

That morning, the RV unfolded from its pile of sleeping yarns and was rolling away from the place I called home. Drawn out of the cavities in my heart, I felt as though a thin, brittle line was tied somewhere behind us, unraveling itself on the journey's road. Only a few days ago I wouldn't have known that our RV would have ever needed to get up, to drag itself from that spot. I wouldn't have known that its ignition might turn. That the ruts we left in the ground might be empty of us.

I wondered then, as the roots snapped from our tires, if the never ending summer upon summer would notice as we were stolen away.

It was only yesterday that I had overheard them, and now laying down amongst the rattle and vibration that shook the house from the road below, I considered if they had meant to tell us before we left. Was I to wait any longer? The question burned in my hand as I clutched close that unraveling string. Only the day before, my world was without the need to change.

Through the hole in my blinds above my bed, a single, unblinking ray of sunshine burst in, digging at the garden of my thoughts. It laid a red seed from yesterday's memories, buried it so that my anxiety watered its growth, and soon I could feel the warm tendril surrounding me whole as I woke the day before. I could feel the sweat from sleep that morning, just like a bathtub filled with Epsom salt and permanent ink, staining my skin. I could feel my clothes and sheets wrap around me as I rolled over again, trying to avoid the same light that came crashing in through that broken spot in my blinds today.

On the roof, in yesterday's early heat, I could hear my father cursing the broken air-conditioner for the thousandth time. Every morning it seemed to be broken. Every morning I woke with a curled lip for his trouble as every morning was a summer that wouldn't give in and give way to autumn.

They say autumn comes in a softer orange. I don't think it would pair well with the red on my father's face though, that I can picture as he fights to open the electrical box cover above my head. As he stares in silence and reads the codes.

"Again! Why does it keep failing here in the cycle?" He shouts, then scratches his head, then says in hush to himself. "There's no reason for it... it's like it wants to shut down."

That spring, or at least the culmination of months that I was told used to carry spring, had been a warm wrist given up to the doctor. If you chased its pulse, a sweltering summer far worse than the others was following—and it was ready to vitrify the sand structures we made in our short lives into tall glass columns. The hot season had come. And already my family was choking in our small, tin home, begging the cooling units on the roof for relief.

All day long those air conditioners were running, moving ammonia through their cycle, pulling heat from the RV and dumping it out into the already scorching city. On and off until broken. So

often failing that it had become part of the cycle and wouldn't be right without. If the cooling never failed, and the heat didn't overwhelm me, it was hard to sleep.

I turned over, the world peeling from my skin, and slipped into a slumber wound by the sound of my father's tools, scratching in the vents.

Once he was done I overheard them, as you could overhear everything in our cozy little house with wheels, my parents talking about the Nonni's and their cabin by the sea. They would often talk in the morning when they thought we were asleep; about work and the weather and what next thing was important for my little sister Rose and I... But I couldn't remember the last time they discussed all those things at once—and what they discussed, their concerns all jumbling together into one unexpected arrow head in my chest, made my warm, snug little bed transform into an endless cold.

"It's already too hot." He started. "Last year, the indoor farms I worked with struggled with the violent growing season—their air equipment was constantly breaking. And already, this year is far worse. There may not be enough food." My father was whispering to my mother. I could tell he held one shored hand against his cheek to protect the mud in his words from burying my sister and I while we slept. "And you know what our work is like, even in cooler years, fixing refrigeration... there'll be too many hours..." My father struggled against his words, a thin line inside his responsibility cutting his tone between wants and a family's needs.

Mother however, as she often was in the cycle bloom, a growing root or walking stone, worked to prop up the need. "We have to see the positive side, my love. You've always said you wanted the children to grow up like I did and the way you weren't given a chance to." I know my mother reached out with her slender hands, with their one gold ring, and placed them atop my father's clutching fingers, twirling his ring, before slipping into his palm—trying to relax his tense, rigid, words. She could get into the tiny places, he would say, on the control boards and in the electrical panels, with those little hands. But what my father really meant, was that she could get at his heart, and convince its beat... and she often did. "To grow up far away from the city and all its heat..."

But those wedding bands on her nimble digits, the engravings on their face, left a lip that snagged and left me gawking. As she tried to calm my father's falling heart, my mother agitated the red sea inside me, turning it to thrash and leaving truth and wave that choked and staggered—there was a change in the weather, and I was not ready.

"We're not sending them away for good... are we?" He asked, the shoring he held up becoming paper thin, like our walls, like the windows holding back the heat.

"No. I don't think so—" she paused, shifting focus. "This is a great opportunity for them to have a proper childhood... to have a summer like I had growing up. Nothing like here: hiding from the heat or bored at the city core like all the other kids are."

I thought about the upcoming months as my mother mentioned, the season's intensity—and it created a steam beneath my sleeves so that I had to roll them back to release the heat... I thought that's how simple it was to overcome summer.

Just then, the air conditioner ended its small cycle, slowing the draw of cool air into the cabin. What followed was the familiar henna ink, the summer's heat, as it slid in through years of work window gasket to paint its way around my body. To hold me still against its impermanence, sending soft S's into my ear, trying to drown me into its sleep so that I didn't have to hear my parents' discussion. I wanted that. But for once I fought sleep.

“And what if the air conditioner goes out again... and then the back up, while we're away?”

Would it be so bad I thought. And I considered sleeping forever. I considered the time I climbed up to the roof to fix the air conditioner myself.

“They could get sick.”

My father had already come around to some hard truths that, although crept in through the window seals beside my bed, seemed only the warmed fibrous sheets that this normalcy had laid out. I didn't want to leave. I had become used to the heat and the air conditioner turning off and on, and then breaking.

“Remember that year the paint on the siding tried to melt?”

Was the season going to be so much worse, so as to chase us out? Melt the metal of our home?

“We can't leave them alone like we did last season. It was too often. Too risky.” His tone crept up as my own frequency drew thin and wiry. “What are we supposed to do?” He muttered.

As the balloon readied to burst, my mother reached out, as she always did, and she hushed us, her voice breaking through the swollen skin and bubblegum bubble walls. “Trust me.” she said... and I did—and he did as well. “We're making the best choice here. What's better for our children than visiting the home I grew up in? That ocean cooled home, and its endless woods.”

“They won't want to go, you know? It'll be too big of a change.”

My heart made a hard sound like it was softened metal.

“If we don't put on a smile, and we act like it's the worst decision in the world... they're going to feel that way.”

“I didn't say—”

“But your actions sometimes say you are.” She moved closer to him still. “We have to be strong for them.”

Silence.

“And you know the Nonni's will be strong for the girls.” She paused. “And Sophie, she's older now.”

My father reached out and touched the wall beside my bed so that I could hear the smile in my mother's words. “Sophie will be strong.”

There was a hesitation inside my father that led night to its ending horizon, to this acceptance, and then a type of relief that he felt but I had yet to describe. There was all this confusion and change unsorted around me yet my parents appeared to find comfort in the words that were splashed careless along the walls. I had to be strong? I wanted to be like my mother, like the corner of a smile inside a tornado. But I wasn't ready to be like her. I still waited every morning for the air conditioner to fail.

“It really is cooler there.” He said. And I couldn't help but think of my father's eyes as he said that—father always had these soft, soft eyes. And in those moments, in conversation with my mother behind walls he thought strong enough to keep his concerns held back, I imagined his eyes were even softer... but I wanted them to be strong.

“I'll miss them.” Said father.

You can't leave us, I thought.

“Nonna will feed them well.” she returned.

“We will see them after the hot season, my love.”

And what if you don't?

“And what if that never comes?”

It might not.

“Every cycle has a start and a beginning. The day will come when this one ends.”

I know my father shed a tear then, you could hear it touch the counter where he hung his head. Then I could feel my mother's hands in my hair the way they were in his.

“You always know, don't you?”

"What's that?"

How to make us fall for your words.

I wished I could be like my mother was. Like I could move the clouds to show the stars and all their augury.

But as I laid back down in my mother's care, I closed my eyes and found the storm clouds circling. I felt too small to chase them away.

The air conditioner turned on—starting another cycle in the night.

"Where are we going?" Rosa's tiny voice at the back of the vehicle cut the film reel in my head.

I woke to her, attached to the city as well, watching the tall buildings slide away into a thin memory of home. In front of her, the sunburnt and barren fields of the long stretch took over.

"To the sea." My father said from the fading yellow captain's chair up front where the steering wheel rolled back and forth, reflecting the morning sun off its metal polish.

"They said that this morning, Rosa." I spoke with more antagonism than I meant to, the temperature in the RV still not fully cooled had me lose composure for a minute... and the idea of leaving home had not quite settled in my stomach yet, letting bile on my words. The words chosen last night made me think I might never see the place we left, again.

Rosa let a whimper fall against the window. In the winter, it would have left a fog. Seeing that, made me pick back up again, and try to fill the space mother would have, with a joyful note. "We get to meet the Nonni!" I made those words like a cherry so Rosa would bite and see the sugar.

"What's a Nonni?" She asked, half getting up from her seat to try and see my mother's eyes.

"A Nonni," said mother. "Is two people, a Nonna and a Nonno. My mother and my father."

"Your mom and dad are called Nonnis?" Rosa's speech rolled into an upward inflection.

"Only to you, my star." Said mom laughing. "It's a special title that is only given to the most wonderful people on the planet. They are your Nonnis."

"Oh." Rosa sat down and clutched her animal print blanket.

The RV bounced over a pothole and the whole house shook. Plates and bowls and glasses shook. A cupboard opened in the kitchen in front of me and a loaf of bread fell out.

"Is their RV nicer than ours at least?" I asked, putting the bread back and closing the door tight, hoping for something to look forward to.

"They don't live in an RV." Said my mom. "They live in a house."

I know my jaw hit the floor at the same time as Rosa's cause there was only one thump followed by my father's stifled giggling. "What?" I gasped.

"Probably one of the last." Said my father.

"Are they rich?" I wanted to know. I had only ever seen houses once before. None of the other kids I knew lived in a house.

"But how do they move around?" Asked Rosa.

"They don't..." Mom looked out the windshield, letting the sun caress her chin and lift her head into a place where she could close her eyes and imagine a place far away. "Nonno always said, what need do you have to move, when the world does so much of it already?"

From the window where I pressed my head, the sunshine reached in with its trowel in and dug up a bead of sweat from my garden skin. On instinct, not habit, for surely habit would have me hidden, I reached out and slid back the window glass, letting a river water stream pour in and brush the heat away with liquid wind. In my reflection, I watched my eyes lift as the barren fields outside gave way to a green field below an open sky.

And I wondered, had the AC failed again?

Chapter 2

"A bit rough," my parents laughed as a small depression in the road jostled the beans in our RV to jelly and jam. Like me, mom and dad were trying to determine the last time they lifted the house from its concrete blocks and sent it wobbling into the sunset. Dad and I had a knack for keeping the house in good order when we were still traveling. But over the last few years we had steadied into slow moving dunes and there hadn't been much reason for motion's maintenance—until very suddenly, yesterday, we had pried the house from its sedentary retirement.

It bemoaned us, the RV, crying from below as stiff and uneven wheels clamored around ungreased axles and rusty differentials. Corroded until broken bolts and screws that had been tight at one point, now left the suspension thumping and crashing under the floorboards. The brakes squealed, the frame warped and squawked, and all the metal barked hard against the

sun outside. I still felt the sun outside, digging into my temples while I squinted against it, covering my ears, reaching for the untethered blinds which clacked, shoebill beaks, against the RV's insides.

We rounded a corner and the blinds clacked. We sped up and slowed down... they clacked and clacked, announcing their intent to escape. Crying against the window sills. The noise and bright, intolerable thing turned overwhelming; which grew and lit itself ablaze until it became a tight white ball that I pressed inside my palms or punched against the inside of my cheek with my tongue, and held there. And held. And held while it squirmed, transforming into a memory... christ—

"Where are we going?" Rosa asked in her tiny voice at the back of the vehicle, finally breaking my concentration.

"To the sea." My father said from his faded yellow chair up front. The steering wheel was rolling back and forth under his hands, reflecting the morning sun off its metal polish and he looked so calm as it trembled in his grasp from the untamed road.

"Why are we going to the sea?"

"Why wouldn't we go?"

I could sense my talons tapping, the dichromatic conversation between my sister and father, of only a couple words, stung at my already toiled skin.

Under my breath, from inside my grouchy little bubble, I muttered, "how many times are you going to ask that?" Knowing the answer already was a relentless mosquito, mixed with the noise and rising temperature in the RV, I was less than palatable and struggled to stomach everyone else's emotions—whether they were opposite or in line with my own.

"Don't you want to see the sea?" My father insisted.

Leaving home had not settled with me and no one had yet bothered to bring up to Rosa or myself that the place we were going was a one way travel zone. A place my parents intended to leave us. Last night was not a dream, I was sure.

"I don't think I do." Rosa whimpered against the window.

Just like the RV, I couldn't remember if ever, Rosa had to move. I had to consider that, even if I didn't want to.

I watched her sad little chest puff a sigh against the glass. If it had ever been winter, her breath would have left a fog in the window that we could have written our feelings with. Thinking what

she would write, how little she knew yet how close our problems were, made me pick back up again, to try and support her. As every unhappy toad should enjoy another.

"We get to meet the Nonni today." I tried, attempting to grow the words into a cherry so Rosa would bite and see the sugar.

"What's a Nonni?" She asked.

"Nonnis are the word you use for my mother and father. Your Nonno and Nonna together, are the Nonnis." mother turned from her chair just long enough to flash a storm battered smile. "It's a very special title." She inferred.

"Oh." Rosa sat down and clutched at an animal print blanket beside her. She knew too, that something was awry. I just wished they would tell us and be over with it.

The RV bounced over a pothole and the whole house shook, pulling the bench seat out from beneath me only to have it crash back into me as the vehicle returned to ground. On the shelves, plates and bowls and glasses crashed. Jars with lids were loosened and contents were spilled out. A cupboard opened in the kitchen in front of me, and a loaf of bread was flung into the air before landing with a flop by my feet

"Is their RV at least nicer than ours?" I asked, putting the bread back and closing the door tight, hoping for something to look forward to.

"They don't live in an RV." Said my mom. "They live in a house."

"A house?" I choked.

"A real house?" Gaspd Rosa.

The word was almost foreign to us city dwellers.

"Probably one of the last." Said my father.

"Like, a house without wheels?" I asked, ensuring we were on the same road, as no one I knew, nor anyone knew, someone with a home not on wheels.

"But how do they move around?" Asked Rosa.

"They don't..." answered Mom.

Wow, must be nice. I thought.

Mom looked out the windshield, letting the sun caress her chin and lift her head into a place where she could close her eyes and imagine a place far away. "Nonno always said: what need do you have to move, when the world does so much of it already?"

Outside, the world was moving very fast. And it carried my reflection along with it.

Another dip in the road and the blinds swung again. This time they hit the window at an angle and slid until they bumped the rubber seal. It was like, numb fingers on kevlar. Like... Christmas lights, falling against the metal outside.

When I was little, my parents once took the RV for a drive outside of the city. It was the year before Rosa was born and the last winter before the electricity bans that strangled 'unnecessary' usage, came into law.

We had Christmas lights then. I can see them. We would hang strings of white bulbs around the RV from the trim. They would blink off and on in an irregular pattern, almost shimmering, the way glass reflected in the sun.

Dad would laugh and say, "just like icicles." Every-single-time he turned them on.

That day, we drove north towards the mountains, our crown of crystal bouncing along the side of the vehicle making a clatter inside that sounded like plastic rain. And while we drove, mom had told me a story about a man named 'Chris Kringle', who dressed in red and slipped down the chimney stack.

"What's a chimney?"

Mom's stories had a way of doing that. She'd focus on something she thought I would find interesting, like a bag of toys or an empty plate of cookies. But there was always something else, a difference between her time and my own, that would catch my eye.

"It's kind of like the vents on top of our RV. But chimney stacks are much taller. They're made for a fireplace."

"People used to keep fireplaces inside their homes for warmth... they'd put wood inside, and light it on fire. That would heat the home."

A lot of what my parents talked about, from a short time ago that seemed forever, made very little sense to me once framed upon the now. When I looked out my bedroom window in the city, the next thing over was a building, and it was right there, hiding all trace of the horizon. But when my mother was a child, stretching and rubbing the dreams from her eyes, outside her bedroom windows was an endless reflection and a night so cold you had to break the tree and throw it on a fire.

Nowadays, the nights were not so cold. The solar heater we pulled out in the odd winter's sleep often proved to be too much the morning after. Something like a fire would have been excessive... dangerous even.

That night, we continued on until all the plates in the cupboards stopped rattling. Moving from the unpaved roads in 'long stretch' into a small town on the edge of a forest.

Dragging myself to the window, I readied my head for another carbon city copy. Another horizon filled with sky scrapers and streets overlaid in other family's RVs up on blocks. I readied for the world I had been accustomed.

But what I saw outside, was not just another building's facade.

"Sofia!" Cried my father, as a luminous ruby glow coloured the expression on his face a painted red. "Would you look at those lights!"

In a small, satellite village, a flock of Christmas decorations had overwhelmed the landscape, frosting every window frame and strangling every tree with rows of red and yellow and orange lights. Pressed against the vehicle's dash, trying to get closer to those humming lights, swinging his arm behind him, my father begged to get my attention, experiencing some lost moment of his own childhood.

But he was so engrossed, so drawn the firefly, that he missed what had taken hold of me. It wasn't Christmas decorations, lights or season's greetings. It was the neighborhood itself. The structures which lay inside.

There wasn't a single tall building or neon sign. No cars or trailers or RVs. No city. No street lights. Instead, it was a slow diving suburb made from a handful of single, free standing houses with massive properties on rolling hills. There were fine trimmed trees growing in perfect uniform lines that left unfettered views of the horizon. There were open spaces, sometimes overtaken by minimal, decorative gardens. There were, garages, doors closed, with no salvage just pouring out from them. There were houses.

Large, ornate houses... without wheels beneath them.

I'd never seen such houses before. I'd never seen *a house* before. So many of them, scattered across those great huge lawns.

Daunting, imperious, overwhelming entities filled with voids.

I stared into those big, hollow, silent houses where shadows spilled out like portents from the pestle. And I imagined this unused space... these loci without corners or aisles or things touching you as you passed, and it was like yawning portals laying all about the houses. It was vacuous.

An uncomfortably simple labyrinth.

Our road and trip came thwacking back beneath me, suddenly I was again heading towards the Nonni's. But there was this ink, a blackness, that was cast over as I thought in the hillock royalty and all their outspread claws.

We turned onto a dirtier road at the bottom of a hill, and all the pots and pans on the low shelves began clattering against the wood again, breaking me from the images in my past. The spices and baking goods in mason jars strapped to the kitchen wall crashed inside their seatbelts. Stray blankets and pillows, enthusiastic for our journey, bounced around the cabin. From my window, Rosa and I watched a piece of tin cladding come loose from the RV and fall onto the road behind us.

I craned my head for as long as I could, following that tumbling metal chunk as it caught rays of sunset and then threw them from its surface, before it collapsed in a ditch at the side of the road. I considered what animals might make it their home once it settled in place, once it stopped moving.

Then I considered if it would make a good home.

But it would be hot beneath the sun.

We turned again, slowing now, as the road slipped away and a field marked by tractor tires opened up beneath us. In the windscreen, I watched the evening tales from my childhood, a world my mother had painted in words, being pulled out of its frame and laid in front of me. From the corner, we gently peeled the varnish back, collecting the yellow dust of memories and putting them aside, to expose an untouched crystalline beneath. Clouds in c-minor grew light laden plumes that swelled into the sky. From their mushroom roots, were the horizon and its hidden sun, threading roseate rays throughout the bottom of orchestral blooms. Beneath that, was a forest made in fine cursive lines and dense water colour sprays, that were chased on the wind by the crossing shadows falling from above. We were driving down a path into a childhood that my mother had insisted was real, but I hadn't believed it—yet here it was. Here was the flesh from her stories, standing straight up.

And if you looked hard enough, above us on the horizon, beyond a cluster of trees and under a lone break in the clouds where a sunray beamed down, was a single, yellow house surrounded by nothing.

There seemed to be quite an excitement about a house, one that was growing much like an unchecked ivy would. I could feel it, creeping across the mortar and covering the windows with its grasp... pressing the gas pedal beneath its foot, sitting on the edge of its seat while it dug its

uncut fingers into the fabric. As far as I could recall, it had only started last night. Yet, as I looked out the RV's front, rubbing my eyes and expecting the cold city view, that house and what came with it was quickly overtaking the landscape.

We continued on through the field, beneath a stone archway's shadow covered in dark lichen. We passed the imperious lines of needlework trees and mapped our path in a coal dust that seemed to have settled years ago, only now kicking up as we hurried through. And that house, it kept reaching further and further into the vehicle. Letting its spores and tendrils multiply until I had to puff my cheeks and hold my breath against its impending plom. I squeezed my eyes tight against the dust seeping in from the windows and doors—and I laid down. I laid down to try and do the only thing I knew which was safe.

I tried to go back to sleep.

I prayed that any minute now the AC would quit working, the heat would replace the growing fog and I would be back in the city, dreaming.

But the dust and all its weight was too much. The RV slowed to a stop and my mother's words finally crashed through the windshield.

"Nonno's." She whispered.

... It was like a whirlwind in my head. It came and swept all my world up into a cyclone and there appeared, no choice. My face turned blue, all this space between me and the city... I had to get up and look. See what natural disaster has taken the world from beneath me.

It was enormous, the house, with burnt yellow siding and peeling white trim around the windows... so many windows. A million tiny reflections in a wave. —Inside my head, a freshwater river was being overwhelmed by the ocean, and this brine appeared, a dark, mustard stained water that was grim-sky cloudy, and I just couldn't see into its estuary at all. I had to lean close and try to steal a glance by the reflection of others looking in the pool, trying to see if my breath would finally come, when something heavy landed on my head, squishing my neck down.

"Wow! What's that! Is that a government place?" Cried Rosa as she jumped from her seat, clattered through the thin aisle, and leapt onto my head.

I steadied myself against the wall and by instinct, threw my hands up to defend my head. Rosa dismissed my little bubble with her own flailing hands though as she mashed her face against the window for a better look... mashing my face without remorse below her body.

"Whoa! It's huge!" She exclaimed.

She pushed her sharp little fingers into my forehead, raised one leg over my shoulder, and strained to get the other leg from off the seat and onto my other shoulder.

"Rosa!" I cried as I fought with the mass of her tentacles. "Get-off-my-head!"

"What is it though?" She asked, half vacating my head, half allowing me to unfurl her. "Is it... is it a house?" Her eyes were big and her excitement even more so as she glued her eyes to the window. "Like a real house?" she asked again.

Still reeling with my own tumbling descent, I ignored Rosa and returned to the window.

"That would be a home." Corrected my mother.

"Yes!" Blurted out Dad. "A home where a home cooked meal is waiting!" He put the vehicle in park and started out the driver side door before the engine even sputtered out. "Ah, the Nonni's home!" He said with outstretched arms. "A place by the sea," his voice fading as he walked away. "in the arms of the forest, kept by the best cook I know!"

"Hello!" Cried an apple pie voice from inside the building.

"Hello!" Cried my father. "I hope you made pie!"

"Good grief, David! Never a change in you."

"Apples my favourite!"

"Yes, yes."

Rosa followed my father, heading out the side door. While the hesitation which bewildered me, kept my nose pressed up against the glass, surveying with large, fishbowl eyes, the tangle that now encompassed me. A house, a forest, empty swathes where people and fixtures should be. Whole nothing's where I might fall in forever.

"Robert!" The woman talking with my father called.

... Robert, that name seemed important. I looked up and found the older woman hanging out from a downstairs window. She was in a white apron that draped itself over a trough filled with little plants, and she waved, her arms soaked in olive oil, a warm expression on her face.

"Robert!" The woman called, looking back into the house. "They're here!" She dipped inside and I heard her voice trail through the empty windows, wafting the way a rhubarb crisp aroma might from the sill. "They're here! They're here!" Over and over again until she burst open the front door and flooded what was an ominous stoop, with a curious colour haze.

The effect was strange. I remember she stood at the door, her hair a messy chestnut fray, her blue, white dress swaying from steps and gentle breeze... and she let loose this smile. This very familiar and comforting smile. A smile in an otherwise dangerous place. And she became just like spilled paint: very slowly colouring everything.

On my shoulder, I felt a soft fabric and turned to find my mother smiling at me. And I knew where I'd seen the old woman's smile before. In a tornado. In my dreams. In a line of women before me. My mother said nothing, and didn't need to. Then she left as well, meeting the family in the yard where the older woman hugged and kissed her comically... pulling at the corners of my mouth, instigating a feeling I was not expecting . And so I followed.

But outside, in the absence of my shoes, I found something even more surprising when I landed barefoot on the lawn.

In the city, mostly everything was asphalt or concrete. Even the playgrounds near the schools were mapped in no more than plain dirt... sometimes wood chips or even a weird, rubbery surface that was meant to mute your slips and falls. But not plants. Not an endless carpet of green that stirred every time the wind wanted to remember the leaves.

I remember the grass. I remember how it met me and how I reacted to cold water. How good it felt to touch land when there was so much worry of floods. The murmuring green holding my soles all at once, fumbling the nerves on my feet—and every moment after. I padded out onto the lawn, across the living floor radiant from the sun, and I recall being grounded while being held up. I curled my toes and carried my breath full of evergreen through the entire, warmed sensation.

"Sofia! Come and say hi!" My mother's voice wafted over the RV, and tangled with the aromatic lines of the love spell I was under. "Come meet Nonna."

Still floundered by the strange sensation beneath me, I rounded the RV with my eyes on the ground only to stumble into a soft lump which pressed my cheek. A hand reached down and before I could jump, it hugged me. Suddenly I was awash in a sun spackled sea of bright navy blue and jam tarnished white; where two arms, the same temperature as fresh bake, wove in and out like a pie top to hold me.

Poking my head out, I found I was swimming in the older woman's tartan, blouson dress. The smile hadn't seemed to have left her face.

"Well, I was expecting a welcome—but not one so warm..." she said, her teeth bright behind her stove tanned face, distinguishing a smile that I couldn't help but recognize. "I'm not complaining, of course." Her eyes sparkling with the kind of glitter that I thought only my mother made. "This must be Sofia."

I stepped back and pretended to make my eyes busy with the sky but I could feel a red tinge at my cheeks.

"Where's Nonno?" My mom asked.

"Yea, where is the old coot?" Blurted dad, and mom turned and backhanded his chest, knocking the spirit from his mouth.

"What?" He gasped, rubbing his ribs.

She shot him a cold eye. "Yes, where is he, mom?"

The woman, my Nonna, sucked her teeth, placed a hand over her brow and looked behind me to a single story building stepped back a bit, beside the house, its perimeter nuzzling the mixed tree guards that stood for miles around the property. The building had a roof made with various pieces of different coloured scrap metal, water stained cinder brick walls, and two huge bay doors. One painted the same colour as the house and the other happened to be open wide, letting an angle of sunlight draw itself a patch inside.

"He's in there for sure." She muttered before her voice became thin with steam, a pot of tea bubbling within her. "Roberto! They're here!"

Inside, however full with car shop and half-a-graveyard, lacked evidence of anyone at all actually being present. I would have guessed the place abandoned had it not resembled so many of the overstuffed appendices of my own room, which was also half a kitchen. Covered in a pale yellow dust were cardboard boxes filled with wires and car parts, rolling shelves stacked tall with all manner of tools. A car rested with its hood open, looking as though it had been sick and spewed its engine across the floor. It seemed a lot of space inside for there to be so much space taken up with lots of bauble and knacks without knicks, deserted halfway through their uses for some persons mad panic to leave or give up. Or the person who worked there was just engulfed in manic, and clutter, their calls for help muffled by the sliding landfall.

Even an unclaimed pair of shoes lay empty at the shop's entrance.

My eyes focused out and somehow I found it a neutral place. It was somewhere in between my small house with a thousand things all organized but un-ready to travel, and the feeling I got from the giant house next to it, filled with nothing.

"Roberto!" She tried again.

We waited, all stood deer-legged in the field for some slingshot BB to fly for us. But the metal never flew.

"Ah! He's probably got his new painter's suit on. He got his name printed on the silly thing and he's all excited for it." She threw her hands up. "Like there's people around here that might not know his name." Nonna turned towards the front door and waved her annoyance at the sky "He won't be bothered in the booth spraying a car, but he won't be long either," and started to walk along the side of the house, gesturing us to come along. "With me! Lunch is waiting in the solarium."

"Lunch!" Rosa jumped at the word and grabbed Nonna's hand, followed by my mother and my father who mumbled something about apple pie.

Chapter 3

Most days, lunch was a preset number on the microwave. We'd place a frozen meal on the glass dish inside and wait all of two minutes for a mushy cardboard box filled with nutrients to come steaming out. Rosa had quite a stomach for mush—I did not. And the notion of lunch and its grey manners didn't often intrigue me. But, as we circled 'round the house like weighted string pulled beneath the rim, a strange bag of herbs dipped itself into the air and infused the breeze... and an aroma steeped itself in my senses. It grabbed my feet in its undertow and dragged me into some ceremony, a recollection of a place.

That place has always been inside a person, but it's hard to explain to people who haven't had it dug up by shovel, or pick, or teacup. But it's been elsewhere; if you've ever been a place you've never been before but somehow felt you belonged... you'd know. —That smell was just like that. It was a childhood memory. A knot in a willow tree's branch that spelled my name. It was a glass room I'd seen before.

It had tall glass windows that were made to let the sun fall in like a tide against the beach, pushing shells and pebbles, ceramic pots and yellow leaves. I'd once seen its french doors. Two of them, meant to be left wide open so that birds might cross the threshold and carry seeds upon their breasts to feed the potting soil. I'd once seen inside this solarium. A room encircled by plants with all manner of bloom. A table in the centre surrounded by chairs that didn't match each other. A feast set atop the wood.

There was something missing though.

In the cupboard above the refrigerator where my mom took out the frozen dinners, there was a binder. And inside the binder were these beautiful little square things that my mother called polaroids. She said the world moved so fast that we somehow outran the instant photo... I didn't know what that meant but I loved those images.

I keep coming back to this one she had, a picture of her side profile in front of a white cake topped with strawberry, the amber from a small candle's light flailing as she tries to blow it out.

Her face dusted to gold in that light. Her eyes wide from dollops of sugar beneath her tongue and wrapping paper holding up her hair... and there's this excitement... despite the wear within the image—that popped from the page the way confetti might. Like, the shadow's just right and all the honeycomb inside her heart is exploding, blowing out her lips, trying to gather up what wish she could.

It was the cake that was missing. The only thing though.

The terracotta pots with aqua writing across them in the background were still there. Growing from their open chests, the same moss and green leaf fauna that held up a paper cut out garden in bright reds like strawberry and rasp. On the table, are the same blue plates, just now they hold zucchini flowers and undressed pasta. Sitting beside them are small bowls filled with sea-salted chocolate.

At the center, is that table that I can't forget where that birthday cake doesn't sit today.

Despite all the changes I felt today, somehow this had remained the same. All its excitement still here.

I sat at the table. Somehow, Rosa was already stuffing her face with a beautiful, crisp looking bread. Casually guarding its remains on her plate with splayed fingers from my dad who waited on nails at her side. Mom had found a spot eerily similar to the one in the photo. And Nonna collected a pot and spoon, and began to dress my pasta in a thick, basil washed sauce.

"I've seen that look before." She smiled, flicking the spoon down once, coating my pasta with a delectable smell. "In many cultures, it might be any mixing of emotions: uncertainty, anxiety," her eyes wore big sun spots. "Excitement! But in Italian... It only has one name. And it can only be satisfied with our love language. We call it hunger. And we stuff it with food!" She put the spoon in the pot, pushed my plate close to me and winked before leaning down to whisper. "You just eat up, and this whole thing will seem a lot slower going than it is."

I did feel a bit uncomfortable, even though I recognized my mother's home. But I also realised I hadn't eaten today. And I realised the table was full with foods that I'd never had the privilege to eat before. In the RV, everything was rehydrated today. But here, apparently, the plates were topped with mountains made from purple-coated grapes plucked from the vine. I looked, and there were cheeses; white and salty, blue and sweet, harvested from the cloth that morning. I gawked and found the pasta beneath me was a homemade penne bubbling with layers and layers of warm basil red sauce that wrapped up the tongue with so much hearth and warmth. Beside my pasta plate, the noisy bread my sister garbled down, was spiced with seasons and made crispy with the morning sun.

"Focaccia," Nonna called while I inspected it, smelled it, readying to taste what warm fields we stole from the gods.

“That's it then.” Said Nonna, letting out a sigh of relief as she sat down across from me. “You're all here from the long barren stretches and appear no worse from wear.” Her eyes found mine again and I put down my piece of bread. Nonna looked at my mother and the both of them appeared thinner than I had realised, drawn out and tangled, like crochet yarn in knitter's hands.

Something was forming between them.

Rosa crunched through another piece of bread however, and shifted my focus back to the plate. That pasta was overwhelming, draining away the long road and the night before with its spice and balm. It smelled just the way my mother had described it when we were little, like a warm stove in a story about one's childhood. Like a little piece that made up the person now.

It smelled like the vine I'd never seen or touched.

It smelled wonderful.

“Thanks for putting a spread out, mom.” My mother smiled.

Dad rubbed his hands together, warming them up for what looked like passion and work. “I haven't had a proper meal since I left here the summer before Rosa was born.” He placed his palms flat on either side of his plate, breathed in heavy the sauce and scent, then gasped as he opened his eyes wide and wild.

My mother smirked. “Really? That was the last good meal?”

“I've been waiting very patiently.”

Nonna rolled her eyes.

Above us, in the tree canopies, birds told the long stories that made up the first half of every good recipe in a cookbook below. The breeze made loops and swirls as it passed the French doors and braided my hair with wilds outside... and the sun, it poured in as a summer wine; bubbly and dry and full of flavour. I pressed my fork into the pasta, forcing a surge of sauce to burst out beneath it before I lifted it towards my mouth, red and coursing with steam.

Before I could take a bite though, I caught the nervous flutter in my mother's cheeks as she looked at dad, who she said often ate his emotions. He was shoveling little pictograms into his mouth, circles with falling rows of triangles on the end of his utensil. “Good opportunity here,” shapes crashing from his sad face and filling his bowl. “To see the world we can't afford you. You'll get to do all the stuff your mom did as a child.”

At the centre of the table, a growing shadow reached out with steel wool hands, it made a tight woven scratching sound that filled the room, made it hard to hear.

“Like what?” Asked Rosa. Oblivious to the game.

"Ummm. Well, you'll get flowers and animals for one." He stuttered.

"That's right. Not many of those back home. And... lots of sunshine." Tried mother.

Their voices were so tiny compared to the growing shadow now rooting through the table and fumbling beneath the plates.

"Pfft." Exclaimed Nonna before she leaned down close to Rosa's level and asked. "Have you ever had honey before?" Her eyes, big storybook thoughts. "Have you ever seen a bee or listened to one talk?"

Rosa shook her head slowly. "We don't have bees at home."

"Here, we grow flowers so big that the bees will come and they'll sleep inside."

I had asked myself all morning, when would they tell us? And now this was how the news was broken? With bribes and promises of wasps? I'd almost wished they wouldn't tell us at all. I wished that they might pack up in the middle of the night while I slept so that I could be mad at them for leaving without saying a word... rather than be tricked into staying.

Rosa gulped. "And the meals?"

"Everyday we make these meals. " Laughed Nonna.

My parents' shoulders relaxed. Nonna kept smiling and Rosa kept swallowing up the nectar.

"How long are we staying?" I barked. But the shadow had picked my intrusive thoughts to raw nerve and I wouldn't be so easily swayed, not by stories and folklore.

Mom opened her mouth to answer but the words were stone and fell onto her lap as the weight of the room shifted onto her shoulders.

"You are leaving us here, right?"

"Now, Sofia." Tried my father.

"You're leaving us?" Pleaded Rosa, her mouth stood open and her cheeks full, ready to catch the inevitable burst that would flow from her eyes.

"We're not... we haven't de—" Mom glanced at me, and I thought she would be mad or disappointed... Instead, she gave me the same look she had when I had trouble sleeping or when my stomach was upset. "We were going to discuss it at the table." She finally said, shaking her head and getting up to console Rosa.

"I don't want to leave though!" Cried Rosa.

The weight fell further in the room, finding its way to my belly where it sat like an anchor, like no food feels when you're asleep.

“Oh! Now, Rosa.” Nonna was quick to kneel down beside my sister though, and offer her a sympathetic lip. “There's no need to cry. Your mommy and daddy only wanted you to stay a couple of days to see if you like it first. Not just up and leave you for the whole summer.”

Mom kneeled on the other side of Rosa and ran her fingers through her hair, trying to slow the tears that would come. “Yes love. We aren't leaving until you're okay with it.” Mom glanced back at me again. “We aren't leaving right away either.”

“Really?” Asked Rosa, swinging her head back and forth between mom and Nonna.

“No no no, child. That wouldn't be fair.” Nonna then got up and started for the kitchen, patting Rosa on the shoulder. “But it's still scary I'm sure, so let me get you something to settle your mind.”

“Yes Sofia, we had no intention of leaving immediately.” Father spoke across a plate already emptied of food, more to move onto it soon.

In my parents' tired smiles and weak eyes I saw that this talk had been coming for sometime—longer than the conversation they had the night before that spilled into my ears like unwanted medicine. Somehow they had known since before that, and now the long sleek body of their plotting, after sneaking away when my plate had arrived, returned with an empty bag to take the colours from me.

“Your mom and I have been discussing it for some time.”

—It's hard to discern now what shapes my turmoil makes as pieces from my senses are pilfered from the room, in words with mouths. Yet I tried, against stone frozen hands, to bury such unnamed emotion into the soil of this odd garden, hide it away from the way mother kept her eyes pinned to the centre of the table where that cake would have been... kept from the conversation's needle hands

“And we think we're doing what's right.”

That morning, just as well as now, wasn't easy. I had almost forgot. Pulling the RV from the ruts in the ground. Much of the desert vein and tendril had worked its root into our tires, claiming the flat rubber bottoms as their own pasteur, which they clung to like pilgrims their cultures. The engine had whined against those churches and moral senses, and I felt just as connected. Just as deep rooted. Just as unwilling to let go as we tried to leave for the first time ever.

When the vehicle lurched forward however, bracing us against our seatbelts and collapsing the long stories that the pilgrims had made, I thought we might be, at least on the road to, that

freedom from that which kept us static. I almost felt ready to say goodbye, even though I hadn't. And in front of that table where the birthday cake once was, I nearly believed it was time.

How wrong the colours are when painted by distraction.

Such words from mother and father, 'we think we're doing what's right' were the worms finally rising from their hollows beneath me while the ground collapsed. I fell, and the needled hands and the worms both came for me and my pursed lips, trying to enter my mouth as conversation, squeezing and slipping tighter until they were the tendrils on the wheels of the RV that morning. Until I was covered entirely, and they whispered "how long is a summer anyway?"

Ours often lasted, forever.

Nonna returned with a bowl from the other room, filled with some obnoxious red candy or food. It smelled like gasoline. The whole room was excited for it. Nonna called them strawberries.

Amongst my short, laboured breaths and overwhelmed senses, even in the room made of glass, with its open doors and the breeze pulling through, I felt trapped. I felt the light come collapsing in like a rain of spears, puncturing all my exposed skin with burning hot striations. I felt the vineyard worms enveloping me. For a while, I listened to them talk. But soon, I was so far back along our route I couldn't hear my parents or Nonna, Rosa or strawberries any longer—nor their worms.

My mother mouthed something as I pushed my chair away from the table and stood, trying to get out. She even thought to get up but in the corner of my vision I saw Nonna grasp her arm. They exchanged some pot of wisdom, pulling its honey as I wandered out into the yard, and left me to dry out the mud beneath a huge white sun that felt like a brick of heat as I gasped for air to bring me sight. Half blind and filled with anything that was too big to swallow, I stumbled and tripped over a bush with red-spot-bright flowers shouting up at me.

I rubbed my eyes, continued on towards my misguided salvation and thought about jumping into the RV's front seat. I thought about stealing it. I thought about tears and I thought about skyscrapers. And I thought about mom and how she had that same smile that carried me through so many nightmares, wrapped me in a blanket and rocked me back to sleep.

I thought about how now, that was no relief.

Desperate, I placed my palm against the RV's door handle, it burned from the noon time sun and I pried at it anyway, bracing against the door as it didn't open. I jiggled the handle, it only flopped securely in return. I tugged at the door, set my feet apart and heaved—It would not budge, and soon I was banging on the side of it, whimpering and crying. I turned and slid down with the door against my back until I collapsed on the grass.

There was nothing inside of me that wanted to be here. Everything inside was hot and everything outside was cold.

So I sat there, shivering against my home, trying not to listen to my own heartbeat for what I hoped would be eternity, when something flashed across the sky. Blinking to accommodate the bright day, my vision stumbled as it focused in and out on an object above my head. It was a shape I didn't recognize at first, as I'd only ever seen it in magazines or science lessons.

There, in the sky, was a gull for the first time ever, acting as if it wasn't the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. It was a soft, marshmallow white below with light grey ontop and absurd, little orange paddles for feet. Stretching its wings, it was collecting invisible strings, which spiraled and unwound in the wind, trying to escape. Dashing and turning, the gull caught and bundled them into spheres beneath its feathers, and filled the wayward yarn with stories collected at sea, wayfinder words and landmarks that only star readers could see. Once loaded, the gull turned again and headed away from me, west, towards a paper bottle sound that had escaped my senses so far.

Away from the house and the RV, I followed the bird as it carried folklore west, towards what would be the day's setting sun soon in the eve. Beneath my feet, short cut grass curled to make small words for the world I didn't watch as I continued on, my head pointed up, only catching the scenery beside me in my peripheral. To my right, were lines of blurry trees that carried bright fruit and dark bible cloths. To my left, was a fuzzy garden that nipped at my nose with smells of vegetables and spice and slow movements.

But I paid little mind, the bird had all the ink of my bottle as it arced through the sky, writing my melody in calligraphy with its short white quills and feathered winds.

Further and further it flew, and soon my heart was growing plumes from its veins for which it thrashed, wild and hungry at the ivory cage in my chest. My eyes too, became huge and hollow like bird bones, fluffing their eyelashes as they readied to fall from a tree branch and take virgin flight. We chased on, my heart, my eyes and I, until a thin line horizon, sewn into pockets where time had little room to move, finally burst and let flow from the weight of it... of me

My shoes soon picked up cotton and grass and exhaustion as I ran. And the sky, bored of waiting for me to push carriers for its tempest from my back, reached out its arms and let the gull fly until it became a smudge, a steel ball, a dot in the clouds. I laid chase as long as I could, but I was no bird. I was a city dweller. And I stopped.

For some time, stooped and braced with my hands against my knees, I watched the small black dot of the bird become just a photo I kept in my mind. It had seemed an unfair candy danced in front of me, only to be stolen away by the limits of feet; I ruminated on that before I grew tired of resting standing up, and I sat down. The grass here, had grown longer, like seaweed in a dream. I stared at spots that appeared in my vision's lack of air.

While collecting what chance I had at breath again, I inspected my surroundings. I found the gardens and trees that had run beside me had disappeared, falling away from the page as I was running. The RV and the scents drifting from the glass room full with supper had dwindled into ash. The plot my parents had marked me, seemed ages away now, as well. I was left alone with only the grass, which reached out before me into a point, an arrowhead, before it fell off into nothing and empty skies.

At its precipice, there was a small painted fence, made from three posts and four planks. A lonely divider at the edge of the world that appeared to me an enormous, unscalable wall at the end of the line. Even had I the will, there was nowhere further to run—except the sky. But I was full with so many clipped feathers that I was sure I'd never fly.

And what was left behind me but someone else's home?

I was caught in an inbetween. No desire to return as I didn't want to know how long a summer could last... I didn't want to know how deep the autumn vine would sleep beneath the warm black soil in the forever day's sun.

All I could do now was wait at the tiny fence, at the top of a cliff... ready to be engulfed by static.

"Just up there," footsteps carried up behind me, crunching the sun painted grass into thin glass. "is where your mother would stand."

I turned to look, and a man approached wearing no shoes. I stared at his bare feet but he didn't seem to notice.

"My... you've not fallen far from the tree at all, have you?" He asked, inspecting me close as he drew nearer.

"Why aren't you wearing any shoes?" I blurted out.

He stopped and looked down at his exposed toes. Then looked at my hidden ones. "Why've you got your shoes on?"

Grass bunched up in my hands as I grasped for something else. "I'm not sure what's on the ground. Wouldn't want to get pricked by a thorn."

One of his eyebrows dropped and he grimaced before answering. "With shoes on, you'll never know what's in the grass..." He tilted his head, thoughtful. "It's hard to have an adventure if you know exactly what you're stepping into."

He had a gentle face, smooth shaven with dark, tanned skin, and bright brown eyes that squinted in the sun. He made me think of a carpenter, or someone who worked with their hands using materials that didn't stain the skin. He had a new looking, white jumper on, that cuffed

tight at his wrists and ankles, a tight hod which lay behind his neck, and emblazoned over his left chest pocket, a name which was often forgotten and replaced with Nonno.

“Are you Nonno?” Already knowing.

“It's why I know you're my daughter's, daughter.” And he smiled, and I recognized something in it.

“Come.” He reached down a huge rock carved hand and motioned to the fence with the other. “Who runs all the way to the end of it all, and then simply stops before looking over?”

I blinked.

His shoulders lifted up and down. “You're not even close.”

And I realised, his smile was like my mother's and I couldn't not reach for his enormous hand—which held mine like it was porcelain.

We walked to the fence and there was this air about the end of the grass like the space between two sounding rods that made it hard for me to collect my thoughts. I pressed up against the fence's timber, swung my head down beyond its crumbling paint and lichen stained wood, to find the earth had fallen off into a steep cliff, where sand and rock poured out below into a long stretch of bath from either side. When I careened back up, I thought my eyes had folded too much space into the horizon, thinking that the sky had shifted too far and was washing back and forth against the yellow sand stretch. —I was wrong, the sky had ended somewhere in the middle... and this blue mass, twice its size, had taken over the earth beneath.

“It's the ocean.” I whispered, my voice conch shell and laced.

I think Nonno probably said something then. I didn't hear him though, over the waves. My head was drowning in wander. I could taste the coral, and the seawater, and sense the movement of boats. I almost forgot the only world I had known, slipping between my fingers like so many rays of light as I watched the ocean's great unyielding soul spill and splash, the same way stars are made from cosmos' ash.

The following years, I would express the emotion I felt, looking at the sea, as being something brought to me in its warm whirlpools and cold undertows. But it wasn't until I was an adult that I realised what I had felt was a sense of belonging, one to somewhere that I'd never been before. One that had a strange heat overcome me. It climbed through my back and crashed thin scale glass into neck until all the muscles in my body squeezed. Until my jaw pressed pearls from teeth. Until my head pushed the little baths from beside my eyes, where one day my grandchildren would point and laugh at the places where I let birds rest and laugh lines fly out onto my skin... to pour across my cheeks and wash the thoughts from my face.

I leaned further into the fence and breathed in forever—feeling very small.

“If you look, you’ll see that I built the right side after the left one.” He was bothering about the fence. I caught his hand falling onto it beside me, where the paint and the wood seemed much newer. Back on the left side, which had welcomed my cross arms on its upper boards, was more sun worn and faded. Where I put my foot down on the warped plank below, was a good groove that settled my toes but certainly wasn't new. Before he answered, I already considered where my mother likely stood, overlooking this enormous, swirling blue.

“I had nowhere to rest my bones.” He chuckled. “She always hogged that spot...” He leaned further and I could feel the fence bend below his carefree hands. “Funny, you should be drawn here.”

His voice, just an octave below the ocean crashing below, was dry and faraway; caught between the now and a different place. I sensed it inspecting his words as he spoke them... ensuring they were just as he saw them in his head. Crisp and white tipped, like the waves that licked at the bottom of the cliff.

“That bow in the wood, ” he said. “Below your foot. It's not warped from salt, that's where she would always stand. She was here so often that she bent the fences.” He drew his face long as he considered it. “I'm actually surprised she never broke it.”

A nerve flashed, and my instincts stepped back until my arms were folded on my chest, and my body nearly stepped back from the edge. It was now that I couldn't picture myself falling, and I realised the danger separated us from the water.

Nonno laughed though, gentle and low. And warm.

He remained leaning, in the same fashion I had before, overlooking the same ocean. His eyes tight for the red in the sun. The cliff bowing beneath his feet. He didn't turn to me to talk, he remained focused on the big, falling down sea in front of us.

“If it were going to give, it would have done it a long time ago.”

There was a certainty about him; one that refused to falter as a chill wind scampered up the cliffside, pushed by a now receding wave. I felt it dash through me, snapping my thin arms tighter to my chest. Yet, the same breeze only flickered at his dark eyelashes and grey brows before it tousled the short peppered hair on his head. It only moved around him. His expression remained unchanged against the cool wind, and made me think he seemed a natural part of the escarpment. Like the fence had grown from his curling, woodshaven hands, rather than being shaped by them.

“Yep... this was her favorite spot.” He adjusted his broad shoulders and pushed down further into the fence planks. They creaked and bent more, but didn't break. “If she were mad or upset,

she'd wait here." He blinked a couple of times as sunlight bounced from white cap to white cap below us. "If she were happy or just woken up, she'd wait here too..." his nose twitched as a brine tail chasing the wind, followed up last from the sea. "If she were anything, you'd find her here... waiting."

For a moment, I saw my mother where I had been standing: caressing the wind with her hair and drawing down the flickering rays of sunlight which spilled between white and grey clouds. I imagined her smile and how only a summer spent overlooking the edge of the cliff could have molded such a thing. In those still frames spilled from that cupboard above the fridge where the polaroids were kept in my head, I felt the tightness in the coil of my body loosen with each passing silhouette of my mother on the cliff.

That's when I collected all the pieces, and I could tell you the picture inside. I am very small against the ocean. But inside me, there is an ocean that belongs.

Then I felt a pinch at the corners of my folding origami smile, "What was she waiting for?" I asked.

He scratched at an old itch on his neck and shook his head. "Could have been anything, I guess."

We waited another moment.

He breathed in through his nose, patted the fence beneath him, and turned to face me. "My best guess, though? Would be dinner."

Beneath me, an endlessly moving blanket made hush noises and dreams at the altars of rock and sand. It swirled and called, bubbling its request at the tips that made white its waves and I thought of my bed... how relaxed I could be in a void that hugged and dragged. My feet both looked to catch that bottom plank, and then maybe the second, maybe I would jump. Maybe I didn't have to fly to chase the gull. Maybe I could just swim.

"How do I get down there?" I asked.

"Hmmm." Nonno shook his head, turned and began to walk back towards the house. "I wouldn't go down there... there's a huge, angry jellyfish waiting for me on the beach."

Tidal hands reached for me, and I held their grasp with my eyes...

"—jellyfish!" I suddenly realised. "What jellyfish?" I called.

We walked back from the ocean, and Nonno didn't say a word. He left a space between us however, not far away, not like his voice or eyes seemed sometimes, but just large enough for me to take notice of the landscape which I had ignored before.

To my left, was this uneven line of trees that stretched beyond the house; their trunks were short pedestals and their canopies, large bowls filled with bright, watery blooms. The birds would settle in their leaves, and bathe the sky from their feathers, shake the breeze from the beaks, and warm the sugars of the tree's fruit with harmonious melodies I'd never heard before.

On my right, was a vast garden bed surrounded by a white, log fence. Amongst its vines and dark, broad leaves were bouquets held aloft by the earth, made with colours that man made stone just couldn't be. Some were oil paint reds and purples, others were like chalk in blues and greens. Their blossoms came in different shapes and sizes, like I understood snowflakes might be. And wandering betwixt the blooms and flowerets were the sounds of insects unseen, flitting from one pistil to another, collecting pollen and nectar to make honey or draw the seed.

Mixing this with a pearl crash ocean folding behind me, I was privy to a complexity I didn't yet understand. In the city, there was this busyness, but it was bland and ended only in more busyness. Here, there was untamed movement all around me, and it felt rich with purpose. Was this the hidden season that old people talked about? Spring?

I wondered then, and even now, if Nonno knew, walking beside me, what fingers were drawing at the loom inside my head. If he realised how he made the crossing patterns of the mural I stitched, stand out from its pattern. Later that night, when I would eventually lay in bed, I'm sure I would cover myself in those fabrics.

"Thank goodness you found him, Sofia!"

Nonna perked up as we rounded the small glass house, beside the house, filled with golden sun and terracotta pots. My family didn't stare as Nonna stood and pulled my chair out beside mom, or when I sat down and picked up my fork.

"He always tries to disappear around supper time, you know." She continued.

"I do not." Contested Nonno as he kissed my mother's cheek, "I love your cooking." Shook my father's hand and found a seat beside Rosa, who was cow-hazard-happy with a strawberry on a fork that she teased Nonno with. "I just have a poor sense of schedule and you have a poor sense of scheduling me." This made Nonno smile wide, just like an ocean.

"Good, we're all here then." Mom reached across her plate and pet the innocent part of my hand which waited beneath its fork. The part that dipped between my finger and thumb. The part where my other hand might cup it should I feel nervous. She looked me in the eyes and gave that smile. "Did you see the ocean?" She whispered low.

"Is everything alright?" Asked Nonna, smiling as she busied around the table's perimeter, eyes bouncing from Rosa to myself.

"It's perfect! Couldn't be better." Replied my father.

"Not you, you old goat."

Nonna was close enough that she swung a checkered tablecloth at my father's shoulder, playful but with intent. "I'm talking to the children of course." She huffed and looked at Rosa, whose eyes were marbled over from the tabletop of food moving into her mouth.

She looked at me.

"I'm alright." I managed—and I was. "And I saw it." I motioned to mom.

The ocean had left a mark inside me, but it wasn't like a rip or a tear... more like the mark a sewing needle leaves when it's meant to repair.

"I'm great!" Rosa muffled through a mouthful of more strawberry. "We never eat like this at home!"

"Good then." Mom nodded. "As we were saying before, Sofia." My dad took a big breath. "Your father and I think you might like to stay here for a couple of days, see if you like it out of the heat. And in a week or so, you phone and let us know if you'd want to come home... or if you'd like to stay... for the summer."

I toyed with the pasta on my plate, staring down into its swirling paint. "I understand."

Mom leaned down closer to the table, trying to catch the better part of my eye, carving a soft, little smirk for me. "You know you'll have a lot of fun here. I did, when I was growing up."

I took a deep breath and tried to match her, making my own paper simpier. "Okay." Then my brows furrowed. "What *is* there to do here?"

"That's easy." Started my father. "You can go for walks... and maybe hikes." He pursed his lips and searched my mom for hints. "Marathons?"

"There's more than that." Then she furrowed her own brows. "I did a lot of crocheting when I was growing up... let me think."

"Tsk." Nonno placed his fork down, cracking open the awkward words. "Your parents have been so far from the real world in that... city... they've forgotten what it's like to be a person."

Mom giggled.

"There will be frog catching, bird calling, animal following, insect chasing and fairie trapping." He said smiling.

"Yep," continued Nonna. "Pie baking, fruit picking, sky watching, storytelling, story making," she said with an upward inflection. "And I'm sure you'll eat all manner of dessert! You two will have a proper raising up."

"That's right." Nonno grunted, setting his chin firm.

"It'll only be the summer though? Right?" I asked, sending some extension in the words, raising up. "It's not forever."

"Of course not." Assured my father, the heft on his plate getting to his belly.

"It could be." Offered, Nonno.

"Bah! Don't be silly!" Nonna fixed to hit him next with her tea towel, moving around the table and aiming.

"Wha?" He covered his head.

"Let the children get through the door before you start trying to shut it closed behind them!" And she flicked the towel with such accuracy, like she'd done it a thousand times before.

"You're coming back, right? At the end of the summer?" Rosa's face dragged long and her eyes swelled, all the water in her body moving at once towards her big blue eyes.

Mother reached across the table to her, putting her hand out beside a bottle of wine and a half cut loaf of bread. "Of course, Rosa. Nonno's just being silly. He knows that you live with us."

Rosa grabbed her hand and made lace patterns in fear between the comfort of mom's crochet fingers.

"Besides, we would tell you first, if we ever considered such a thing." Mother pressed a bullet between her teeth and pointed it back at Nonno, triggers in her eyes.

"What?" He demanded again. "I'm saying that if she wanted to... "

Nonna flicked the towel again, nipping his ear, drawing out the dog in his voice.

Then she made that smile. Mom sometimes made it, very in-often, like she were saving it for a special day. A family heirloom or an anecdote... maybe just a box of cookies hidden away. But she brought it out then, and it felt the way a comforter does when you're a child and the night,

for once, is cold... like an endless place. Like an endless place. "You'll love it here, Rosa. And we'll phone you. And we will come back to get you. We love you."

No tears came from Rosa then, she settled into the curve on mother's face, sleepy and content.

I caught a little jewel at Nonna's eye though, before she wiped it away. And I watched her place it in her pocket. Hiding it, the way they hid the conversation from Nonno's flat, oblivious words.

It was easy to spot that they'd had this conversation before. That Rosa and I could've stayed here indefinitely. Although Mom would certainly come get us at the end of this...adventure, there was something back home that had chased us here, that would remain there when we did get home, something that made them consider the Nonni's home more permanent than transient.

"Where will the house go?" Asked Rosa, spilling into my train of thought.

"Which one?" Asked my mother, her shoulders moving the way sand makes dunes.

"Our house." She said exasperated. "Where will I sleep?"

"The house on wheels comes with us, love." Said my father without looking.

"Where will my bed go?" She persisted, concern puffing up the corners of her eyes.

"You have a bed here." Nonna moved around the table smoothly, to place a hand on Rosa's shoulder. "You have your own room here, even. I dressed it just for you."

Rosa's swollen worry deflated and she lit up at the prospect. "My own room! I've never had a room!" She announced.

"You too." Nonna turned to me, her smile so bright it might attract the moths just waking in the forest beside this solarium. "I've made a room for you too." She leaned down then, and her smile faded, replaced with a genuine worry. "Are you alright?" She asked.

And I didn't want to say that I was suddenly aware of my parents abandoning me. But Nonna had those knowing eyes you sometimes see in people not caught in the traps of the city. People, who are rather rare, that aren't in pace with the strides in our clock faces back home. Sometimes the only live for a moment. I've seen it in my mother a lot, a person she had once been in a memory of her own. A knowing look, one that didn't require my telling. She leaned in even closer and she whispered.

"I know, it's a big stone. But I'll help you carry it." Then her grin returned and squeezed my shoulder before leaning back and speaking in a normal tone again. "Have some lasagna child, fill that hollow leg your mother so often told me about." She continued on around the table. "I'll go get that cake. Time for more sweets at this table."

"Am I not sweet enough?" My father questioned.

"Lord." Grumbled Nonno. "You know, it may not be so bad to get a little distance from this joker." He swung a thumb at my father and laughed. And my parents laughed at that.

On Nonna's advice, I took a forkful of the red lathered pasta on my plate and held it up in the afternoon light that spilled in like silk needles through the solarium's glass roof. I smelled the delicious meal, the hints in oregano and rosemary, the crystal specks of pink salt, masterfully fallen on this piece. I closed my eyes and took the bite. And my mouth spoke immediately to my soul then in a sweetgrass language of knots that I had never known before in their words. They spoke of spice and season, how the wind adjusts the taste of the earth. They spoke long into that night, warm around a fire sweet with sage and licorice root, they connected... like that had never before.

I found myself forking away at that plate, thinking that maybe Rosa was right. The food might just be a good enough reason to be swayed.

My last bite, Nonno and father chatting, Rosa reaching out to my mother with a content smile on her pale white face. And I thought of that picture once more. Nonna came back from the kitchen, carrying a cake that looked as though it deserved birthday candles.