. His knees buckle, but he's rooted to the ground and he gawks at Mama like a sinner before justice.

"If you ever come near my girls again, I will kill you myself and feed your body to the dogs."

With this, Mama raised Daddy's rifle and shoots it off one time into the black night above Willy's head. The punctuation mark to her threat. She held tight, absorbed the kickback straight into her muscle. I felt the bullet rip through my soft tissue, carve its hole through me like an extra vein, through which all my energy might drain out. Even with the gun aimed too high for danger. The sound of a rifle is as much of an impact as the bullet itself. If you ever get shot, your ears are the first to know. I feel Jill jump, but not Laurie. I didn't feel Laurie move a speck. But I watch as the sound punctures Will too. He stumbled backwards and clutched his chest, like he expected to find blood there. He looks at Laurie and then back to Mama. He must have seen something in Mama's face because his feet start carrying him backwards. He moves awkward, like a man on borrowed legs, kicking up gravel. He starts to say something, voice hoarse and stretched thin, "I'll be—"

But we never hear what Willy would have been because Mama brought the rifle up to her good eye and pointed that barrel directly at him. Mama didn't need to say anything else, he was already running.

We stand there like actors on a stage, glued to our marks, even after he disappears, even after the sound of his frantic footfalls fade. I strain my ears as hard as I can, but there was nothing. He had gone. I didn't hear Mama set the gun down but all of a sudden there was her arm on my shoulder and her shepherding us up the porch steps and into the house.

That night Mama made us hot cocoa and let us drink it, mugs resting on laps, in the living room. Mama must have forgotten her own rule about no drinks or food in the living room.

"No need mentioning this to your Daddy." was all Mama said about the incident. Lots of rules being broken tonight. Makes me wonder who Mama might be outside of Daddy's shadow. Who she mighta been all on her own.

I leave the next morning soon as everyone's awake. I hug Laurie twice. This time, when I say I'll call, I mean it. I already checked the academic calendar and seen that the first break is Labor Day. I tell them to expect me back in a month. They brush this off like they don't quite believe me. Daddy asks me, as he always does, if I wanna take a hand pistol with me to keep in my dorm. This time, I don't laugh, but I decline like always. Mama hands me a tupperware of something. And then a second Tupperware. She tells me she wants them back. I hug

Laurie again. I wrote my address on an old Walmart receipt and left it on the dresser in our room, just in case. Daddy takes my boxes to the car while I finish my second cup of coffee.

On the drive I decide to indulge myself with a stop at Waffle House. I haven't eaten here in years, but its presence looms large in my adolescence. We would drive to the nearest one on weekends, after nights we spent sneaking through cow pastures and in empty church parking lots, having crawled out the bedroom window. Our friends would wait for us halfway up the driveway, knowing not to get too close in their loud pickups. Waffle House where every waitress is above the age of seventy-five, where you can eat yourself to the point of stuffed for whatever change you scrounge up from the cup holders in your car. I go for the waffle and ask Dixie to keep my coffee mug full. I stare at the bowl filled with tiny individual slaps of butter and I'm reminded of my Nana. She was a depression baby and never got over the habit of stealing butter from restaurants. I take one and slip it into my pocket in memoriam. I think of all the ways I am not my Nana or my Mama. And the couple of ways in which I am.

The semester sets off without a hitch. I arrived on time, as requested, to the Student Housing office and waited among a crowd of squealing Freshman, clutching my financial aid paperwork, to be assigned a dorm. At least they put me in the Northside building with other upperclassman so that I have my own room. Every dorm is identically sad, identically clinical, with pale wood laminate furniture and coarse grey industrial carpeting. I share the suite with a Korean girl who I've barely seen, but seems nice enough. I think she's studying astrophysics, which would explain her scarcity.

All of my classes are in the same engineering building on the West side of campus, with one exception. My elective course this semester is Creative Writing, which I thought would be subjective enough to land me an A. Originally, I'd signed up for Spanish, which even now, seems a barrel more useful than Writing in a language I already know how to speak. But I thought the course might be like digging deeper on a well that's already run dry.

Creative Writing was far from full and along with the rest of the Liberal Arts college occupies – to the chagrin and amusement of the STEM student body – the basement section of the soft sciences labs. The basement is surprisingly cozy, a bit of a hidden gem really, with a fireplace and two full walls of books that you can check out and read at home. I've started studying there, in one of the scrunched up, ratty armchairs if I can get it.

I gave myself two weeks to settle in before thinking about money, eating only from the Dining Hall and looking up illegally scanned PDF's of my textbooks online. I did, briefly, consider texting Ali one night when a craving for Antico's pizza snuck up on me like the

boogeyman. But I dismissed it. I'm not going backwards. Must never go backwards. After that I scanned the bulletin board for student jobs and found that they needed bodies at the campus rec center. They offered me the position when I told them I'd worked at a gym before. So now, five days out of seven, I'm found standing by the squat racks, picking up the weights that students are too lazy to put back. I lift with my back, proper form and everything, so my arms don't get too big. It's fine, except I hate having to wear the boxy Polo shirt they gave us for a uniform. I've never looked good in Polos. But I tell myself that there's no reason for me to look cute, not now that I've given up on men. I keep my face hollow like a seashell when the boys look at me in between their sets of deadlifts. I like to think of myself like this, rubbed clean and smooth, left to rest serenely far away from the world. Praying that no one comes along and plucks me up.

They don't pay much, not nearly enough. Which doesn't surprise me. No one is ever paid what they're worth, especially young people. But fine, I knew I would have to adjust my lifestyle. I wanna kick myself for even thinking that way, given I got by just fine on practically nothing for the first 17 years of my life.

I keep my word and go home for Labor Day. I'm actually looking forward to it, which is the first time I can say that and mean it. Laurie is the happiest to see me. I can tell she's put on five or so pounds. It does her good, makes her look more vibrant, like she's coming in rather than going out. And there's more than just that waiting for me. Suddenly, there's news. Which usually means something like Daddy's put a down payment on a new tractor but this time means something else. For a people that uses the same five names generation after generation, my family doesn't handle change well. But I find out at dinner what it is: Jill's got herself a gentleman caller. I raise my eyes at Jill when Mama dishes out the news, but she's fixated by something on her plate and keeps her eyes glued on the collards I tell Mama how great that is while mentally preparing myself to interrogate her that night in our room. I've never seen Mama look so happy. Usually she considered smiling to be indecent but tonight she's all teeth. I ask Daddy if he's met the young man – knowing full well he must have – and Daddy says he's got a good head on his shoulders. High praise. I repeat his name, "David Bernstone" just to be sure I don't recognize it, but then I remember.

"Oh wait, he was between you and Laurie in school, right? Played defensive line?" Jill nods.

"Yeah, that's him."

Where I pulled that from, I've no idea. I've been steadily but surely sending all files marked "high school" through the memory shredder for the past three years. As if maybe a bunch of blank spots could be written over, or re-invented, rather than just forgotten.

Later that night I convince Jill to come out on the roof with me. The weather hasn't turned yet, so it's nice out, but it's already possible to tell the days are getting shorter.

"I didn't know anything about this David fellow. That must have happened fast." I say, cutting straight to the quick.

"Yeah, it did happen fast." Jill concedes. "He's fat now."

I wonder if she said that to be funny.

"You must really like him." I phrase it like a statement, but really I'm asking. Jill rubs her legs like she's cold while she considers.

"He's nice to me. He works making furniture, but knows about farming too."

"And, you like him?" I try again.

Now she looks at me straight like she's taking aim.

"He's fine, Charlie."

And with that, she scrambles back over the windowsill and into our bedroom. I stay outside a few minutes longer. Jill's never spoken to me like that before. I move to stand up, hand on the head of the window for balance and my fingers graze something. I snag it before it slides off the roof: a pack of cigarettes. Maybe Laurie's started smoking again. I'll have to keep an eye on that. I don't think tobacco's considered a gateway drug, but maybe everything is for someone who already done passed through the gate. I crumple the pack, tobacco and all, and put it in the pocket of my jeans. Maybe it means she's stressed about something.

I'm back at school for three weeks when Laurie calls.

"Who's phone you using?" I ask when I hear her voice.

"I borrowed Jill's," she says.

My own phone lays useless, collecting dust in the top drawer of my writing desk because I can no longer afford the plan. I thought about buying a pre-pay SIM but honestly, there's no one I really need to talk to. The family knows how to reach me on the student housing line. One less distraction on an already shortened list. I'd be hard pressed to find a reason not to study.

"So she's not too busy calling David?" I ask, just to be cheeky. Laurie scoffs.

"Not even a little bit."

I hold the phone closer, hang my fingers on the thick metal chord.

"What's that all about anyways?"

"The hell if I know. It came out of nowhere. She just announced one day to Mama and Daddy that she had someone coming to pick her up for a date. Mama near swallowed her own tongue."

"Have you seen them together" I ask, knowing we're getting conspiratorial.

"Oh sure."

"And?"

"And what? He's perfectly fine."

"Perfectly fine," I huff. "Fine is all anyone seems to say about him."

"Well, that's about all I can say. He seems to really like Jill. But listen --" Laurie hastens before I can comment.

"I didn't call to talk about that. I gotta favor to ask."

Ah, fuck. "Shoot" I say.

A pause. "Could I come visit you, maybe stay a night or two?"

"What for?" I blurt out, before I can think.

"I need your help with something." She sounds wounded. "But if it's too much to ask, then don't worry about it."

"No, no, it's totally fine." I say quickly. "I'd love to have you. But, how will you get here?"

"I'm working on that." She says before she hangs up.

Laurie's able to convince Daddy to let her borrow the truck for two days. I would have bet 10 to 1 that he wouldn't go for it. Daddy must be off his rocker and Mama too for abiding. Both of them have changed. Especially Daddy, but Mama too. It's like all the pulp's been squeezed out. Nothing left but the skins. When I went home last Mama barely said a cross word to me. They're both working less now that Laurie's around to take things on and maybe that's what did it. Like all these years of being stretched thin, propped up by necessity and held together by stress. But Laurie's come and cut the strings. Maybe they're finally feeling old. Or realizing that they don't have to worry about us like they once did. Regardless, they've grown soft like a peach that's been dropped too many times.

She comes up on a Friday and I give her a tour of campus. It takes us about twenty minutes to find a parking spot that the truck can fit in. Parallel parking an F-150 in the city is no small matter. Laurie's dressed up as much as she can with the wardrobe of old clothes that was waiting for her back in our room. That means high school, which means things like a bright pink Hollister full zip hoodie. She's quiet as I show her where I have classes. To be fair, I'm not the greatest tour guide. The buildings are all big and square and built from red brick. Besides that, I don't know much. I know there's some grand, important story of the history of the university and I know too that there are legends and silly traditions that generation after generation of students continue to participate in. I don't know any of those because I never went to orientation. I never joined a sorority. I don't live much of my life on this campus. I'm here to study and get the job done and make my sorry ass into something worthwhile. But I don't say any of this to Laurie. I regale her with the bits and bolts I do know, have overheard, and my own anecdotes from the past three years.

"And that's where I got my first and last failing grade." I say, pointing to the chem lab.

"What did you do?"

"I begged my professor, Dr. Martin, to retake the exam. And he let me." I smile "but only if I came to his office for one on one tutoring."

Laurie raises her eyebrows.

"Whatever it takes." I say

She nods, agreeing, "Whatever it takes."

I take her along the street with all of the fraternity and sorority houses. Most of them are Colonial, which to me, just means they look like mini versions of the White House. I tell her how at Christmas, the brothers of Sigma Chi dress as reindeer and pull a sled with their president on it dressed as Santa Claus, all across campus, throwing out condoms to students and singing carols. I tell her that Alpha Lambda got put on probation by the Dean last year for discriminating against black students.

The street dead ends at the stadium. She asks me if our team is any good and I tell her, truthfully, that I've never been to a game.

"You should." She says, "At least once, for the experience."

Back at my dorm, I finally get her to tell me why she's come.

"I need your help filling out an application. We don't have a computer at home and I thought you'd know more about this kinda thing anyways."

Together, with my laptop on the floor between us, we look up the website to the community college closest to home, in Clarkesville. Laurie wants to take an accounting course. Which makes sense to me, she's always been good at numbers.

I read the list of eligibility requirements to her and she checks them off on her fingers.

"I can get a copy of my academic record from the high school." She says.

I open the registration application and notice that she's almost missed the deadline.

"Laurie it's due in two days."

"Well it's a good thing I came when I did."

I help her fill out the personal information and when it comes to the essay (I'm surprised that a community college is requiring a writing sample, but I don't say this), I read the prompt out loud:

"Write about a time you've had to overcome a struggle."

Laurie lays back on the carpet.

"You're liable to start itching if you stay there very long." I tell her

"What the hell am I supposed to put?" She complains from the floor.

I shrug, "Just make something up, they won't know." I hand her a pillow from my bed, "Or, better yet, pick one of the many struggles you've faced. You could write a book on struggle. We both could."

Laurie hands me a ten dollar bill when I order pizza for dinner, says Daddy gave it to her.

"Jesus, he's happy you're home. An allowance and everything." I joke.

"As if. It's just for dinner."

Over pizza, we take turns listing potential struggles to write about.

"Or the time you tore your pants down the middle and had to hide in the bathroom until the principle brought you a pair of sweatpants."

Laurie picks at a pepperoni that had fallen and places it on her tongue.

"That happened to Jill, not me."

"Oh, right." I laugh.

"But I did shit my pants once."

"No fucking way." I stare at her slack jawed.

"A few times." She says, face straight. "It can happen with, you know, a symptom."

"Why not write about that?"

"Have you lost your damn mind?"

"Not the shit part! But about recovery."

She shakes her head. "No way they'd let me in." She wipes the grease from her fingers on a napkin.

"At Clarksville Community?" I roll my eyes, "I bet half the teachers have a drug problem."

Laurie stands up so fast the pizza crusts on her plate scatter to the floor. She looks at me like she's been slapped. By me.

"It's not 'this'" She motions around the room, "but it's something."

And she's out the door before I can apologize.

I'm freaking out. Not a lot, just a little. I'm thinking about the other times Laurie's walked out. Things don't go well when she storms out. I'm not gonna be the reason she relapses. She doesn't have a phone, so I can't call her. I just have to wait in my dorm, pacing pacing

pacing, till she gets herself back. I consider writing the essay for her as a way to say sorry – putting that Creative Writing course to task – but decide that it would come off too pandering. Make her point that I’m a stuck up bitch even more true. But I didn’t mean it like it sounded. I’m thrilled that Laurie wants to go back to school, I think it’s a fantastic fucking idea. And she’s gotta start somewhere, obviously. I know that. I’ve always thought Laurie was smart, wicked smart. She’s gonna be way smarter than those other kids at Clarksville Community. And *that* was my point. That she’s *too* good for it. But I came off sounding like an ass, per usual. How come I’m only charming for weasel-headed old men?

I’m thinking these thoughts when Laurie walks in. All in all she wasn’t gone more than an hour. But hallelujah I’m relieved. I rush to her, babbling start an apology but she waves me down with her hand.

“I thought of the answer to the essay.” She says, breathless. “I’m gonna write about being an older sister.”

Oh man, I had to really bite my tongue.

Laurie finished her essay submission on my laptop before heading back on Saturday. I let her use my email for any communications they might send.

I spend the next few weeks with my butt wearing grooves into that old leather armchair in the English department. I walk to class, I pay attention, I study. I pick up weights and yell at Freshman goofing off when it’s required of me. I collect my biweekly and stuff it in my account before I can even consider using it. If someone was writing a case study on me as an animal, those would be my primary functions. Habitat: two square miles of college campus. Behavior: reclusive. Interests: none. I’ve been thinking on what Laurie said, that I should try and do the whole “college thing” before I graduate. That don’t leave me much time, but maybe there’s some sense in what she said. I have enough fodder for my resume, given the number of clubs I was an absentee member of in first year. That’s me, drifting through four years like a phantom, without leaving any fingertip smudges on the glass. I look up the football season schedule and tell myself I have to attend at least one. One Tuesday in early November, I stop by a meeting of the Robotics club. I saw a flyer. They meeting’s in a conference room in the EE building. A handful of nerds, mostly Asian, are in a cluster at one end of a large table, discussing the contents of the big box in front of them. I see Jenny, who must be a member. She introduces me to the others and I recognize a couple from class. They show me what they’re working on: a self-propelled robot that can pick up bouncy balls and place them in a cup. The tricky part is getting it to recognize colors, so that it can sort. That sounds like a software problem to me. They assign me to the dev group for us to tackle

that issue while the CompE kids focus on getting it to move itself. After the meeting, Jenny and I go for a walk. Really she invited me to grab a bite, but I told her I'm trying to save money. She was sympathetic. She asks me about how it went in Summer, even though we're almost at the end of Fall. I tell her a version of the truth, how I broke it off with the guy and decided to go home instead. I notice that it doesn't hurt that much to say this. It took almost 6 months for me to be able to think about him without being thrown off. I ask her about her internship and she sighs,

"Same as always."

"It's nice that you get the work experience." I say, to say something.

She rolls her eyes at me, "I know, I know, I shouldn't complain."

"Oh go ahead," I smile, "complaining is the best."

I say goodbye when we reach her car and as she opens the driver's side, she says, "You know, my dad could probably get you a job. Hit me up if you need a hook up after graduation."

I see Jenny a few more times before exams because I decide to keep going to Robotics club meetings. We've got the robot working pretty good, besides the fact that it can't differentiate between plastic balls and any other object. I go to my first football game and I can say that it was long, way too long. But also kinda fun to see how excited everyone was, screaming their heads off. I got into it too, even though I left early. An hour and a half is plenty of time to spend on school spirit or sports. And I've started writing. I mean, I was writing before for my Creative Writing assignments. But I was just phoning it in, typing up whatever bullshit I thought sounded believable and researched. It's supposed to be creative after all, no one can judge what's creative for me and what's not. But somewhere around mid-semester I found myself writing. Not just putting words on paper, but thinking about what I was saying. And I'd think about it when I wasn't even writing, like before bed or walking between classes. December is supposed to be poetry month. I remember the sad girl sappy poems I tried writing about Raul this Summer and shudder. I wonder if it's possible to write poetry about happy things. Does poetry exist for happy people? Seems unlikely that they'd need it. Happiness makes the very air you breath seem poetic. Everything else beautiful belongs to happy people, so I guess poetry is the birthright of the sad. We deserve it more.

Mama hasn't said much about Jill and Daniel the few times I've talked to her on the phone. She says they're getting on well. I ask her if it's serious and she says that she reckons it is. Jill says even less, but Laurie spills that Daniel's been spending time with Daddy on the land. Damn. That is serious.

I disappear into my usual study cave for Hell Week. They give us a whole week off from the Rec Center, so I don't even have to work. I have an almost co-dependent relationship with my same armchair. It's certainly intimate. If I walk in and someone's already seated there, I stare at them until they leave. So far no one's figured out that I'm not a Liberal Arts student and I'm holding my breath that they don't. Even without the prime real estate, this is the best prepared I've ever been for end of term exams. Without clients demanding my time, I've hardly missed a class. My grades are exceptional. So exceptional that I'm exempt from most of my exams. I only have two and one of them is written.

Everyone tried to tell me that I wouldn't be able to handle the course load. And yeah, it's intense. But I've never been afraid of hard work. And all things considered, brain work is easier than body work. Not once in my twenty odd years have I stopped. And to be truthful, this college thing has gotten easier for me with every semester, not harder. I barely made it through year one. I almost lost my scholarship. Year two was a bit better, but still a fucking rock uphill. My high school didn't prepare me well. I didn't know how to study the right way, how to talk to professors. And beyond that, they get easier on you. The material gets more complex, but the foundational stuff is way harder to grasp. Learning to walk is way harder than learning to run. And by the time you're an upperclassman, professors know you've earned your keep.

So I'm sitting pretty for exam week. I gotta write a series of poems for Creative Writing, so I spend a lot of time just staring off into space, thinking thoughts too stupid to write down. I don't have a mind for poetry, I'm just too literal. I'm so down to earth, I could slip right through its crust. So I try to focus on descriptions of real things, things you can throw and crush and kick.

My father had hands for picking wild mint from the roadside/His dreams were too small to hold

I knew I wasn't writing anything good or profound, but Professor Elingson would likely go for anything that sounded raw and vulnerable.

No one's waiting outside to greet me when I pull up. No big deal. I shoulder my duffle and kick up the porch stairs. Mama and Daddy are sitting in the living room, so they see me come in. They're all smiles and "how was the drive" and "we're glad you made it". Laurie and Jill are out buying groceries for dinner. I sit down next to Mama on the couch. It's easier than it used to be to sit close to her. Our knees are almost touching. I tell them that exams were a

piece of cake and I should get my results back before Christmas. They nod and Mama pats me on the knee.

"So what's new here?" I ask and they exchange a look.

"Let's wait for the girls, so that we can all catch up." Mama says.

They don't have to keep their secrets for long though, since Laurie and Jill burst through the door a few minutes later. They saw my car out front. Laurie rushes over to me and swoops me into a hug.

"I got in!" She says straight into my eardrum.

"That's great!" I shout back. Extracting myself, I say "Laurie that's really great!"

Her smile is taking up her whole face as she tells me, "I wasn't expecting anything, really I wasn't, and when the letter came in the mail I just knew it was bad news."

"She made me open it." Jill adds.

"They must have liked your essay." I say and Laurie's smile grows – if possible – even brighter.

"It's only a couple days a week so I can still do what needs doing here." She says, looking at Mama and Daddy. Just a slight sting at this, the usual guilt, but I shove it down and focus on Laurie.

"And accounting gone be real useful. For running the business." Daddy says.

"Taxes." Adds Mama, nodding her agreement.

"Taxes." Daddy confirms. "But that's not the only good news we've had."

"Let's not get into all that, Charlie's barely walked in and we're already stampeding her." Jill says quickly. "Come help us with the groceries."

Along with the glazed ham that they bought, we cook up some of our own tomatoes, potatoes and pickled okra. Mama's baked rolls. Sweet tea for Mama. Arnold Palmer for Daddy, water for me. Mama's decorated the house for Christmas with the usual: garland

around the front porch, a wooden nativity scene on the living room table, and flimsy DIY ornaments from our various elementary classrooms. When we were younger, Mama sometimes let us paint pine cones with silver and gold glitter and hand them on doorknobs. I don't see any of those old pine cones laid out. I opted to come home for the entire break, rather than the perfunctory two days I've done for previous years. For one thing, I don't have any of the usual holiday dates – always the busiest time of year for escorting. Once I had a client ask to spread icing on my tits so that he could lick it off. His idea of festive I guess. I even had Christmas themed lingerie. The Santa Baby act was a sure way to guarantee a tip. And besides, I'd rather be home than sitting alone in my dorm room, with the cold air seeping through the window that never seemed to shut all the way. Jenny was home for the break, along with the other Robotics kids, so there was no one to hang out with on campus.

At one point over dinner Mama takes a sip of tea and puts her hands down flat on the table. "Jill," she begins, "we really can't wait a moment longer."

Jill looks around the table and lands her eyes on me. Not really on me, but right at my forehead. "Charlie, I've got the most wonderful news. I'm getting married."

When she says this, the whole table reacts. Laurie squeals, Mama claps her hands, and Daddy leans back in his chair. They already knew, but it's like hearing it again gives them fresh cause to celebrate.

"Wow." I breath, after the shock slides off me. "I can't believe it." Which is the only thing I can think to say, as it's the only thing I can think to think.

"I know!" Exclaims Mama. "Daddy and I never expected..." She stops herself and starts again. "It's simply wonderful. Daniel is simply wonderful."

"It's all happened so fast." I venture, keeping my voice light.

"When you know, you know." Daddy says. "That's how it was for us." He winks at Mama.

Jill's looking cucumber calm and peachy pleased, cutting up her potatoes, listening as Mama and Daddy discuss Daniel's finer qualities. He's got a mind for farm work, Daddy appreciates. And raised with real manners, Mama acknowledges.

After dinner, I'm washing dishes and Jill's drying.

"When am I gonna meet this fellow? I can't believe you're engaged and I don't even know him."

"You do know him." Jill says

"Okay, technically yes. But not as your fiancé I don't." I push.

She shrugs. "He'll be here for Christmas, probably more."

"Where's your ring?" I ask.

"He's saving up for it." She says, wiping off a plate. "The engagement was more of a mutual conversation than a big moment."

"You're killing me with the romance." I joke.

"I'm not really a romantic person." She says.

"You didn't scribble boys' names all over your notebook like Laurie, that's true." I admit. "Is Daniel your first boyfriend?" Jill and I have never really talked about relationships or sex or any of that. Laurie and I did plenty, but I always felt like it was taboo for Jill, like some invisible force shield went up around her whenever the topic was raised.

"The first one that matters." She answers. Slippery as a lake trout. A lake trout in a slimy lake.

I do meet Daniel a couple days later. Laurie rallies everyone to drive through the community lights. The regional Rotary Club sets up lights in the park that you can drive through in the car. You could get through in five minutes or less if you drive through at a normal speed, but everyone makes it a big country ass deal. One year I drove through with a friend's family and they popped corn and filled thermoses of eggnog for it. It's tradition to tune in to the local radio station – which plays nothing but Christmas tunes from the day after thanksgiving to the first week of January – while you drive through. Daddy suggests that Jill call Daniel so that finds us in two cars, with me, Jill and Daniel in his pick up.

"The famous Charlise!" He says by way of greeting.

"That's me." I say at the same time that Jill says, "She prefers Charlie."

Daniel rests his free hand on Jill leg while he drives. Right on the knee, no higher. Proper. Daniel's full of questions for me, which I take as good breeding. He's smart to try and get on my good side, even if I'm just a sister.

"I hear you're quite a talented carpenter." I say as soon as I can get a word in. He turns his face to Jill and smiles, like it's some inside joke between them and not a straight question. That's good, implies intimacy.

"I'm not the best, but not the worst either."

"He's being humble." Jill steps in.

"I've got my own style."

She twists in the passenger seat to face me.

"He makes lovely pieces. Quite in demand."

She already sounds like a housewife. I don't think I've ever heard Jill use the word 'lovely'. God I'm a nightmare. Analyzing every second word out of their mouths. I tell myself to chill out. Daniel is plenty lovely. He even sings along to Bing Crosby and knows every single day of the *12 Days of Christmas*. That's gotta be like the universal sign for harmless. And I'm clearly no expert in love. Maybe I've never even seen love. Maybe Jill will teach me. If any of us deserve it, it's her.

Daniel's around a lot that next week, including on Christmas morning. Mama makes a big breakfast per usual: sausages and eggs and fruit salad and the centerpiece: a Dutch baby. Which I inevitably burn my tongue on every single year. Afterwards, we sit in the living room – us girls on the floor, Mama and Daddy in their places, and Daniel above Jill on the couch. I doll out the presents I hastily wrapped last night. A book of poems for Jill (Walt Whitman, who we spent a week on), an apron from the campus store for Mama, a bag of artisanal (wouldn't dare use that word) coffee for Daddy, and three pairs of fuzzy socks for Laurie. I did pretty good this year, given I didn't have the disposable income I usually do. I started looking for their gifts in November. I know they like things from the city, even Mama, though she wouldn't be caught dead admitting it. Daniel carved each of us a different animal figurine. He picked a hedgehog for me. No symbology as far as I can tell, just plain cute. Daddy must have given some money to Laurie to buy us presents, because she had something for us too.

Daniel took Jill to his folks' house for Christmas dinner, so it was just Laurie and me that stayed up late talking.

"You wanna go up to the roof for a smoke?" I ask her. "Smoke?" She gives me an odd look.

"I found your stash last time I was home."

She shakes her head, "Jill. Not me."

"Wow."

"Yeah." She says.

"Let me ask you..." I start, "do you think she's happy?"

"I don't know. Happiness is different for everyone."

Maybe Laurie doesn't see what I see. Maybe it's just me seeing it because I'm the one doing the seeing. Maybe I don't know Jill as well as I thought.

"You've talked to her about the marriage though."

Laurie nods, "Mhmm, of course."

"And she's excited?"

Laurie exhales loudly, "I don't know, I guess? I mean, what are you looking for me to tell you, Charlie?" Softer, she adds, "Jill's never been one for big emotions."

"Pragmatic." I say. Because it's true. Even when she was a kid, she walked around puddles, never wanting to make a splash. Whereas Laurie and I viewed puddles as perfect for making footprints.

"Remember Raggedy-Ann?" I ask Laurie.

"Better than you! I remember when Mama made it for her."

"Yeah, but she made *me* play the Daddy."

Laurie chuckles, "Duty of the youngest."

"She was scared of you."

"With reason." Laurie smiles.

"You tied me to a tree." I remind her. "And charged Jill a quarter to throw pine cones at me."

Laurie huffs, "Like asking a fox to grow feathers."

After a pause, I say "She'll be a great mom."

Laurie never skips a beat. That's the thing with sisters, their brains flow in the same direction.

"She knew one of us was gonna have to give them grandbabies."

"You and I will probably be cut out of the inheritance."

Laurie snickers, "What inheritance?" We both laugh before remembering to be quiet.

Laurie stands up and I know it's time for bed. Jill's not back yet, but Mama and Daddy seem to have handed her over already. As I change into my bedclothes, I think about how Mama and Daddy must have thought us a strange lot. Embarrassing, even. Jill's 25 and around here, that might as well be middle-aged. Most women have at least one, usually two kids by 25. Mama and Daddy got stuck with three daughters, none of which have married. Laurie will be 30 in a couple years and I don't see her any closer to starting a family than me. Daniel was a godsend. They can finally see the end in sight. Someone to take over. Grandbabies to raise better than they raised us. A man in the family. A man to do what we couldn't.

No use working myself up before bed.

March is eight months, almost nine that Laurie's clean. Since she came home. March is a year since I met Raul. A year since my last client. March is crisp in Atlanta. Days starting to get longer. Jill and Daniel picked October for their wedding date. Mama's working on her dress. She's using material from her own. Jill didn't seem to have much of an opinion. But she is already looking at cribs. Daniel started working on the farm with Daddy in the new year. Laurie's two months into classes. She says it's hard remembering how to be a student. But I think she's doing okay. She will be okay. Me too, if I had to place my bets. Jenny and I and the team ranked at Nationals for our robotics competition. Tony stopped giving me shit about my course work after my grades came out from last semester.

I haven't been on any dates. Haven't had sex in almost a year. I masturbate sometimes, but only when I can't sleep. Laurie hasn't met anyone yet, but it's only a matter of time now that she's getting out of the house. I don't see that happening for me. I've had enough. Enough of men and their endless needs. Enough harm to last. I've felt it all and I've let it go. I've chosen another way.

I think about the bull fighting arena that Raul took me to almost a year ago. How with enough poking and prodding, the bulls destroys himself with his own anger. I might have more bull in me than most, but I refuse to be in an adversarial relationship with myself. I refuse to confuse myself with the enemy. No more shadow boxing. There are men who build walls to fence in the bull. Men who taunt it with spears. Men who sell tickets to the show. I know who the enemy is.