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Marathon

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My mother married for the third time on a boat. She wore yellow. “It’s a hopeful color, I suppose,” Grandmother sighed as Mother twirled from the dressing room, beaming at her own reflection.

For her first wedding my mother had worn cutoffs and a blouse with enough peasantry billow to conceal the fact that she’d given birth eight months prior. She was barely nineteen. My mother’s first husband, it bears mentioning, was not my father. Mother had run away from home to marry, because Grandmother didn’t approve. She’d run away, but left me behind. After two months, Grandmother insisted Mother bring me to live with her, and her husband insisted he didn’t agree to be nobody’s father. At least that’s how the argument was always repeated to me. Mother’s first marriage fell apart after barely four months.

At the second wedding, when she was twenty-two and I was four, Mother wore lace and a full veil. *Tacky*, Grandmother said, to wear a veil for one’s second marriage. She said this over and over, for the next three years, until the occasion of Mother’s final marriage. *Tacky*: as if it were the veil’s fault Steven turned out to be so awful.

This time it was a yellow dress and a floppy straw hat, and these offended Grandmother with their informality. I got to wear white, though. I was the flower girl.

The Mississippi River is not beautiful in the daytime; its waters are not clear and they do not sparkle. Before sunset, the river is a sluggish brown, and nearly as thick as cake batter. Only cake batter does not churn with plastic bags and stray feathers.

The Mississippi doesn't become beautiful until the sky turns dark, when the sludgy muck transforms into opaque vinyl, reflecting the moon and the stars, as well as the cheap Christmas lights twined around the railings of the Memphis Queen, the faux riverboat Mother and Benji had rented for their ceremony. Under a four o'clock sun, the ship's planters obviously held artificial flowers, stems broken and bent at impossible angles, stuck into green foam. All the glasses, not just those given to the children, were plastic. The guests stood around tables covered in thin plastic, filigreed at the edges to mimic lace. The wedding cake rested on bunting made from actual cloth, though the side facing away from the guests was pockmarked with small, even holes, tinged beige at the edges. My wandering fingers skittered away from these scars as though they still held heat. Even at eight, I knew full well what a cigarette burn looked like.

I don't recall much of the ceremony. The Memphis Queen's progress was slow, but I still felt lurchingly nauseous. Grandmother deemed my pink glitter sunglasses too informal for the service. I wasn't allowed to put them back on until after the photos were taken, by which point I had a headache from squinting from squinting against the summer sun. In all of the pictures from that day, my eyes dart away from the camera, looking for a patch of shade.

Mother, Grandmother, and Benji were the only people on the boat I knew, but that didn't stop strangers from saying my name cheerfully or trying to draw me into baby-talk conversations about how happy I must be. The water sluicing alongside the boat looked

like the toilet after sickness, but to avoid strangers speaking too close to my ear or Benji's over-eager aunt who kept trying to tickle me, I hid myself behind the table with the cake and watched the river ooze by.

We weren't supposed to have the boat past sundown. Sunset weddings cost twice as much. We were meant to disembark by six, so the next wedding party could set up and push out by seven-thirty. Only the boat ran out of gas, and the current carried us across the state lines from Memphis into Tunica, Mississippi. The company had to send a tow for us, and Mother and Benji got their sunset for free.

* * *

The only thing I know about my father is that Mother and Grandmother's eyes are brown and mine are green. I am an inch taller than Benji's nephews, the only cousins I have ever known. All I know of Mother's nameless first spouse are Grandmother's stories of disappointment, which she rarely retells anymore. Mother's second husband, Steven, is the shadow that lurches at the outside edges of my vision, the reason I run up the basement stairs once the lights are off. He is every unexpected loud noise, every car door slammed in a too-empty parking lot. I remember leaving Grandmother's house the month after my fourth birthday, moving into small rooms without windows that smelled of cigarettes and animal fur, and being back to Grandmother before turning five. I remember how hard I tried to be small and quiet, how I never tried hard enough.

I was eight when Mother and Benji married, old enough that I would've remembered him well, even if he'd left.

After Mother and Benji returned from their honeymoon, the three of us moved in together, into a new house, instead of the apartment Benji shared with a cousin, the place

he lived while he and Mother dated. My whole life I'd only lived in someone else's space, most of my time spent with Grandmother.

“Oh, Janey,” Mother said, “We finally have our own place.” We were standing side by side on the steps leading out of the kitchen and into the backyard. Mother's hand rested on my shoulder and every few minutes she would reach up and ruffle my hair. We watched Benji assemble a swing set, his wedding gift to me. He had completed the blue metal A-frame, and was re-hanging the second swing, after I told him chains were too long and the swing too close to the ground.

I wanted to tell him that between second and third grades the swings at school had lost their luster, that I enjoyed foursquare and double-dutch now, but he looked so proud of himself, and so eager for me to be happy. I didn't want to seem ungrateful, still unsure how he'd react to a show of displeasure. My early years had taught me well the necessity of appearing glad of any gift I was offered.

We lived in Southhaven, technically in Mississippi, though new construction pushed the town partially into Tennessee. Our house was away from the more tightly-packed new developments. “Our country manor,” Benji called it, though Mother laughed when he said it.

“That's just because you're a city-slicker,” she always replied. Like Benji, the backyard overwhelmed me. My legs and lungs gave out before I could reach the edge of the property line at a full clip. A series of wooden stakes, spaced a handful of feet apart, separated our yard from the taller grass of our neighbors, whose house I could only just make out in the distance.

Our new house had so many rooms, and everything smelled new. No one had ever burned a dinner or smoked a cigarette or dropped a cup of coffee in the kitchen. There were no unknowable stains near the baseboards, and everything in the bathroom was blindingly white. The vinyl flooring in Grandmother's house gave the illusion of wood, but, where it met the wall, the edges curled up, trapping crumbs and dust underneath.

"Are we rich now?" I asked Mother the first time I wandered through our new house, canvas bag of my meager possessions clutched tightly in my right hand.

Mother threw her head back and laughed. "We're gonna be just fine now. Just fine," she said after pushing my sweaty bangs off my forehead and kissing my temple. The central air whirred in the background, so unlike the rattle and drip of the window-mounted air conditioner in Grandmother's bedroom, working overtime to cool down a house that sat unoccupied through the beginning of summer.

Grandmother's house only had two bedrooms, and I slept in the large storage closet across from the single bathroom. I found this arrangement perfectly delightful. A child-sized mattress was pushed against the back wall, with barely a foot of space on the floor beside it for a cup of water and a lamp. I had my own tiny cave, a capsule. When I turned off the lamp, the room became perfectly dark, and I was invisible. I liked it because it felt like a secret.

My new bedroom had three windows with purple lace curtain. I had a bed, not just a mattress on the floor. For the first week I was terrified I would fall out of the bed, a wholly new fear, a distress I hadn't needed for my the past seven years. The bed had lavender sheets and a deep purple comforter. I don't know who decided my favorite color was purple, but after a week I agreed with them.

We all had beds and dressers the day we moved in, but over half the house sat empty. I would sit in the space that would eventually become our living room, propped up against the wall, watching the shadows of the trees in our yard dance across the glossy, tan hardwood floor. At midday the sun shone directly into the front windows, and I sat against the far wall watching the trees' shadows stretching towards me, stretching out my own bare feet, pointing my toes to meet them.

Benji mistook my enchantment for malaise. "Don't worry, kiddo, the furniture will be here soon."

"I like it empty," I replied, perplexed that he wanted to cover up the floor. The sofa, armchairs, coffee table, and thick rug arrived ten days later. Unwilling to make peace with the furniture, I gave myself headaches hanging upside down off the arm of the sofa, trying to find some magic in the emptiness of the ceiling. The shadows never reached that high. Though it was enticingly blank, the ceiling was matte white, the wrong color.

There were still two empty rooms at the back of the house. True, the shadows were less intricate, but the floors were as glossy as their now-shrouded counterpart in the living room. For almost an entire year I imagined these rooms were a gift to me, a consolation prize for filling the living room with so many things we never seemed to use.

Benji just didn't want to decorate until the baby was born. He considered it bad luck, tempting fate. My mother was all tented dresses and swollen ankles before he could be persuaded to assemble the changing table. I learned of Mother's pregnancy when I discovered the crib.

Benji insists Mother promised to have “the talk” with me. He’s very clear that it was her job to explain the situation. I’m sure that getting fatter and asking me every other day, “Aren’t babies cute?” was Mother’s version of telling me. It was the tail-end of fourth grade, and, in Mother’s defense, I could be willfully obtuse about almost everything.

Just as she began to show, right as the fireflies flipped the switch on summer vacation, Mother became less and less inclined to expose herself to the heat outside. I wasn’t allowed to play outside without adult supervision, so my only chance to leave the house came on Wednesday afternoons, when Grandmother would pick me up and take me grocery shopping with her at the Piggly Wiggly. Mother was having a horrible pregnancy, nothing like how easy I’d been, she said often. Grandmother assured her that a difficult pregnancy meant a strong baby, and I wondered what that meant about me.

One Wednesday, around her seventh month, Mother was too sick to wait in the living room with me, and I savored the freedom of sitting alone on the front stoop, shopping list and envelope of twenties clutched tightly in my hand. The realization that no one was watching me and I could just walk away, go somewhere else, enticed me so much it terrified me. I released the envelope of money and clutched the edge of the porch to stop myself.

Though I had lived primarily with her for the first seven years of my life, Mother coming and going based on her romantic fortunes, Grandmother and I never established any sort of rapport. She wanted me to play the piano and wear shin-length pink dresses and learn how to cook. She wanted me to remain chaste until marriage, to avoid making my own mother a grandmother before age forty.

These shopping trips did nothing to bring us closer together, but that didn't matter to me. All I wanted was a chance to get out of the house and talk to people. When Grandmother would get distracted riffling through her plastic binder of coupons, almost always in front of the soup display, I would wander away and start conversations with the other shoppers. *Precocious* is how one older gentleman in suspenders and a bowtie described me. He winked when I asked him why he was buying so many cookies. When I got to be his age, he explained, I could eat as many cookies as I wanted and no one could stop me.

"Is strawberry your favorite?" I asked a woman close to Grandmother's age as she studied the boxed cake mixes. There was a box of chocolate cake mix in her hand, but she was biting her lips, three fingers resting on the metal edge of the shelf just below the boxed of strawberry mix.

She was making cupcakes for the church social, she told me. Another woman at church said you could make the cupcakes with applesauce instead of oil, but that didn't taste the same. She grimaced as she told me, pained by the thought of fat free cupcakes.

"You should get what you want," I said, pointing to the strawberry boxes.
"You're doing all the work."

"If only it were that easy," she said with a sigh. Walking past me she laid a hand on my shoulder and said, "Thanks, sugar." For what, I wasn't sure.

From a college-aged boy whose hair was long on one side and completely shaved on the other I learned that you have to open the carton of eggs and inspect them, make sure none are broken. If he found a broken egg, he swapped it out for a good egg from another carton.

“Then someone else gets the bad egg,” I said.

“That’s what they get for not checking,” he replied, walking away.

In the cereal aisle I approached a dark-haired woman. She held a box of Honey Nut Cheerios in each hand. Her eyes were cast down to the floor, empty and unfocused.

“Is there a difference between them?” I asked her, gesturing between the two boxes.

She shook her head slightly, as though waking herself up. When she turned to answer me she gasped. Her lips began to tremble, and she bit down on them.

“Ma’am?” I asked. “Are you alright?”

“I am, sweetheart,” she said. “I am just fine.”

“Is there?” I prompted. “A difference between the boxes?”

She looked down at the boxes in her hands and laughed. “I just happen to enjoy Cheerios. You know, my son, when he was little, every year on his birthday he didn’t want a cake. He just wanted to eat two bowls of cereal with half-and-half.”

“The stuff for coffee?”

“The very stuff,” she replied with a nod.

“Is that good?”

“Well, it’s very delicious but very bad for your heart. You should ask your mama if you can try it.”

“Jane,” I heard Grandmother call from the next aisle. “Jane, it’s time to go.”

The woman with the cereal opened her mouth to say something, but I knew if I kept Grandmother waiting she wouldn’t buy me a gumball on the way out. “I have to go,” I said, before she could say anything, turning on my heel and racing around the corner to

meet Grandmother at register six. Even if other registers had shorter lines, Grandmother always picked number six.

“Wait,” the woman called out to me. When I stopped and looked back she looked genuinely sad. “Good-bye, Jane,” the woman said.

Grandmother called again, louder this time. “Jane! I swear if you’re reading comic books I’m just going to leave you here.”

When I was four, Grandmother caught me squishing a line of ants crawling across the kitchen floor towards a few grains of spilled sugar. *Mush*, I announced as each ant compressed under the force of my thumb. Horrified, Grandmother made me pray with her, then made me promise I would never hurt another living thing on purpose. Though I knew it wasn’t really my fault, leaving this woman sad felt an awful lot like hurting her on purpose.

“We come every week,” I told her, walking backwards towards Grandmother’s voice. “Maybe I can see you again.” I waved, then turned and sprinted away. From the corner of my eye I thought I saw the woman raise her hand in return.

We didn’t go to the Piggly Wiggly the next week. Grandmother spent the weekend with a stomach bug she picked up at her church picnic. She insisted she had made a full recovery by Wednesday, but Mother didn’t want to chance me catching the bug and passing it to her. Benji bought groceries that week. I didn’t mind eating only corn dogs and frozen waffles, but Mother rolled her eyes at the start of every meal.

Two weeks after first meeting her, I ran into the woman in the cereal aisle again. “Hello there,” I said.

“Oh, Jane, I thought you weren’t coming.” She reached out and tucked my hair behind my ear. “You weren’t here last week.”

“Grandmother was sick,” I explained, gesturing with my thumb in the direction I assumed Grandmother to be. The woman seemed frantic today, her smile jumping. Today she wore makeup, enough for me to realize she’d been bare-faced two weeks ago.

“I have something for you,” she said, handing me a plastic Piggly Wiggly bag. “I don’t know which comics you like, so I bought a couple of different ones.”

“No way,” I said. I held the bag by its two handles, and stuck my head almost fully inside to see what I’d been given. Belatedly, I remembered my manners, and straightened up. “This is amazing. Thank you.” I smiled at her, and she opened her arms. Though I had watched several educational cartoons about stranger danger, I didn’t really see the harm in giving her a hug. There were people everywhere, plenty of people to intervene if she turned kidnapper. And no one ever bought me comics. I hugged her briefly, then pulled back to examine my bag of treats. There were six comics, two different versions of the X-Men, a couple that looked to be about animal friends, Batman, and Spiderman.

“This is the best,” I said. “This is the best thing that’s happened all week.”

She didn’t answer me, but smiled, hands folded over her heart. “You are so precious,” she said finally. “I’m happy that I made you happy.”

“I’m very happy,” I told her, and she pulled me into another hug, tighter this time. After a few seconds I began to wiggle towards escape, but she didn’t ease her hold on my shoulders.

When I finally slid free, I began to back away. “I should probably go find my grandma, but thank you. That was really nice of you.”

“Please don’t go,” she said. “Would you like to get some ice cream? We can go to the Baskin Robins.”

No one ever took me to Baskin Robins, either, but I also understood this interaction rode the line of what my Sunday school teacher would approve of. Grandmother would never give me permission to leave with a stranger. As much as I wanted more people to talk to, a friend who wasn’t also a relative, I didn’t want to leave with this woman.

After backing up five steps I heard my name in stereo, from in front and behind. Grandmother rounded the corner behind me, calling for me at the same moment as the woman in front of me.

Seeing Grandmother, the woman gasped. She pressed a hand to the center of her chest, then spoke. “Eleanor, hello. Hello, Eleanor. It’s good to see you.”

Grandmother kept her eyes on the stranger but spoke to me. “Jane, come here. Right now, Jane.” I retreated quickly to her side, and Grandmother gripped my shoulder so tightly I would find faint bruises the next day.

“Jane has grown up so well,” the woman said.

“No thanks to you, Christine,” Grandmother bit back. “No thanks to any of you,” as angry as I had ever heard her.

“It’s better now,” the woman said earnestly. “Everything’s worked out. He’s finally defeated the drugs, praise Jesus.”

“I’m pleased to hear it, but that has no bearing on me and mine, Christine. You know that full well.”

“He has a right to see her. I have a right to see her. Please,” she said as tears began to fall, but Grandmother was already pulling me away, our shopping cart abandoned at the end of the aisle. “Don’t take her away again,” the woman cried, but Grandmother didn’t turn or pause in her forward motion. I cast one look back in her direction, saw her place her face in her hands, shoulders shaking violently.

“Who was that?” I asked Grandmother once we were back in the car. The silence between us felt tight. Her eyes were locked on the road before her and her knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

“No one,” she said. “That’s no one important.”

“You tell me,” I began, my voice faltering. I took a deep breath, then pressed on. “You tell me, all the time, that I have to be nice to people. Even people I don’t like, I have to be nice to them.” I glanced sideways at Grandmother, who gave no sign of having heard me. “But you were mean to that lady. You made her sad.”

“There are things you don’t understand, Jane,” Grandmother finally said, her eyes still locked on the road. “This is for your own good.”

“The other kids at Sunday School call me names, and you say I have to be nice to them,” I protested.

“You need to drop this right now, young lady,” Grandmother replied.

“No one is ever nice to me,” I pressed on. “That lady was being nice to me, and you yelled at her. You don’t want me to be happy,” I accused. “You hate me.”

Grandmother had always held firm on children who didn't mind or sass back, but my punishments were never more strict than banishment to my closet bedroom or having my supper taken away. As the car rolled to a halt at a red light, I barely saw movement out of the corner of my eye before Grandmother's hand connected with my cheek. Because we were sat beside each other, her hand glanced off the top of my cheekbone. It didn't hurt as much as a blow from straight on, but Grandmother had never struck me before. I began to cry, more from the shock than the pain.

When we pulled into the driveway, I leapt out of the car before Grandmother had cut the engine. I wiped a wrist across my face, smearing the snot and tears, and leaned into the open door to address Grandmother. "It's fine," I said. "I hate you, too." I turned and ran into the house, slamming myself in my bedroom and leaving Grandmother to carry in all the groceries on her own.

The next week, Grandmother arrived full of forced cheer, bearing a coloring book for me. Before her arrival, I told Mother I didn't want to go shopping today, or ever again. Now Grandmother stood in my doorway, peace offering in hand, suggesting we drive two towns over to see the new Super WalMart.

"Do I have to?" I sat on the edge of my bed, swinging my legs just enough that my pointed toes skimmed the floor. "Will I be in trouble if I don't?" I added, addressing this question to Mother, hovering nervously behind Grandmother's shoulder.

"You're not in trouble," Grandmother assured me. I had made no move to take the gift she still held extended, so she took two steps into the room and laid it on my bed.

I looked down at the Sesame Street coloring book at sixteen-pack of off-brand crayons, both clearly too young for me, then back up to Grandmother. "No thank you," I

said. I laid down on my side, curling my legs up to my chest, and rolled until I faced the wall. I wanted to extend my feet, kick the coloring book to the floor, but I knew that would be too provocative, a punishable offense. I scrunched my eyes shut, listening to their footsteps retreating to the front door. I kept them shut as I heard Mother walking back towards my room.

“Can I come in and talk to you?” she asked.

“No,” I replied. Because she’d phrased it as a question, Mother left space for both us to wiggle out of an uncomfortable situation. After a few long seconds, I heard her retreating to her own darkened bedroom.

Grandmother stopped inviting me shopping two weeks later. Though Grandmother advocated for throwing them away, Mother let me keep the comic books.

For entirely too long I thought people just didn't have fathers. The world was full of adult men, sure, I saw them almost every time I left the house. But I had no first-hand experience with fathers. I didn't have a father. The bits of conversation I overheard lead me to understand that Benji didn't have a father. Mother didn't have a father, although Grandmother did have several framed pictures of a young man in a military uniform displayed in her apartment. She would linger in front of these photographs, trailing her fingers across them sadly when she thought I was engrossed in the television.

When's Mother's labor with Ruth Ellen began, she and Benji left me with Grandmother on their way to the hospital. "Gram will bring you along when the baby's here," Benji told me.

Aside from an awkward Sunday at the Longview Baptist Church, I hadn't seen her since our last trip to the grocery store. Because they didn't know how long the labor would take, Benji and Mother had packed an overnight bag well in advance. To keep my entertained, the bag contained several books about the benefits of becoming a big sister, as well as the still-untouched coloring book. As we hurried out of the house, I added the comic books.

When we first arrived, Grandmother entreated me into helping make a painting to hang in the new baby's room. After twenty minutes of half-hearted participation on my part, offering one-word answers to all of her questions, applying the paint just carefully enough that it wouldn't be seen as deliberately messy, Grandmother dropped her brush and sighed. "I thought this was a nice thing you could do for the baby, but if you aren't going to actually help me, you can just go to your room," she said.

I bounded gladly away, tossing a glib *Okay* over my shoulder as I retreated to my closet bedroom. Two hours later, as I lay curled on the mattress, re-reading the Superman comic for the twentieth time, the phone in Grandmother's home rang. Grandmother's side of the conversation was entirely limited to the phrases *calm down* and *hold on*.

"Bring something to entertain yourself," Grandmother told me, pausing in my doorway just long enough to impart her instructions.

"What?" I called after her, unwilling to give up my burrow.

"Get up, Jane," she called. I could hear the jangle of her car keys. "This is not the time for dawdling. We need to get to the hospital."

"Is the baby here?" I asked, the prospect of meeting my new sibling enough to get me into the doorway.

"If only, girl," Grandmother said. She held out the bag Mother and Benji had packed, now emptied of everything but the books about welcoming a new sibling. "You can read these while we wait," she told me, and I reached out and took the bag from her.

We found Benji pacing in the waiting room of the labor and delivery floor. A nurse was sitting on the sofa, deliberately checking her watch. She sighed dramatically when Grandmother called out to Benji.

"Good luck with him," the nurse said to Grandmother, gesturing to Benji.

"She threw me out," Benji cried to Grandmother.

"Calm down," Grandmother said.

"She threw me out," he repeated, louder and flintier.

"Hang on, son," Grandmother said.

"She threw me out! Why did she throw me out?" This time it was a full shriek.

Grandmother took a firm hold of his forearms. “This is very different than last time,” Grandmother told him. “Last time she was with me, and she probably just wants something familiar.” Grandmother stared at Benji until he nodded his agreement. “It’s going to be fine. I’ll go sit with her. You stay here with Jane. The nurse will come when it’s time.” Grandmother looked over Benji’s shoulder and raised an eyebrow in the nurse’s direction. The nurse pushed herself off the sofa with a huff, and Grandmother followed her through the swinging doors that led away from the sitting area.

In the waiting room of the hospital, waiting to hear about Mother and the baby, Benji spoke at length about his father for the first time that I could recall. He told me how his father taught him to fish, taught him to play baseball, was the best man and the finest father. How could he possibly measure up?

“You knew your father?” I demanded, flabbergasted.

“Of course,” Benji answered, making it sound like I’d asked a ridiculous question. We were seated side by side on a pale grey sofa whose pilled, linty surface was dotted with off-color rough patches. These patches confused me, until Benji’s rabbiting knee jostled the Styrofoam coffee cup in his hand, creating a new stain. Benji alternated bouncing his legs, which he had done for the entire time I was there. First he would bounce his left leg, then he’d still for no more than five seconds, then the right leg would begin bouncing. I’d tried timing the bouncing, then counting the number of bounces, but there didn’t seem to be a pattern.

“I just want to be a good father, Jane,” he said.

“You’re not dead, that’s a start.” I meant it to be reassuring. His father was dead, Mother’s father was dead, my father might as well be dead (if Grandmother were to be

believed). Being not dead seemed like winning the father game from where I was sitting, but I could tell from Benji's face that it wasn't the right thing to say. The bouncing stopped, and he pushed himself off the couch to pace.

The nurse did not come to fetch Benji until after Ruth Ellen was born. He held my hand as we walked to Mother's room, but as soon as we reached the room he let it drop and rushed to her side. I didn't see Ruth Ellen at all that day, just a tightly wrapped blanket and the blinding smiles of Mother and Benji. I stood in the doorway, wondering what my role was, when Grandmother stepped in front of me to block my view of the bed. "Your mother is very tired. We're going to leave her here to get some rest. We can come back tomorrow."

I nodded, and let Grandmother steer me back to the parking lot. I was surprised to find it was full dark when we left the hospital. Grandmother heated up a plate of fish sticks for dinner while I changed into my pajamas and brushed out my tangled hair. After a silent dinner, Grandmother stood and took my plate, pausing to kiss the top of my head. "What an exciting day," she said. "You should probably get some rest."

I retreated to my closet and a twenty-first reading of Superman. Grandmother never did take me back to the hospital. Mother was released two days later, on Friday, but I stayed with Grandmother until Sunday.

Ruth Ellen threw an unexpected wrench into my life. I could have ignored her easily enough, if she had been quiet. She grew into a serious, silent child, but as a baby she wailed constantly.

I had no experience living with an infant. Ruth Ellen's squirming and screaming, the way she prevented anyone in the house from getting a good night's sleep, were secondary concerns to me. The thing that upset me most about my new sister was that I had clear recollections of being punished for everything that caused adults to fret and coo over her.

"You probably cried all the time, too," Benji said with a wink, trying to make light of our shattered REM cycles, the way we all had to tiptoe close to the walls when Ruth Ellen finally fell asleep.

Ruth Ellen's fourth night at home was the fourth night I'd been woken by her wails, cries that reverberated with such intensity I felt them in my spine more than heard them with my ears. I tried turning towards the wall and holding my pillow over my head, which had worked well enough the night before. I couldn't not hear Ruth Ellen, though.

I followed her howling to the living room, where Mother and Benji stood, facing each other, baby cradled between them. They moved their feet side to side, shuffling in an awkward two-step. Benji was whispering *hush, hush* over and over, peering down at his new daughter. Mother's unfocused eyes were on the wall over Benji's shoulder, seeing nothing as tears rolled down her cheeks.

I felt sympathy for my mother, with misery writ large on her exhausted face. More than that, though, I hoped she regretted the new addition to our family as much as I did. Whatever my shortcomings, at least everyone got to sleep.

Benji noticed me first. “Hey, Jane,” he said, raising his voice to be heard over the baby. “Go back to bed, okay?”

“I can’t sleep,” I protested. “It’s too loud.”

“She’ll calm down in a second,” he assured me. “We just gotta be patient.”

“But I can’t sleep,” I repeated. “Why can’t you make her be quiet?” I demanded through clenched teeth, emphasizing every syllable. I stomped my foot as punctuation.

Benji opened his mouth to answer, but Mother’s eyes snapped onto me. She realized I was there, and suddenly I had all of her attention. “I am trying, Jane,” she yelled. “I am trying to put the baby to sleep. Maybe you could try being helpful, instead of just standing there and making things worse.”

I balled my fists at my side, tensing all my muscles ramrod straight, threw my head. I screamed until I ran out of breath, turned and ran back to my room, and slammed my door. When the first slam wasn’t sufficiently angry enough, I opened the door and slammed it again, gratified to hear an uptick in Ruth Ellen’s cries.

No one followed me, and eventually Ruth Ellen quieted. I heard Benji place her back in her crib, then tiptoe back to he and Mother’s bedroom. I couldn’t fall asleep. Talking back or yelling got me drug over Steven’s lap, beat with whatever was closest at hand until I couldn’t stand. I’d managed to stay on Benji’s good side for over a year, but there was no way he could overlook tonight’s outburst.

When the morning light began creeping across my floor, I threw off my covers and went in search of my punishment. It was coming either way, and sure to be worse if I hid from it.

The house was quiet and the kitchen empty. To keep me from kneeling on the counters to root through the cupboards, the boxes of cereal were lined up alongside the refrigerator. I poured myself a bowl of generic puffed rice, sprinkled liberally with the sugar for Benji's coffee, since no one was there to stop me. I carried my bowl to our small table and began to eat. Benji usually sat facing the doorway, the head of the table as it was, and I sat with my back to the doorway for our meals. This morning it seemed like a good idea to see what was coming. Whatever my punishment for last night's outburst, it wouldn't get the drop on me.

I chewed slowly, savoring a silence broken only by the faint pops and snaps from my bowl. After finishing the cereal, I savored my favorite part of the meal: the milky sugar settled to the bottom of the bowl. I tilted my bowl towards me, and ran the tapered edge of the spoon along the bottom of the bowl, scraping up the slurry of sugary milk. After licking the spoon clean, I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth, enjoying the slight sandpapery scratch until the sugar dissolved.

A quick glance over my shoulder assured me I was still the only creature stirring, and I hurried to pour myself a second bowl of cereal. No one could prove I'd eaten two bowls. Besides, condemned prisoners always got a last meal of their choosing. The second bowl of cereal was half gone when Benji appeared in the doorway.

"Hey, Jane," he said. "Good morning."

Spoon in mouth, I could only nod. He turned his back on me to prep the coffeemaker. In a few seconds I heard the bubbling hiss that meant the coffee was brewing, but Benji still hadn't turned back to me. I glanced over to see his head pillowed on his folded arms, slumped against one of the cabinets. As I watched, he stretched his

arms to the ceiling, joints popping like my bowl of cereal. My spoon slipped from my sweaty hand, which was fine since my appetite had evaporated.

When Benji turned back to me, smiling. His smile wasn't real, but it also wasn't cruel, and I didn't know what to make of it. "Look, about last night," he began, and I squared my shoulders, tensing my back where I expected the first blow to land. "Your mother didn't mean what she said."

My shoulders stayed tense, and I studied Benji, my eyes caught between a flinch and a grimace. He scrubbed a hand over his face, rubbing the back of his hand across his closed eyes. "I have it on good authority," he said, lowering his hand and looking at me with a real smile, "that you were a very quiet, calm baby. And I've never had a baby before." He smiled as he said this, but his laugh sounded like choking. "None of us quite know how to handle your sister, but we're going to figure it out, okay?"

Again, all I could do was nod.

Benji walked over and rested a hand on my head. I twitched away, but he seemed not to notice. After mussing my hair for a few seconds, he said, "Finish up your breakfast. When everyone's up and attem, we're gonna take a quick trip. We should get out of the house, right?" Benji's eyebrows were a line of confusion, like he was really asking my opinion, like he expected me to have some kind of answer.

"Sure," I whispered, my voice barely stirring the air.

"The playground," Benji said. "Fresh air. We can't stay inside forever." He clapped his hands together, looking more awake than he had since walking into the kitchen. The coffeemaker sputtered, signaling the pot had finished brewing, and Benji turned his attention to doctoring his mug. I finished my second bowl of cereal without

tasting or enjoying it, then quickly slunk away to get dressed. Maybe if I did everything expected of me today, Benji would keep on forgetting to punish me.

Back in my bedroom, I told myself I would lie down until I counted to one hundred, then get up and get dressed. I woke up at lunchtime, when Benji knocked on my door, holding a peanut butter sandwich on a plate.

After I finished eating, Benji pushed my on the swings for nearly an hour. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back. At the top of each arc I held my breath, believing this would be the time gravity let me go, that I wouldn't swoop back down, but keep on going, up, up, up, and away.

As much as her arrival threw my life into turmoil, in hindsight I realize that without Ruth Ellen I might never have met Greenie. Greenie was Benji's mother. I met her when we visited her home to introduce Ruth Ellen. I called her Greenie the first time I met her, because her house was green and I was determined to be unkind.

Greenie was the great joy of my childhood, the first purely fond memories I remember having.

The surprise I'd felt moving into our new home paled next to the revelation of Greenie's home. The even, open grass of our lawn might as well have been a crayon scribble next to the manicured beds of roses and azaleas in Greenie's yard. There were perfectly rounded green shrubs and a white marble birdbath that I originally mistook for a tiny, worthless swimming pool.

In the back yard I found an actual swimming pool, complete with diving board, which pushed me over the edge. Bordered in red bricks, the pool had the shape of an oval punched in just above the midpoint on one side. After I decided to love her wholeheartedly, months later, I wrote Greenie a story called "The Giant Who Kicked the Pool" to explain its odd shape. It hung on the fridge as long as she lived there.

On that first visit, though, I plopped myself onto the hard concrete of the back patio, bypassing the padded deck chairs. I'd held my temples in my hands and repeated the words, "Holy cow," shaking my head back and forth in disbelief, for a full minute.

Greenie's house had two floors and a basement, so much space for one woman living on her own. There were stairs that didn't pull down from a latch in the ceiling, stairs that led to a whole second floor of rooms, not an unfinished attic. The kitchen was large enough to hold a table with four chairs, but a longer table sat in the next room with

eight high-backed heavy wooden chairs. The basement was mostly one open room with a pool table, large television, and several mismatched armchairs.

I knew better than to ask Greenie about her wealth directly, or Mother, who also showed signs of being overwhelmed, but I knew that *this* was rich. Our house was nice, but Greenie was rich.

About an hour into our visit, when the adults ran out of conversation, and Ruth Ellen had settled into a peaceful nap in her car seat, Greenie offered Mother a bedroom upstairs to take a nap. Instead of immediately answering, she cut her eyes towards Benji, who nodded slightly. Once Mother was settled, Benji offered to mow the lawn, and Greenie disappeared into the kitchen. I was left alone with a coloring book and my sleeping sister. That afternoon Ruth Ellen received more compliments and hugs than I could remember getting in my entire life.

Sitting on the floor, coloring book open atop a black footstool that matched the soft leather of the couches, I scowled at Ruth Ellen and decided she was having entirely too easy a go at life. I took the baby from her car seat, carefully, just the way Mother and Grandmother had shown me how to, and placed her on the floor of the hall closet, between two sets of rubber boots with mud clustered around the heels, underneath a neat row of coats.

I pulled the door shut behind her and returned to my coloring, looking at the empty car seat with a mixture of satisfaction and horror. I'd spent enough of my childhood in closets. I slept in a closet because there wasn't enough room for me. I hid from Steven in closets, or waited for the clock to run down on my time out, if Mother had caught me first. The way I figured it, it was Ruth Ellen's turn.

Several minutes later, Greenie emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on an apron. Whatever words she'd intended to say cut off when she saw the empty space where a baby should've been.

"It seems like we're missing something here, sweetheart."

I looked her dead in the eyes and said, "She doesn't like it here. She ran away."

"Well, that was stupid of her. I made cookies. You go get us the plate on the counter and I'll see if I can't get her to come on back."

In the kitchen, I reached for with a plate piled high with oatmeal raisin cookies, my hands shaking with fear, wondering what the repercussions would be. When I returned, Ruth Ellen was back in her carrier. Greenie didn't say a word about it, never did. She sat on the floor, next to the footstool, and motioned for me to join her. Later, after I ate my fill of cookies, she didn't correct me when I told her I wanted to color Rainbow Brite entirely black.

She tried to teach me slap-jack that afternoon, but I was too afraid of being hit. *This is where I get it for Ruth Ellen*, I thought, and flinched away from all the Jacks. We switched to Go Fish, which removed the threat of physical violence, but didn't make me any less nervous. When we left, Greenie knelt down so we were eye-to-eye. Holding me by the shoulders, she said, "We'll figure this out, Janey-girl. Maybe next week we can go swimming." Then she hugged me, tighter and longer than I'd ever been hugged before.

We began visiting at least once during the weekend. Mother praised me for being *such a good big sister* as I packed Ruth Ellen's diaper bag, making sure there were enough spare bottles to last the afternoon. Purely motivated by selfishness, I wanted to

see Greenie, who doted on me the way Grandmother fussed over Ruth Ellen, who told Benji not to interrupt me while I was speaking.

On our second visit, Greenie shooed me up the stairs, to show me the library. Each wall was a bookshelf, filled floor to ceiling. I didn't know it was possible for one person to own so many books. We didn't have any.

The chairs were deceptively uncomfortable, chairs that looked inviting but would crack your tailbone if you sat down too quickly. This was the only room in the house with a rug. The rug was edged in tassels, which all neatly faced the same direction. The carpet was thick, patterned with flowers, and almost as soft as my bed.

The library quickly became my favorite part of Greenie's house, and it was there that I grew to love her. The bottom half of the shelves, those I could reach, were filled with children's books, easy readers and picture books and *Pickles the Fire Cat*.

"*You are not a good cat, and you are not a bad cat,*" Greenie read to me as we lay, side-by-side on our stomach, "*You are a mixed up cat.*" I reached out to the spotted yellow cat on the page as though I could pet him.

"I think Pickles is a good cat," I said.

"Of course he is," Greenie replied, kissing the top of my head. "That's why he wants to stay at the fire station to help people."

"He wasn't, mmm, so good at the beginning," I hedged.

"He grew up and he learned better," Greenie reassured me.

A heavy book laid on its side, too tall to stand upright, directly above the shelf where Pickles lived. As far as I could tell it was the thickest book in the room. "What's that story?" I asked Greenie, pointing upwards.

“That’s not a story, that’s the dictionary.” My confusion must’ve shown on my face, because Greenie pushed herself off the floor to pull the book down to show me. She placed the book on the seat of one of the chairs, and we knelt in front of it together. “The dictionary tells you about all the words. What word do you want to know?”

“Pickles.”

Greenie laughed, then began to thumb through the pages. She slowed down, stopped, and ran her finger down a page, stopping to tap the middle of the page. “Here,” she said.

“Food that has been preserved, specifically a cucumber,” I read. “What’s preserved?”

Greenie flipped through a few more pages, pointing to a new word, and I read the new definition. *“To keep something safe, or to keep food from rotting.”*

“Anything else?” Greenie asked. I searched my brain for unusual words I’d overheard adults using.

“Perk-oh-tee-us,” I said through my effortful frown.

“Precocious?” Greenie corrected with a questioning lilt and I nodded. She flipped a single page backwards and pointed.

“Showing adult qualities at an early age.”

“Do you want to look up any words that don’t start with a letter P, or are you ready for a snack?”

“I want,” I began, pausing for dramatic effect, “to eat a Pop Tart.” I knew I was taking a chance here, as Mother had told Greenie I had tricked Benji into giving me Pop Tarts for breakfast (true) and that I didn’t need any more sugar today (not true). Greenie

studied me, her forehead creased in thought, before nodding her assent. Yelping with excitement, I jumped up to run towards the stairs.

Several weeks later, Mother and I were alone in Greenie's kitchen, tidying up the dishes from breakfast. One of the heavy juice glasses slipped from my hand and shattered on the floor.

"Jesus Christ, Jane! I can't afford to replace that!" Mother pressed her palms to her eyes, a gesture I have come to learn means she's trying not to cry. "She's already paying for everything. We can't keep spending her money."

Mother swept up the pieces while I kept watch at the door. She buried them in the trash, beneath the coffee grounds and apple peels. "This is gonna be our secret, Janey," she said. "Hopefully she won't notice." It felt nice to have my mother focused on me, to have her need something from me. I nodded solemnly and we pinky swore.

For the rest of the afternoon I felt a stab of fear when Greenie passed by the garbage can. I'd tried to talk her into reading in the living room, but she said it was cooler here at the kitchen table. That afternoon was the only time I was ever relieved to leave Greenie's home, eager to get away before the broken glass was discovered. I twitched away from her hug, certain she could smell the guilt and fear on me. I was usually the last member of the family in the car when it was time to leave, but today I was buckled in, feet jerking nervously, while everyone else dawdled on the porch.

As we pulled out of the driveway, Greenie ran onto the lawn and motioned for Benji to roll down his window. The insides of my bones went cold with dread. Certain she'd found the broken glass, I crossed my arms over my stomach, willing myself not to cry.

“I ordered you a set of proper coffee mugs,” she said, elbow resting on the top of the car, eyes shaded by her hand. Greenie wasn’t looking into the car, but frowning at her rose bushes. “Just run by Sullivan’s and give them my name.”

Benji nodded his thanks. My fingers spasmed as we pulled out of the driveway, and I knit them together so no one would notice. Once we were on the street, Mother dropped her head against the window and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Can’t we have one thing that she didn’t buy? Maybe I like cheap cups from Wal-Mart.” While Mother was trying to explain that she felt suffocated and inadequate, all I realized that Greenie’s juice glasses probably came from Sullivan’s.

Greenie had shown me nothing but love and acceptance, but that was because I hadn’t done anything wrong yet. If I could replace the cup before next weekend, Greenie might never know one had been broken. And even if she did find out, once I replaced it all on my own, she’d understand that it was an accident, and she’d see how responsible I could be. She’d forgive me, and she wouldn’t stop loving me.

Sullivan’s was Main Street’s flagship store, taking up nearly half a block all on its own. The first floor was apparel, everything from upscale causal to Christmas Mass to formal wear. Upstairs there were ornate table settings and glassware. A wedding registry at Sullivan’s was every girl’s dream, or so the ad that ran in the Sunday paper told me. I had been with Mother and Grandmother as they picked flatware for her wedding to Benji, but had been instructed not to touch anything.

On Monday I produced a series of coughs pathetic enough to convince my mother that I should stay home. When she and Ruth Ellen laid down for their morning nap, I emptied the contents of my piggy bank into the shiny plastic Hello Kitty purse I’d

received for my excellent report card. The sides of the purse bulged under the strain of all my change, and I started thinking about what I could do with the leftover money.

We'd driven to Main Street often enough that I easily recalled the route. On foot, however, it was much farther away than it seemed in the car. It was a warm day, so I'd worn my flip-flops instead of the Keds Greenie had given me the week before. By the time I reached Sullivan's there were blisters between my toes threatening to pop. I felt the lines of sweat rolling down my back, and without looking, I knew there would be damp patches under the arms of my shirt. The purse grew heavier and heavier, and I could feel a bruise forming on my right hip, where it swung against me as I walked.

There was a wrought iron bench just to the left of the store's entrance, and I sat for what felt like an hour making myself breathe deeply. I sat in the center of the bench, my arms stretched out along the back, trying to cool off. When I pushed the door open, the blast of air conditioning caused a full-body shiver, and I felt dizzy from the temperature change. I must have looked terribly out of place, especially on a school day, but no one stopped me as I moved through the racks of half-price dresses to the stairs to the second floor.

Turning around halfway up the stairs to observe the shoppers and saleswomen moving through the store, I realized I had no business in Sullivan's. Everyone else was relaxed and neatly packaged. Every woman had red nails and low heels and hair that didn't move.

I thought about leaving, certain I could be home before Ruth Ellen's nap ended. But failing Greenie was too much to bear. I'd already come this far.

I walked purposefully to the back counter and addressed the woman standing behind the register. “Excuse me,” I said as politely as I’ve ever said anything.

“Did you lose your mommy?” she exclaimed. She’d even laid a hand across her breastbone, touching her pearl necklace.

My dislike was intense and immediate. Still I persevered. “No. No, ma’am.” I took a deep breath and launched into the speech I’d practiced in my head since leaving the house. “I broke a nice glass at my grandma house, and I brought my allowance because I would like to replace it.”

“Bless your heart,” she announced, an exclamation point after every word. “You are the most precious child.”

Not knowing how to answer, I launched into a description of the glass. “It was for juice. It’s blue, and about this tall. No flowers or fancy things on it.”

She led me around the store, and I found the match easily. “You just want the one, right, sweetie?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The glass, just the one, was twenty-seven dollars and forty-nine cents. I dumped the contents of my purse on the counter and diligently counted. I had five dollars and eighty-five cents, almost entirely in dimes.

“Oh, honey,” the salesgirl began, “I’m afraid that you –“

I didn’t hear the rest of her sentence. I turned around and ran down the stairs, leaving my life’s savings and purse sitting on the counter next to the glass. I ran out the front door and down the block, as fast as I could, not stopping until the blisters between my toes popped and running became too painful. I collapsed in the middle of the

sidewalk and began to cry, full-body sobs that made my shoulders shake and my face hurt. My jaw popped.

I didn't calm down, just ran out of tears. I stood up, took several halting steps trying to find how to best accommodate my now-oozing feet, and realized I was less than a block from the daycare attached to Grandmother's church. I had attended the daycare during the summers when I was five and six. I carried my shoes in my hand and walked on my heels through the grass leading to the fenced playground.

I reached the chain-link fence enclosing the playground. In the corner, eyes shaded by her hand, watching the four-year olds stack blocks in the sand, sat Miss Lainey. Three years ago Miss Lainey had thrown away my Rudolph paper, coloring and sending home her own, since I insisted on making his nose mossy green.

"Hey! Miss Lainey! Hey," I called, my mouth pressed against one of the diamond-shaped gaps in the fencing.

She rose, and walked over to me. She rose to her tiptoes to hook her chin over the top of the fence. It took her a few seconds to recognize me. "Jane? Shouldn't you be at school? It's Monday," she said.

"I faked," I said. "I lied about being sick." Miss Lainey's lips formed a thin line. "I ran away," I continued, "but I got lost and it's hot. Please help me."

"Your mother is probably worried sick, Jane," she finally said. Her righteous tone meant she would help me, but that I had really let someone down.

"I don't think so. She was taking a nap with the baby when I left. I don't think she's noticed yet."

“You just walked out the front door? Sweet Je--potato, Jane. That wasn’t safe at all.” Miss Lainey motioned with her head towards the latched gate, which kept the more adventurous children from toddling out of the playground. We walked together, each on our side. She took a key from around her neck and opened the silver and blue lock.

“You gonna be alright with all these kids, Rebecca?” Miss Lainey asked the younger woman standing by the swings. “I’m just gonna leave her in the office.”

“Yeah, go on,” Rebecca answered.

The oddity of my plight had drawn quite a crowd, and the children gathered to see me as Miss Lainey pulled the gate closed. She turned and shooed them away. “You’re gonna be mad you didn’t play when you had the chance. Get! Get!” The children reluctantly edged away, casting glances over their shoulders at me.

As she pushed the door open, Miss Lainey looked down at my bare feet. “Put your shoes on, child.”

“They hurt,” I said. My voice broke on the last word, and the tears threatened again. The enormity of my failure was sinking in. I didn’t get Greenie her glass, returning for my purse would be as bad as dying, and I was going to get in trouble for lying and for running away. Miss Lainey sighed and knelt down so I could hop on her back and she could piggyback me to the front desk.

Miss Lainey left me with the secretary, also the daycare’s nurse, who poured hydrogen peroxide over my feet. I usually balked at the anticipated painfulness of any first aid, but by this point I was so demoralized I felt nothing. She bandaged the raw spots between my toes as best she could, and gave me a red popsicle. I asked for purple, and the receptionist sighed but gave me a purple one. Popsicles were reserved for sore throats

and busted lips, and no one ever got to pick their own color. Karen Ellis chipped a tooth and had to keep her green popsicle. Things were worse than I could've guessed.

There was a small cot in the room with the copy paper and play dough, where sick children rested in isolation until someone could take them home. From here I could almost overhear the secretary's attempts to track down an adult to claim me, the rise and fall of her voice as it moved from cheerful to exasperated. By my count it took three phone calls.

Greenie arrived an hour later, with a pair of slippers for me to wear. "My renegade," she bellowed, arms thrown wide, only to be immediately shushed by the receptionist, who pointed to a laminated sign featuring the moon and the words "Nap Time, Quiet Please." Greenie scowled at the woman and knelt down to embrace me, squeezing my ribs and digging her chin into my shoulder. "My little road warrior."

Though I'd already eaten a popsicle and no lunch, she took us for ice cream sundaes. Staring down at the puddle of hot fudge and melting soft serve I asked, "Am I in trouble?"

Greenie put her hands on my cheeks and lifted my face to meet her eyes. She spoke without anger. "If you ever do this again you will be in so much trouble. I will personally spank you until my arm falls off."

Unsure how to respond, I nodded. Two tears slipped out. Greenie wiped them away. "None of that. You aren't in trouble. Everyone is just so glad you weren't hurt."

I nodded again.

Greenie rose halfway from her chair, just far enough to kiss my forehead. "Eat your ice cream, my most beloved. And never do that again."

I let go of my spoon and raised my hand, pinky extended. "I promise," I said. Greenie linked her finger with mine, wiggling our conjoined hands.

Curled in my bed that night, I heard the rise and fall of adult voices, a few *I'm tryings* followed by a few *How dare yous*, until there was a loud thwack, perhaps a pan or cookbook hitting the counter. In the following silence I made out Greenie's voice clearly.

"What do you plan on doing with three children when you can't even keep track of the ones you have now? Or would it not matter to you if that girl got lost forever?"

"That's not fair," Benji called loudly, but there was no answer, only footsteps and the front door slamming. Four months later Laura Grace was born.

Because I was still too ashamed to explain about Greenie's broken juice glass and my abandoned change purse, I just let my family believe that I was trying to run away. Because I might run away again, I was no longer allowed to play in the yard unsupervised. Benji worked until five, and Mother got tired easily in the heat, so I was no longer allowed to play in the yard at all.

Like many girls my age, I played house with my stuffed animals, spending long afternoons alone in my room, making up familial relations between the creatures. In the years before Benji, I had amassed a truly impressive collection of stuffed animals – at least one from each suitor Mother introduced me to. These boyfriends, without fail, brought one as a peace offering when we first met. From boyfriends around during my birthday or Christmas I got two stuffed animals. I don't remember these men, their faces or their names, but I can sequence the toys -- *fox, brown bear, bunny, puppy, polar bear, triceratops, panda bear, grey kitten, brown kitten*. I hope I was kindest to triceratops man. I hope I rewarded his originality with good humor.

Greenie didn't have any bears or bunnies in her home, a product of only having sons she told me, so I was allowed to bring three of mine when we visited. I agonized over which toys to select. I spent the first half of every car ride mourning the toys I'd left behind, wracked with guilt over the abandonment they must be feeling.

During the first half hour or so of every visit Greenie would talk to Mother and Benji while rocking Ruth Ellen, and I would set up my game in the living room. I always picked up my toys when I heard Greenie coming, as whatever she had planned, books or puzzles or some interesting happening in the yard, was always miles more entertaining than my own games.

As the birth drew closer, Mother's conversations with Greenie grew longer and I had more time to myself. I arranged my toys on the carpet, placing a rubber ball between them. Then I retreated to a couch to study them intently. Deeply involved in my imagination, I didn't hear Greenie approach.

"What do we have here?" Greenie asked.

I was startled, but as Greenie had so far shown a complete willingness to do what I wanted, I decided to explain the game to her. "It's soccer practice. The elephant is my son, William," I said, pointing. Choosing which animal got to be my offspring was also difficult, and I had adopted a strict rotational schedule to avoid showing preference to the kitten.

"Good job, William," Greenie said. "Goal!"

I pantomimed checking a watch and then sighed. "Practice always runs late. I need to start dinner."

"Maybe William's father can order a pizza for everyone tonight."

Here I took a long drag of an imaginary cigarette. "William doesn't have a father. I have to do everything myself."

"Goodness," Greenie said. "We definitely need a pizza in that case. Why don't you come in the kitchen and help me order?"

I wasn't allowed to answer the phone at home, and no one ever called to speak to me. The closest I'd come to actually using a telephone was a kindergarten lesson where every child took a turn dialing 9-1-1 on a rotary phone our teacher kept on the top shelf of the supply closet.

Greenie carefully wrote the number out for me, and I painstakingly pushed the buttons, pausing between each number to make sure I wasn't making a mistake. When the ringing stopped and the voice on the other end said, "Old Venice Pizza, how can I help you?" I panicked and slammed the phone down with a gasp.

"I don't know what to say," I told her, face hot with embarrassment that I couldn't do this right.

Unbothered, Greenie steered me to the table, where we wrote out a script, what she expected the conversation to sound like. "What did you hear on the phone?" she asked me. I repeated the words as best as I remembered them, and Greenie wrote them at the top of the page. "So you need to tell them we need a pizza," she continued, and together we wrote out several versions of the conversation, one for each possible digression it might take. By the third iteration of the script we had begun to amuse ourselves with bear attacks and ninja invasions at the pizza parlor.

Amused and no longer nervous, I practiced the scripts with Greenie until I felt confident enough to handle the phone call. Though my voice shook, I even asked the woman from the pizza parlor to repeat herself when she sneezed halfway through telling me the price.

Hanging up the phone, I was overcome with so much emotion that I could only shake my fists above my head chanting *yeah yeah yeah* for nearly a minute. Once I'd sufficiently calmed down, Greenie taught me how to high five. I also needed to practice this several times before I felt fully confident.

At dinner, when Mother thanked Greenie for the pizza, Greenie tipped her head in my direction and said, “You ought to thank Jane, here.” No hunter has been prouder of a kill than I was of that sausage pizza.

That night as we were leaving, the leftover pizza wrapped in tinfoil because Benji insisted we’d be eating it for breakfast, Greenie handed me a slip of paper with seven numbers printed on it. “This is my phone number. If you get bored this week, you can just give me a call.”

I waited until Tuesday to call her, unsure if she really meant it. Her *hello* sounded almost like her, but not quite the voice I remembered from my visits.

“Hello?” she said again, more of a question.

“Greenie,” I asked.

“Jane,” she exclaimed with complete delight. “I thought you’d forgotten all about your poor grandmother.”

“No,” I said, stricken. “I’ll never forget you.”

After a just too long pause, Greenie said, “So tell me all about your day, my love.” We spoke every night that week.

“I have a present for you, Jane,” Greenie declared the next Saturday, as soon as all the toys and diaper bags had been distributed around the living room. She handed me an unopened puzzle box. There were several puzzles in the closet of Benji’s old room, and I had built each of them at least ten times. Last weekend I had turned all the pieces of one puzzle upside-down, and fit them together that way. Here was a new puzzle that had never belonged to anyone but me.

“Five hundred pieces,” I said with disbelief. The biggest puzzle I’d built so far was only two hundred pieces.

“You know all those puzzles are too easy for you,” Greenie said. “Besides, I’ll help you. Go get started in the kitchen and I’ll be there in five minutes.”

Flush with excitement I placed the puzzle on the counter and pulled myself up on one of the barstools. The picture on the box was a red wagon full of kittens, all different shades of grey but each with bright blue eyes. I took this as a good sign that my demands for a real kitten of my very own would soon be met.

I had never opened a new puzzle box, and the sealed paper around the bottom edges wouldn’t yield to my tugging or scratching. I dropped myself back to the floor, in search of assistance, which is how I overheard Greenie talking to Mother and Benji.

“When I talk to Jane, she never has anything new to tell me. No trips to the library, no trips to the park, no playdates. Do you know the game she plays with her toys? As far as I can tell it’s Depressed Single Mother. You have got to find something for her to do.”

Stepping gingerly into the living room, I shook the puzzle box to announce my presence. “I can’t open this.”

The adults were all silent, Benji responding first. “Yeah, sure, give her here,” he said, extending his hand for the box. He pulled a Swiss Army knife from his pocket, quickly cutting through the sealed edges. “Here ya go, Janey.” His voice was too cheerful.

“I’ll be right there,” Greenie said, motioning with her hand to indicated that I should head back to the kitchen and leave the adults alone.

Back on my stool I discovered the puzzle pieces were further trapped in a clear plastic bag, but I was able to make short work of that with my fingernails and teeth. I believed that I had found all of the edge pieces by the time Greenie joined me to work on the puzzle.

She ruffled my hair and surveyed my progress. “Look at this. I knew this wouldn’t be too hard for you.”

These words didn’t fill me up the way her compliments usually did. “I’m sorry it’s boring to talk to me,” I said, keeping my eyes on the puzzle.

“No,” Greenie said loudly, shaking her head. “It’s not that at all.” She bent her head down at an awkward angle to meet my eyes. “You’re such a bright little child and you need more things to do.” Her head was mostly upside down, and her hair touched the counter, obscuring the puzzle, and I couldn’t help but laugh. “How would you feel about spending the weekends here with me?” she asked, turning her head upright. “You can sleep in Benji’s old room. We can go on all kind of adventures.”

Too happy to say anything, I nodded. It took almost three hours, but I finished the whole puzzle with only minimal assistance from Greenie.

From that Friday on, Greenie picked me up from school. In the afternoons she sat on her porch, sipping ice tea and reading a paperback while I raced through all the toys left behind when her sons moved out. There were roller skates and a skateboard, a rusted pogo stick and a half-inflated contraption called a pogo ball. There were a couple of children in the neighborhood, twins named Aaron and Shawn, a girl my age named Michelle. We raced each other on our various wheeled contraptions, set up elaborate obstacles to be pogoed through. They became my weekend friends, the first friend I remember having.

On Saturdays we went to the Germantown Public Library, whose children's section was larger and sunnier than the entirety of the Pass Christian library. There were three oversized corduroy beanbags, large enough for Greenie and I to share. I always picked the blue beanbag, and did not do a very good job of hiding my disappointment the one Saturday that only the yellow beanbag was available.

That first Saturday Greenie read me *Liza Lou and the Yellow-Bellied Swamp*. She did different voices for all of the characters, and sound effects for the wind and rain. She read it six more times without complaint, stopping only because we were meeting Benji's older brother Kent for lunch. I had never heard anything so magical in my life.

When my sisters started calling her Greenie, she corrected them. "It's Gramma, my love."

"Jane calls you Greenie."

"No, not at all," she'd say with telegraphed wink and wild eyebrow wiggle in my direction across the table. "You must be hearing her wrong."

The Germantown Public Library had a summer reading program, with a race to see who could read the most books in six weeks, and an hour-long program every Saturday morning. One week the local karate school laid down mats in the parking lot and took turns throwing each other to the ground. The next week the community theater broke us into smaller groups so we could write and stage our own puppet shows, only one of which, miraculously, devolved into commentary on bodily functions.

For the last week an entomologist from the University of Memphis and two of his graduate assistants brought a variety of insects, including a live hissing cockroach. Of the thirty or so assembled junior readers, only six lined up to hold one of the specimens. “That’s all?” he asked with enunciated disbelief. “This guy can’t hurt you. He’s plenty friendly.” Only one more child edged her way to the end of the insect-petting line.

From where I sat, it the bug looked to take up the whole of the entomologist’s palm, the black of its head fading out into light brown on the torso. The first child in line balked at touching the bug, and the second would only run a single finger down the creature’s back before leaping to the side. The third child in line, a boy named Ryan who had forced his way to the front of every line that summer, shrieked the second the cockroach touched his upturned palm, flailing his arms with such force the cockroach went sailing, landing on the far wall. Those of us still on the floor gasped and covered our heads with our arms, as though it were now raining insects.

Raising my head, I could see the cockroach wasn’t too shaken by its unexpected flight. Its antennae wiggle back and forth for a few seconds, before the cockroach turned in a tight circle and began scampering towards the floor. Those children closest to the far

wall slid backwards as a unit, kicking their feet towards the wall as if to shoo the bug away.

The entomologist laughed, not cruelly, and walked to the back of the room. “Calm down guys. Don’t upset my pet.” After stooping down until he was eye level with the bug, he placed his hand perpendicular to the path of the insect. The antennae fluttered again, then the cockroach climbed onto the back of his hand. “Don’t worry, big fella. No one else gets to hold you today,” he reassured the cockroach. His smile showed he had expected the chorus of *ewwww* when he pantomimed placing the cockroach in the front pocket of his dress shirt. Back at the front of the room, he returned the cockroach to its clear plastic box. “Luckily for all of us,” he told us, “these things are pretty indestructible.”

Correctly sensing that he’d lost us, the entomologist let us out ten minutes early. Ryan pushed his way through the mass at the door. I didn’t hear the taunt that must have been directed his way, only his shouted response. “At least I touched it, you *sissy*.” Ryan had made it into the library proper, but he turned around address the children still making their way through the double doors from the children’s area to the circulation desk.

“Young man,” the woman at behind the desk chastised him.

“Ryan Jameson Allen,” a woman I took to be his mother chirped. “Watch your language, young man.”

Hearing him reprimanded, both by his mother and a librarian, the rest of us began to chuckle. “Shut up,” Ryan yelled, veering hard left to run out the front door of the library. His mother opened her mouth, then bit down hard on her lower lip before giving chase.

I was usually one of the last children out of these assemblies, along with Amy, who was both the youngest and the best reader in the summer program. Amy was Chinese, but her parents were white, and on the first day Greenie and I had overheard them arguing forcefully with the children's librarian that Amy simply read at too high a level to be a part of the first-grade program. She and I had bonded over finding the karate demonstration too loud.

At the door, Amy turned back, staring at the entomologist until he noticed her. "Is it...can I..." Amy asked, holding up a cupped hand. "I promise not to throw it." Amy hadn't lined up to hold the insect during the program, had covered her head with me when it sailed over our heads.

"Sure," he said, nodding with a smile. "Come here."

Amy walked towards him, her cupped hand extended in front of her. When she stopped in front of the entomologist, he opened the cockroach's box and gently scooped it out. He supported Amy's wrist with his free hand and gently set the insect on her palm. Amy's whole body jolted, her face momentarily panicked before settling into delight.

"It tickles," she told him.

"Not a cat or a dog," he told her, "but it's a pretty good pet for me."

"Does it have a name?" Amy asked.

"I call him Shades," he replied with a chuckle. Amy laughed, too. The entomologist looked over and caught my eyes. "You can hold him, too, if you want."

I did want. I wanted to be brave enough to try, like Amy, or even Ryan. But I stayed frozen in the doorway. I didn't even shake my head no, just blinked mutely.

He smiled. "It's okay. Cockroaches aren't for everyone." He wedged his fingers between the bug and Amy's palm, lifting the cockroach back into its box. "There's always next year," he added when the top was latched back on. "You should probably go wash your hands," he said to Amy.

"I will," Amy said seriously. "Thank you for letting me hold Shades." When she reached me, Amy lifted my hand and tapped her fingernails in my palm. "It's like that," she said with a smile.

I yanked my hand away from her. "Yuck," I said. "Now I have to wash my hands, too." I knew my cowardice wasn't Amy's fault, but I still stomped away from her towards the bathrooms.

Every weekend with Greenie was it's own adventure: books to read, recipes to try out, puzzles to build, Disney cartoons to watch. Occasionally exhibits touring the US would pass through Memphis. I saw the splendors of Versailles, which I insisted on pronouncing exactly as it was spelled, to Greenie's chagrined amusement, as well as Ramses II. I had resisted Greenie's efforts to take me to Sullivans to buy a swimsuit, and I waded from the shallow steps of the pool until the water reached my armpits in an oversized shirt of Benji's and a pair of his old basketball shorts.

In spite of all these adventures, the greatest part of every weekend was sleeping in on Sunday morning, waking up and knowing I wasn't sitting on the uncushioned pews of Grandmother's church, unable to find my place in the battered hymnal quickly enough, knowing no matter how perfectly still I sat, it wouldn't be perfectly still enough to appease Grandmother.

Though she had never come with Grandmother and I when we lived together, Mother began attending church again after Ruth Ellen's birth. Even when Ruth Ellen wept during the sermon, Grandmother still chastised me for not sitting still. "How hard is it to just set still?" she implored every week.

The first weekend I stayed with Greenie, Mother called on Friday night. "Hang on," I heard Greenie say. She was standing at the counter, with the boxy cordless phone secured between her chin and shoulder. I was sitting at the kitchen table, working on a story about the day the cockroaches attacked the library.

"I'll ask her," she said. Greenie took the phone away from her face and spoke to me. "Jane, your mother wants to know if I can take you to church tomorrow."

It was too scary to say no out loud, like I would be personally insulting God, but I shook my head as quickly as I could. I made my eyes as wide as I could, what Greenie called my *begging face*.

Greenie laughed, which she turned into a cough. Into the phone she said, “I think Jane and I are going to sleep in tomorrow. Next week.”

Three Saturdays later Greenie and I sat on the sofa, propped against the opposite arms, the soles of our feet touching, reading. When the phone rang, Greenie sat up straight and swatted gently at the sole of my feet with her paperback, index finger tucked between the pages to keep her place. “Your turn,” she told me. “You’re the one who doesn’t want to go to church, you do the dirty work.”

I shook my head. “I can’t,” I said, my fingers and toes beginning to tingle. “Don’t make me.” We stared at each other until the phone stopped ringing.

“She’s just going to call back,” Greenie said. Sure enough, a handful of seconds later the phone began to ring again. “Go on,” Greenie encouraged, nudging my feet off the sofa and on to the carpet.

“No,” I whispered, my voice wheezing out like the dying rattle of the air conditioner in Grandmother’s Chevy.

I wasn’t allowed to answer the phone at Grandmother’s house – to prevent contact with my biological father’s family I later understood. Touching Steven’s phone was also strictly forbidden. On the other hand, not minding adults also hadn’t worked out so well for me. The phone stopped ringing for a second time while I sat motionless on the couch.

Just stop calling, I projected at Mother. I sent up a quick prayer to the God I’d gone out of my way to avoid that Greenie’s phone would break. Of course, the phone

began ringing for a third time. I felt an immediately paralyzing dread, like there was a cottonmouth curled around the doorknob leading out of a burning room, and I had to pick which way I would get hurt.

“You’ve got to learn to stand up for yourself, Jane,” Greenie said, as though exercising autonomy were just the easiest thing in the whole, wide world. “Why can’t you just pick up the phone and tell your mother no?”

* * *

Why can’t you just... was the refrain of my childhood. *Why can’t you just set and stop embarrassing me* Grandmother asked as we drove home from another church service I’d fidgeted my way through. If I could be as obediently pious as Mrs. Holtcamp’s granddaughter, then Grandmother would be asked to join the church’s women’s league.

Why can’t you just be fucking quiet Steven barked after backhanding me to the floor. His PBR sloshed over the rim of the can, and he flicked the dripping foam at me before licking his fingers clean. I knew better than to clomp through the living room when the race was on.

Why can’t you just stay in your room when he’s drinking Mother asked, holding a paper towel-wrapped ice cube to my split lip. If I just kept myself amused in my room, instead of looking for trouble, Steven wouldn’t have a reason to lose his temper.

However well-intentioned her question, all I heard was Greenie saying *Why can’t you do anything right?*

And I didn’t know. I didn’t know why I couldn’t be silent or small or good enough. I didn’t know how to be better, how to do things right.

* * *

After I mumble-mouthed my way through telling Mother I didn't want to go to church, stammering over every word like they were made of glass, Greenie called out, "Now was that so hard?" When I didn't reply, she called out my name, which also went unanswered. I heard Greenie huff softly as she stood up, then her footsteps approaching the kitchen.

"Are you giving me the silent treatment, young lady?" she asked. "There's no reason - " she began, then cut off abruptly.

I was kneeling on the floor, the cordless phone balanced precariously on the edge of the counter, a pile of soggy paper towels massed beside me, trying to contain the spreading puddle of urine before it could creep under the any of the appliances. This would be a manageable catastrophe, as long as there wasn't any piss under the goddamn stove.

"I'm so sorry," I told Greenie, my voice cracked with tears. "I think I got all of it, and I can mop." When she didn't answer, I chanced looking up at her. Greenie's mouth hung open and her face had paled. "I can do the laundry, too," I placated. "You don't have to do anything. I can take care of it."

"Oh, god, honey," she said, all in a rush. "Oh, honey," she repeated, stumbling towards me.

"I know how to clean everything up," I assured her, calmer now that her immediate response didn't seem to be fury. "You won't have to do anything."

"Honey, stop," Greenie said, kneeling down beside me. "Janey, stop," she repeated. She laid a stilling hand on my arm, far enough up to avoid my pee-splattered

hands and wrists. When I finally met her eyes, Greenie said, “I’m not mad at you, darling. I promise.”

I nodded slightly, a quick up-down jerk of my chin to show I was willing to entertain the possibility. Crescents of tears gathered in her eyes, then she blinked, sending a few scattering down her cheeks.

“I won’t ever do that again. I’ll listen to you next time. I promise,” she told me.

I repeated my doubtful nod.

“I think, *hmm*, the easiest thing would be if you just dropped all your clothes here and ran up to the shower,” Greenie said. To my shocked expression, she added, “I won’t peek, shy girl.”

“Who’s going to clean up?” I asked. “I should finish cleaning before I shower, so I don’t get dirty again.”

“I’ll take care of this, Janey. You just scoot up to the shower.” She deliberately covered her eyes with both hands. “Hurry up, you can’t be comfortable.”

I quickly shucked my clothes, leaving them in a pile near the used paper towels, then bounded towards the stairs and the spacious upstairs bathroom. At the base of the stairs I thought I heard Greenie said, “What did they do to you?” I didn’t stop to answer.

When I came down, hair wrapped in a towel atop my head, wearing my flannel Little Mermaid pajamas, the kitchen smelled faintly of lemons and bleach. I could hear the faint rumble of the washer from the laundry room off the kitchen.

Greenie was back on the sofa, feet tucked under her. “Hello, my love,” she said when I stepped into the room. She held up the book in her hand. “Have you ever read *The Secret Garden*?”

I shook my head.

Greenie smiled, her face gentle. “Oh, I think you’ll adore it. Come sit here with me and I’ll read you the first chapter before bed.” She patted the sofa beside her, and opened the book as I sat beside her and let all my weight fall against her side. “*When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle,*” Greenie began. My eyes drifted shut, and I was asleep before learning was the most disagreeable looking child anyone had ever seen.

A year of Saturdays later, when the phone rang just after dinner, Greenie asked, as she always did now, “Do you want to get that?”

“Nuh-uh,” I replied, less afraid of the phone now, but no more eager to answer it.

“I have to do everything around here,” Greenie said, pushing herself off the sofa.

“It ain’t my house,” I shot back, earning me a chuff on the head as Greenie walked towards the cordless in the kitchen. I couldn’t make out anything being said, the conversation more subdued than usual.

When Greenie came in back into the living room she was pale. “Jane, love, I have to take you home.”

“No!” I yelped, immediately burrowing myself deeper into the sofa as though that would keep me in place.

Greenie sat down beside me, put a hand around one of my ankles, and leaned her head against the back of the couch. “Janey,” she said, talking to the ceiling, “you have to go home now.” She turned to face me, and her eyes shone. “Honey, I’m so sorry. Your grandmother died. I’m so sorry.”

The air I drew in wouldn’t move past the bottom of my throat. *No you’re not*, I wanted to say. *You’re just fine*. Then I realized who Greenie meant. The whole room moved in and out of focus, like I was using binoculars to look at something too close. Numb, I said, “At least it’s not church.”

Greenie inhaled sharply and looked at me through narrowed eyes. After a pause, she said, “You can just leave everything here for next week. No need to pack.”

No one had turned on the porch light for me, or unlocked the door, so instead of walking me up to the porch, Greenie sat behind the wheel with the high beams on until

Benji let me in. “Your mom’s in your room,” he said, before going outside to talk to Greenie.

Mother sat on my bed, looking as blank as I felt. *At least we’re not going to cry*, I thought as I gingerly sat beside her. She pulled me to her, and we both immediately began to sob. I kept drawing deep breaths, saying to myself, *This is it, no more*, intending to stop crying with each exhale, but I couldn’t stop. Neither of us stopped crying for a long time.

Death made the church even starker. Less light crept through the smeared, wavery windows, and the pastor’s voice held even less joy. I found the hymn on the first try, but the words tasted cold in my mouth. I sat still, frozen, the best way I knew to honor Grandmother. I hoped she could see me from heaven, could see how immobile I could be when it really mattered. Every time I hadn’t made her proud was a rock on my joints, keeping me still, even after everyone else began to file out of the church.

“Let her be. This is her kind of sad,” Greenie told Benji, after he hissed at me to get up and come on, was I deaf. The cemetery was just behind the church, and Greenie sat beside me while everyone else clustered at the grave. She wasn’t at still as I was, and I hoped Grandmother could see that to: that I was doing a better job of being sad.

We sat there together until the pastor returned, whispering to Greenie that he had to lock up now. I made my steps as small and contained as I could manage, folded my hands in my lap once we were in Greenie’s car, and didn’t move them, not even when Greenie told me I could find whatever I wanted on the radio. I mourned by sitting still, but holding myself motionless.

In the South, grief tastes like a casserole. Cheese, shredded chicken, cream of something soup, and crumbled crackers on the top. The women from Grandmother's church filled our kitchen with foiled-covered Tupperware and plastic pitchers of iced tea. "It's the least we could do," they said to Mother, who embraced these women just long enough to be polite while I stood beside her, like a piece of marble, trying my best to make my Grandmother proud of me.

By the third day of ninth grade I figured out which of my classes would require my full attention (algebra, biology) and which I could spend racing through that week's haul from the public library (all other subjects). By Wednesday I had settled into a routine of R. L. Stine novels punctuated with occasional note-taking. Mother had fallen accidentally pregnant last year. While Benji was at work, I was the only other person in the house old enough to feed and change Jenny Ann, which meant school was a welcome reprieve from the seemingly endless gallons of bodily fluids an infant is capable of producing. If Grandmother really hadn't wanted Mother to get pregnant in high school, then she should've gotten Mother a job in a daycare.

Because there was hardly any homework, nothing I couldn't easily wrap up Sunday night, Friday afternoon I was packing a tote to spend the weekend with Greenie. Mother knocked on the doorframe and walked into my room. She held a shopping bag, plain but still fancy, like something from a department store. "Ready steady, Janey?"

"Yup," I replied. "All set." Mother extended the crisp, brown paper bag to me. "What's this?"

"It's for your dance classes."

"No," I said, backing away from the proffered bag. "I don't take dance."

"I think it'll be fun. Just give it a try."

That year Ruth Ellen was five and Laura Jane was four. They both wanted to take ballet. Apparently registering three students was cheaper than two, because I ended up enrolled at Littest Angel Dancing Academy without ever having expressed a desire to pirouette.

The Littest Angel Dancing Academy was actually three storefronts in a strip mall, a combination office and lobby between two dance studios. The glass of the two studios was boarded over, but the lobby retained the floor-to-ceiling windows of the other shops. There was beige-y blue carpeting on the floor, and chairs with navy blue upholstery and wooden legs. The seats of the chairs seemed just slightly too wide for a normal human. A gumball machine and one of those ten-gallon water dispensers with the little paper cups sat against the back wall, next to a magazine rack. To me it felt just like the pediatrician's office, right down to the heavy floral air freshener.

The owner, Miss DeAnna hurried to greet Mother when we walked in. Mother had brought the three of us to the studio half an hour before class to fill out forms and take a tour. Ruth Ellen and Laura Grace bounced like popcorn kernels on the stove, while I stood, arms crossed over my chest, scowling at my sisters' happiness.

"Look at these gorgeous girls!" she said clapping her hands in approval. "Are y'all ready to be ballerinas?"

My sisters were too giddy to answer, so the two adults turned to me. After an awkward pause I spoke. "The name of your store is spelled wrong."

Miss DeAnna didn't answer for just long enough that I began to nurture a secret hope that Mother would be mortified enough to take me home. Then Miss DeAnna threw back her head and cackled. "God bless, the man who painted the sign sure did make a mistake." Mother laughed, too, and I was stuck.

So that the three of us could attend on the same day, I was placed in an advanced class with fifteen year-olds, all of whom had been taking lessons since they were Ruth Ellen's age. These older girls attended classes three days a week, though I would only

come on Wednesdays, the day the beginners met. I was as tall as my classmates, taller in a few cases, but they were lithe from a decade of lessons and my body was already showing the effects of associating oatmeal raisin cookies and love. Their hair was coiled tightly in neat buns atop their heads, while mine hung limply past my shoulders.

My leotard, ignored in its shopping bag until forty minutes ago, was cut higher than my underwear, which were vivid green. I spent an unsuccessful and frustrating few minutes trying to bunch the excess centimeters of my panties under the leotard, but, because of my pale pink tights, this was an exercise in complete futility. A quick scan of my classmates revealed only I was having this problem. I made one last valiant attempt, pulling the fabric of my tights away from my body, stretched between my thumb and forefinger, trying to roll up the edges of my panties with my other hand. I stopped when I realized two girls at the front of the class were watching me in the mirror, nudging each other and giggling. My cheeks warmed, and I turned so I was facing the barre that ran across the back wall of the studio.

“Just don’t wear panties next week,” came a voice to my left. I turned to see another of my classmates, shorter than me and obviously muscular where the other girls were lean.

“Really?” I asked, startled. That sounded unhygienic.

“No one wears them. It’s already too hard to pee.” I laughed, happy to not be a complete outcast. “Do you like ballet?” she asked.

“I have no idea,” I replied. “This is my first class. My sisters are in the baby class,” I added hooking a thumb over my shoulder.

“Why’re you here?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but just shrugged.

“I took lessons since I was five,” she said. “It’s okay, I guess. Just look at my feet and do what I do.”

I nodded as the instructor, Miss Lori, clapped her hands to call us to attention. “First position, ladies!”

First position is standing with heels touching and feet in a wide V. The legs are touching, but the hips are turned out, opening the pelvic muscles. To plie, bend at the knee, making sure the knees travel over the ankles, not straight out. The bottom should be tucked under the spine, not sticking out, that’s vulgar. However, don’t tuck too far, lest the crotch push outwards. After three plies the muscles of my inner thighs, as well as just under my butt, where I was unaware I even had muscles, were on fire.

First position was the easiest one. The other four were actual torture.

We ran through the positions for the first half of class. I stood behind my classmate at the barre, my eyes turned down to her feet. Her name was Rowan, which I learned when Miss Lori called out, admonishing her for turning around during the warm-up.

“She’s helping me,” I called back. “I have no idea what you’re doing.”

Miss Lori scowled at us for several seconds, before turning back to the mirror. “Fourth position!”

“Thanks,” Rowan said, embarrassed.

“Sorry you got yelled at. I’m Jane.” Rowan smiled at me. For the next thirty minutes I bent and tucked and tried to embody grace. While my classmates’ arms sloped

gently away from their bodies as though carried on a light breeze, my own arms chopped through the air like the stiff, metal appendages of self-aware robot bent on destruction.

Halfway through class, after running through all five positions, we lined up at the water fountain in the lobby. Even in line, the rest of the girls stood in perfect first positions, their wrists loose and graceful.

Through the open door of the other studio I could see my sisters' class. Small girls multi-colored tutus were running, seemingly without direction. Three girls, including Laura Grace, crashed into each other, falling to the ground, laughing. I doubted I had the coordination for crashing into strangers.

When my class let out Benji was already in the lobby, a child perched on each knee. He bounced his legs and my sisters laughed in glee. "Hey, Janey, how was class?"

"So fun," Ruth Ellen laughed.

"So fun," Laura Grace parroted.

"You already told me, you goofs. I'm asking Jane."

"It was good," I told him, smiling at my sisters' giddy joy.

"Bye, Jane," Rowan called to me, pushing the studio door open. "See you next week."

"See you," I answered.

"You made a friend," Benji said with clear delight.

"Ugh, you're embarrassing," I said.

He laughed. "Let's go see if Mama has dinner ready." He stood, balancing a child on each hip, taking a few sweeping waltz steps.

The second week of lessons was no easier than the first. I was instructed to practice my positions for twenty minutes every day, but my muscles protested too much the first two days after class. Once I felt better, it made no sense to hurt myself all over again. After a month, when my indifference to ballet overrode my embarrassment at being just so bad at it, my classmates and I came to an unspoken truce. They would not tease my poorly pointed toes and wobbly thighs, and I would stay at the back, going through the motions but never asking for help.

Rowan and I stood together in every class. If there were a move she thought I could master she'd try to talk me through it. If she knew it was beyond my abilities she'd just shake her head and say, "Eh, not this one."

There were seven girls in the class, including three with the same name: Kelly, Kellie, and Kelle. After the third week of lessons I described them to Greenie, mostly using the gossip I gleaned from Rowan during before class and during our breaks at the water fountain. Kelly was the best dancer in the class, but only due to her own overcompensation. "She knows she has the most common name, Kelly-with-a-Y." Kelle always got a solo in the Christmas pageant, but she still hated it because she never got to be the lead. Kellie always tried to invite herself over to Rowan's house because Rowan's brother was a senior on the football team. Kelly was stupid because all she did was dance and Rowan heard that someone heard that someone knew Kelly was only so skinny because she puked.

Class was only sixty minutes each week. While the lessons were never pleasant, they were something I could endure without too much annoyance. I came to look forward to them the way I had looked forward to the Piggly Wiggly, a highlight of my otherwise

boring weeks. When October came, Rowan shared her uncle's deer jerky. She told me about sleeping in a deer stand, twenty feet off the ground, but how she hadn't been allowed to hold the rifle. She invited me to a Halloween bonfire at her parents' farm. Ballet was the only time in the week we saw each other. Mother and Benji thought the party was too old for me. Secretly I was glad, though I showed Rowan disappointment. I was the youngest girl in class, and Rowan was the oldest, already in the eleventh grade. Though I was in the ninth grade, overcrowding and tornado damage meant that ninth grade classes were taught at the junior high. Electives were taught in poorly ventilated double-wide trailers on blocks in the JV football parking lot.

Every year the girls of the Littest Angel Dancing Academy pranced together in formation in the town's Christmas parade, which was held the first Saturday after Thanksgiving. The parade officially kicked off the Christmas season. Between the high school band and the humane society, half the town marched in the parade, with everyone else watching from the sidewalks of Main Street. Some people brought lawn chairs and coolers, staking out a good spot two or three hours in advance.

I asked Rowan if she was going to march, and she shook her head in wide-eyed horror. Kelle, having lost the lead in the Christmas recital to Kelly, lashed out more directly. "Only the stupid little kids who can't do anything march, so you'll fit right in." When I didn't immediately crumble under this attack she added, forcefully, "I'm saying you're a stupid dancer."

"Yes," I said. "I know I am." Despite this bravado, I didn't want to be in the parade. Recalling the parades of the past, I'd never seen a Littest Angel taller than my

waist. It would be mortifying – thirty some odd little girls, a handful still in diapers, and me. All of us marching together down Main Street.

I couldn't talk my way out of it. Mother was over the moon at the thought of her daughters in the parade. Plus, my sisters needed someone to hold their hands. This way Mother, Benji, Jenny Ann, and Greenie could watch together, since I would be keeping track of Ruth Ellen and Laura Grace.

We lined up with everyone else in the parade, the marching band, the karate club, the baton twirlers, the cheerleaders, a flatbed full of the high school and junior high football teams, Santa and the mayor in the back of a pickup truck, and the convertible with the homecoming queen. The parade started from the parking lot behind the courthouse, at the head of Main Street.

There were other older sisters with the young dancers, chaperones for the parade route to keep the masses of over-excited and stage-frightened children in line. I wanted to blend in with these other helpers, but the students were all donning green tutus and reindeer antlers. I had my own tutu and antlers, and too much of the middle school fear of calling attention to myself to feel anything other than embarrassment that I was the oldest girl in costume. The mortification grew as we walked, and I became convinced that every giggle and cheer from the onlookers on the sidewalks was meant as a personal rebuke. The whole town had bundled up, staked out good spots in their lawn chairs, and given up their Saturday night, to mock me. The girls my age were in the crowd, not wearing bedazzled antlers with a flock of toddlers.

At the end of Main Street we turned down a side street and doubled back to the staging area at a much quicker pace. Already the crowd was breaking up, and most of the

parents were already in the parking lot to collect their charges. By the time we found our way back to Benji, who was waiting with the station wagon, I was near catatonic, my shame having turned into quiet rage. I didn't even want to do this stupid thing. I didn't even like dancing. I said I just wanted to watch. I said I didn't want ballet lessons. No one cares what Jane wants.

Back at Greenie's house, she and Mother had made cocoa and laid out a tray of gingerbread men. Jenny Ann dozed in her swing, her little fists clenching and unclenching as she dreamt. When we walked in the door, Greenie and Mother began to clap. Benji stood behind us in the doorway and clapped too.

"You were all so pretty. My lovely dancing girls," Mother proclaimed. "I recorded the whole thing."

"Was it fun?" Greenie asked.

"It was awful," I said. "Dance class is stupid. I hate it and I'm never going back." I walked away from the table of treats, not even swayed by the plate of oatmeal cookies I knew were freshly baked just for me. I went to Benji's old bedroom, where I slept when I spent the night. I locked the door behind me, and for good measure strained my shoulder pushing his low bookshelf full of Hardy Boys and sports biographies in front of the door. Then I sat on the bed, swinging my feet.

Greenie came to the door, knocking gently. "Janey, won't you come down and have cookies? They're only going to be warm for a few more minutes, and you know they're no good cold."

"No thank you, Greenie. I would just like to be alone right now."

I heard her sigh, but she turned and left. I'd wanted her to stay and cajole me, and I was mad that she'd gone back to the kitchen to be with my stupid sisters and their stupid antlers.

Mother came next. "Jane, why didn't you tell me you don't like dance? I never would have made you go, honey. Just come out and eat some cookies." I said nothing. She tried to turn the knob, and huffed when she found it locked. "I'll tell Greenie to put your cookies in the jar. You can sleep here tonight and have them for breakfast. We gotta take the babies home, but I'll come back and get you and we'll talk about it tomorrow. I love you, Janey."

No you don't, I thought. *If you loved me I wouldn't have been in the parade.* When I knew she was gone, I got up and turned off the light, then sat back down on the bed. Benji came to the door. "Dammit, Jane. Your sisters are upset, your mom, your grandma. Everyone feels lousy cause we made Jane sad. I hope you're happy."

Oh, I was happy. Everyone should feel bad. Ballet was stupid.

Greenie came back. "If you don't want, don't come down. It was selfish of us to make you be in the parade. If I could do it again, we'd just us two stay home and eat all the cookies. Nobody meant to make you feel so bad."

Then I wasn't happy, I was awful. She came back, just like I wanted, but I'd made her sad, too. And I couldn't make myself open the door and tell her not to feel bad. I slid to the floor and slithered my way under Benji's bed, curled up with the dust bunnies, and sneezed through my tears until I passed out.

It turned out everyone spent the night. Since the door was locked, at 6am Greenie sent Benji in through the window. He had broken the latch in his teenaged years, so he'd

always have a way in after curfew. Not seeing me in the bed, he went back out the window bellowing, “Jesus Christ, she’s not here. Mama! Jane’s gone!”

The yelling woke me, and I followed Benji out the window into to backyard. He was turned towards the trees at the back of the property line, hands cupped around his mouth. “Jane! This isn’t funny! Get back here, Jane!”

“Benji, I’m here. Stop yelling,” I said from about ten feet behind him.

He turned back to me, just as Mother and Greenie rounded the corner, having barreled out the front door when they heard Benji shout. “The fuck did you come from?” he asked.

“You’re still yelling,” I answered as Mother dropped to her knees in front of me. She took my face between her palms, then frowned, reaching up to pull a tuft of grey dust from my hair.

“Janey, where did you go?”

“Nowhere. Honest. I just. I was under the bed.”

Mother locked eyes with me for a few seconds, making sure I wasn’t lying. “I don’t understand you sometimes,” she said.

“I know. I’m sorry. I try to be understandable. Honest.”

Mother pulled me into a hug. “I know you do, Janey.”

I decided to press my luck. “Can I still have the cookies for breakfast?”

It ended up being a happy morning. I got to eat the cookies for breakfast, after Ruth Ellen and Laura Grace showed me the dance they’d made up the night before. Judging from the flattened patches of taffeta, they’d slept in their green tutus. The dance was little more than holding their hands up to their heads in an approximation of antlers,

then spinning until dizziness caused them to collapse on the carpet. The adults and I clapped them through three encore performances, with Jenny Ann sitting on Mother's lap, waving her chubby fists with happiness. After the third dance Laura Grace's cheeks took on the green cast of her tutu. Benji scooped up a daughter under each arm and deposited them by the table before the carpeting could take a hit.

My sisters sat on either side of me at the long oak table in the dining room. Though oatmeal raisin are not their favorite cookies, though it was not in my nature to share, I divided the contents of my Tupperware container into three piles and we ate a downright sisterly breakfast.

"So what do you want to do?" Mother asked me.

There were at least three partially-chewed cookies in my mouth. "*Huuurrh?*" I replied with a crooked eyebrow.

"Instead of dancing. You can pick something else. Soccer, tee ball, art?"

I swallowed the cookies and licked the crumbs from around my lips. "I want to go to England and marry Prince William."

"Well, we can't afford that," Mother said.

"Don't push your luck, kiddo," Benji called from the kitchen.

"Just, I don't know. Just take me to the library. I'll read." We went to the library every Saturday already, but that never felt like enough

"You don't..." Mother's voice trailed off as she frowned. "You just wanna go to the library? Even more?"

"Please and thank you," I replied with a firm nod.

It turns out that children twelve and up can be left unattended at the public library for periods of time not to exceed two hours. While my sisters spun and jumped, I ventured from the young adult section and began making inroads on the fiction. On Saturdays, when Benji brought me to the library with Ruth Ellen and Laura Jane, he was fairly strict about my book choices. No Stephen King, no women whose garments were beginning to unravel, nothing, it seemed, that was any fun at all. On my unsupervised Wednesdays, though, I followed behind the interesting looking adults, at least one of whom turned out to be an unemployed UFO enthusiast, picking up whatever they set down. Ten years later, re-reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, I would boldly throw the book to the ground and announce, "Holy shit, I had no idea!" to a café of unsuspecting Londoners. This widow of unfettered access to books was the high water mark of my school week, as well as being incidentally educational.

From Grandmother and Sunday School, I learned sex left you full of unplanned babies and sin. On a biological level, I understood the biology of fertilization and embryo-implantation, processes that keep increasing the count of younger sisters under our roof. Once, as we retrieved one of her prescriptions, Greenie tried to steer me down the contraceptive aisle at Walgreens, which I blushinglly refused.

At the library, though, I discovered paperbacks, pastel pink and lavender covers with a cutout window showing a woman's face gazing tenderly into the distance. Almost always there was a second cover, the full picture, the young woman now wrapped in the strong arms of a shirtless man, often with a castle in the background. I wish there had been a more accurate source of sexual information that wasn't a dog-eared paperback that fell open to the dirty part if you set it on its spine, but that also wasn't having an awkward

conversation with another human. Because hell if I was going to ask someone to tell me how sex worked.

Benji confiscated the first harlequin romance I brought home from the library. “No more *roguish Irish bastards* in this house,” he intoned, reading from the book’s cover. “No more *sheltered but passionate maidens*. Do you hear me?” He hoisted the book above his head with an extended arm, as though he expected me to jump up in an attempt to reclaim it. “Read Jane Austen or something.”

“You sound like a commercial for the book. I’ve already read Jane Austen,” I told him. As I continued, I ticked off my counterarguments on my fingers. “*Or something* is really vague and could even be another romance novel. Or *that* romance novel,” I added, pointing at the book he’d taken from me. I turned my palm up, asking for the book back, though I knew I’d only made him angrier.

“Go to your room, smartass,” Benji said. “You should get your library privileges revoked.”

“What am I gonna do instead?” I asked through my door once inside my room. “Take up smoking behind the band hall? Do you have any idea how lucky you are that my teenaged rebellion is books you don’t approve of?” I waited to hear his footsteps heading back to the living room, then exhaled with a smile. I’d put up just enough of a fight that he’d be confident my banishment truly annoyed me.

Little did Benji know that he’d confiscated my decoy book. Tucked between my mattress and the pale blue of my wall was a completely innocuous-looking book, *The Opal Affair*, whose cover was matte black with a handful of pearlescent blobs in the

bottom left corner, the namesake opals. I never would've considered this book, if not for Mrs. Ambrose, the prim library patron who'd been in line ahead of me the week before.

"How are you today, Mrs. Ambrose," asked Meredith, the petite, perpetually delighted woman who worked the circulation desk. Meredith and I were the same height. She was thirty-six.

"This pains me, Meredith," Mrs. Ambrose began, "but I'm going to lodge a formal complaint."

"Oh, no. What's wrong? How can I help you?" Meredith's love of the library was apparent at all times, and she would take even the smallest grievance seriously.

"This book," Mrs. Ambrose said, sliding a hardback across the counter, "is beyond the pale."

"Oh," Meredith said.

"I'm sure you know how much I especially enjoy the wide selection of books you offer your patrons."

"Oh, yes," Meredith nodded. "You especially enjoy them a lot."

"But this book is unseemly." Mrs. Ambrose punctuated her statement by tapping the book with her first two fingers on the syllables of the last word. "It is," and here she paused to glance over each shoulder, so not to be overhead, "scandalous."

"Oh, dear," Meredith said.

By this point I had begun to lean around Mrs. Ambrose, craning for a better look at the offending missive. Meredith saw me, smiled, and winked.

"What would you recommend, ma'am?" Meredith asked.

“Things like this belong behind the counter, away from prying eyes.” Mrs. Ambrose crossed her arms over her chest and stared down at the book, as though unwilling to have any further contact with it.

Instead of picking the book up, Meredith moved it slightly to the side. “I’ll certainly take your advice up with our director, Mrs. Ambrose,” she said. “Please have a nice day.”

Realizing she’d been dismissed, Mrs. Ambrose jostled slightly before squaring her shoulders and walking away. I moved to the head of the line, but I couldn’t stop casting my eyes towards the offending book.

Meredith smiled when she saw me looking. Angling her head towards the book, she *mmmmmed*. *You want that book, don’t you?* she was asking.

I *mmmmmed* in response. *Really? I can have that book?*

Meredith nodded and pulled the book back so it rested on the counter exactly between us. She spread her hands over the book, offering it up. *It’s all yours* her smile said.

I pulled the book towards me. It was my turn to cast an exaggerated glance over each shoulder to make sure this wasn’t an elaborate sting operation. Once my card number had been recorded and the due date was stamped in my books, as I tucked the books into my backpack, Meredith offered me another wink. We hadn’t spoken at all during the transaction.

Mrs. Ambrose had not mischaracterized the book. She had been quite accurate in her assessment of the more salacious elements of *The Opal Affair*. For my very limited understanding of human sexual relations, I did have a vague notion that things transpired

between no more than two people, usually in some kind of private enclosure. There were whole realms of possibilities I had never considered, and, quite frankly, was happy to never consider again.

I returned the book to Meredith the next week. “Mrs. Ambrose, uh. She might have a point.”

“Oh, man,” Meredith said, genuinely concerned. “I would not have given you the book if..I mean, it looks so boring.”

“So boring,” I agreed. “But, on the inside...” My voice trailed off and I could feel my cheeks heating. “I’m just going to go get *Sense and Sensibility* now.”

It was on one of my Saturday jaunts to the library that I ran into Rowan again. The end of the young adult section was five steps away from the second row of the adult fiction section, and if Benji turned his back long enough, I could stretch from Cynthia Voigt to Tom Clancy. I'd never sneak it past him at the check-out counter, but even holding a book not written for a child made me feel important. As I tried to stroll inconspicuously towards Peter Carey and Arthur C. Clarke, Rowan appeared out of nowhere and noisily blew my cover.

"Hey, Jane," she said, though she did not sound entirely friendly.

"Hey!" I croaked in response, more worried about a lecture from Benji than anything else.

"Why'd you stop dancing?" she asked, still cross.

"Because I was bad at it and no one liked me."

Rowan scowled impressively. "Well, it sucks without you." She scuffed the ground with her shoe and frowned at the shelves behind me. "All those girls are bitches."

"I'm sorry. That's too bad." *Sucks* and *bitches* were still the kind of words I tended to think rather than say.

"You wanna go to the movies tonight? My brother has a car. He'll drive us, because I know he took one of Daddy's beers and I'll tell if he doesn't."

I wasn't sure how to explain that I tended to spend my Saturday nights with my grandmother. We ate cookies and drank chocolate milk and built puzzles and it was *awesome*.

We were interrupted by Benji, and while I initially believed I would be spared turning Rowan down directly, he ended up making things so much worse. "Who's this, Janey?" A child clung to each of his legs like a monkey, and his voice betrayed none of the strain in his jaw. They didn't love cookies as much as I did, but my sisters were both very healthy girls.

"This is Rowan, from my old dance class."

"Me and Jane are going to the movies tonight," Rowan pronounced. "If that's okay with you," she added quickly.

"Well, I mean, sure, that's great. Of course that's great!" My nonverbal cues had gone unheeded or ignored. Rowan waved over her mother, whom she was obviously embarrassed to be seen with, and our parents exchanged numbers and addresses. After receiving assurances that no R-rated movies would be watched, it was established that Rowan's older brother, would, in fact be by to pick me up.

On the car ride home Benji couldn't stop grinning and nudging me with his elbow. "This is pretty great, hey?" he asked at a red light.

"This is awful!" I replied. "I was supposed to spend the night with Greenie! She's making lasagna for me!"

"Janey, you spend every weekend with Greenie. Don't you think it's time to make some friends your own age? Spend time with, you know, young people?"

"Young people! Are! Awful!"

“That’s just not true. You need friends your own age.”

Mother agreed with him, which should not have been too much of a surprise, but when Greenie passed along her blessing, through Benji, since I was too upset to hold the phone, I believed this to be the worst moment of my life.

“Tell Greenie that my heart is like that kitten she hit with her car.”

Benji had already hung up the phone. “That’s a terrible thing to say to your grandmother.”

“Meow.” I lolled my head backwards and stuck out my tongue.

We kept our promise to Benji by watching *The Chase*, instead of the basketball movie Rowan wanted to see. I failed to keep my promise to myself, and ended up enjoying my time with Rowan. Eventually we fell into a rhythm where I spent one weekend at her house for every weekend I spent with Greenie. “This is fantastic,” Mother assured me. “When you move up to the tenth grade you’ll already have a friend in the high school.”

Though Mother and Benji told me often how welcome she was, Rowan had little patience for my sisters the few times she came over, and our friendship took place mostly at her home. I began spending the night at Rowan’s house at least one a month. The house was modest in size, and the interior had a worn quality that suggested something dated. Not that the furnishings were old, but that somehow I’d stepped back in time to several years before my own birth.

The house was set about one hundred feet back from the two-lane county road, so far back Benji drove past the driveway three times the first time he ferried me out for a sleepover. In the backyard, about fifty feet back from the house the yard dropped off

steeply into a man-made pond stocked with catfish, a small pier jutting out about fifteen feet into the water. They owned nearly thirty acres, her father told me with pride, and the family grew, trapped, or hunted all of their own food.

Rowan told me in the fall we could ride the four-wheeler out to the family's deer stand to watch her father and brother hunt. When Rowan turned eighteen she would get a rifle of her own, and her own hunting permit, but for now she was limited to practicing in the backyard with a BB gun.

There were always between five and ten dogs running free on the land where Rowan and her family lived. The dogs were all shapes and sizes, and only one had been intentionally adopted by the family. Buster was a three-legged black mutt, the runt of a litter born at their closest neighbor's house. The neighbor had brought Buster over to drown in the pond, but Rowan's mother took pity on the creature and he had lived with the family for ten years. The other dogs were highway dogs, showing up alongside the road in mid-February, and were relegated to the yard. Buster got free-reign of the house.

"Highway dogs?" I asked in confusion. I was standing on the bench seat of the picnic table on the back patio, as seven dogs jumped and wagged in excitement at my feet. It wasn't that I was afraid of them exactly. It's just that there were so many of them and they were all so very glad to see me.

"Some asshole's kid want a puppy for Christmas," David explained, obviously amused by my plight. "Puppy gets big, puppy ain't cute any more, puppy shits in the house, asshole kid doesn't want it after all, so the asshole parents drive it out of town and dump Merry Christmas by the side of the road."

Rowan and David set out food and water for all of the dogs, threw sticks for them to fetch, scratched the ears of the ones who got close enough to allow physical affection. Two of the dogs were regular fixtures, always in the yard when I visited Rowan's house. Three more made the rounds of the nearby properties, eating food wherever it was laid out. Some of the dogs ran off shortly after being fed, either into the woods to become fully feral, never to be seen again, or back onto the highway to be run down by incautious drivers in the dark.

“Stupid things think their owners are coming back for them. Chase down all the cars trying to get back home. Then...bang!”

I jumped, shaking the picnic table, setting the dogs off in a new flurry of barking exuberance. Rowan's mother exited the house, carrying a plate of burgers, deer cut with ground beef, to the grill. “David, stop scaring the company. And get those dogs gone while I'm cooking.”

Smirking, and with a wink, David pushed himself out of the lawn chair where he had been reclining and clapped his hands loudly. “Get! Get on,” he shouted, stomping forward in a way the dogs knew meant they had to scatter.

In April, a month before the end of the school year, Rowan told me that her older brother thought I was cute. I wasn't friends with boys who weren't book characters, so this news had very little effect on me. “Aren't you excited? Like everyone likes him. You should let him kiss you.” She related this information in her bathroom, my leg balanced on the white countertop, my toes hanging over the lip of the salmon sink.

“You're lucky it grew in so light,” Rowan said, referring to my leg hair. “Otherwise this would be too grody.” I had managed to apply the pink shaving foam to

her satisfaction, but my inability to hold the razor properly, and my hesitance to get too close to my ankles were beginning to frustrate Rowan. If I spent Saturday night with Rowan, then Sunday morning I had to join her family at Longview Baptist Church. The days had warmed up enough Rowan suspected we could do without tights, until she got a close look at my naked shins.

“My mom says if I don’t shave it’ll stay blonde and I won’t ever have to.” It was actually Greenie who told me this. Waiting for her prescriptions at the drugstore a few months prior, I had asked when I was supposed to start shaving. According to Greenie, it was never. On rushed mornings Mother often complained shaving nicks. Perfectly rounded spots of blood dotted her legs, and I had a profound aversion to bleeding.

“Well, maybe your dad doesn’t care if your mom looks all dyke-y, but you’re not gonna get a boyfriend with carpet legs.” Rowan sighed, looking over her shoulder, down the hallway towards the family room. She had announced loudly that we were watching *Dark Skies* at 9, but the longer she spent on remedial shaving the less likely her family was to acknowledge her claim on the television.

“Should I shave my Hobbit toes?” I asked with a laugh.

“Your toes are fine. Only weirdos look at toes.”

“I bet your brother likes toes,” I joked.

“Shut up,” Rowan said, pushing me so I lost my balance. “Don’t talk about him like that.”

Sometimes Rowan's parents went out to dinner, leaving David to watch over his sister and I. Rowan and I were sitting on the sofa in the family room. A row of deer heads, which startled and saddened me every time I spent the night, were mounted on the wood paneling behind us.

"I killed all a them," David told me the first time I spent the night. When talking to me, he often held onto the neck of his shirt with both hands, pulling it down just far enough to expose an amorphous blob of black ink on his collarbone.

"Did that myself," he said the first time he caught me staring. "Broke a pen and used a sewing needle. It's a football."

I never knew what to say to David's pronouncements. He wanted me to be impressed, I could tell, but all I ever said was, "Okay."

As soon as his parents left that night, David grabbed a beer from the fridge.

"Dad's gonna be pissed," Rowan said.

"I can do what I want. I'm almost in college now." Though there wasn't room, David sat between us on the brown velour couch in front of the television. He put his arm around my shoulder. "I'm gonna play in the NFL."

"Okay," I said.

“It’s fucking better than okay. One day I’ll be too rich to know you.” David drained his beer, then worked his free arm under my legs and set me on his lap. “You should be my friend now.”

Rowan stood up and walked out of the living room in the direction of the kitchen. I tried to stand up to follow her, but David held me tight. “Don’t you wanna be friends?” he asked, too close to my face.

“No.”

He leaned in to kiss me, his beer-damp lips catching on the corner of my mouth, then dragging across my cheek as I turned my face away from his. I leaned backwards away from him, rolling off his lap and somehow executing a perfect somersault, landing in a low crouch on the floor. I scrambled backwards, then stood when I felt I was far enough away. It was the single most graceful maneuver of my life, and through the undercurrent of fear I felt annoyance that it was wasted on him.

“God, all Rowan’s friends are uptight bitches.” He turned back to the television, giving Vanna White an appreciative whistle.

I walked to the yellow phone mounted on the kitchen wall and called Greenie. I told her I had a stomachache, then waited for her to collect me in the carport. When she pulled into the drive I realized my overnight bag was still inside, but I was unwilling to chance seeing David again to collect it. I never got those pajamas back.

It took a full week for the rumor to make it from the high school to the junior high. David and I had sex on his parents’ couch, but he only did it because I was so stupid about liking him, and I was bad at it to boot. “You didn’t even know where to put

it, so you're dumb and if you have a baby it'll be dumb too," a girl told me in geography class.

"We can do it, too, cause no one else will ever want to," a boy mentioned casually at my locker. Rowan wasn't there to defend me, which allowed me to tell myself she would've, though she hadn't returned my last phone call.

It only lasted a week, before summer vacation arrived and swallowed the cruelty. Perhaps if it had happened in August I would've learned to bite back and stand my ground. Or not.

Rowan and David had everyone over for a bonfire on the last night of school, but I spent the first night of my summer vacation with Greenie. It only took a few hours for her to coax the whole story from me. “Well he’s a horrible boy and I hope his penis catches on fire.”

My laugh was weak, but it was real. “I don’t even care about that so much. Not really. I just hate it that no one likes me and I didn’t even do anything wrong.”

“The world is full of people who are going to like you, Janey. One day you’ll walk into just the right room, and everyone will wonder how they lived such boring lives before they met you. One day you’re going to meet people who like you even more than I do.”

“Why ‘d you decide to like me so much?” I sniffled. Greenie was sitting at one end of her sofa, and I took up the rest of the cushions, curled on my side with the crown of my head less than an inch from her hip. I could no longer rest my head on her thigh, as I had in years past. Greenie’s low platelet count meant that my temple would leave a deep maroon bruise if I laid against her for more than two or three minutes, an inky half-moon that wouldn’t fade for more than a month.

One of the throw pillows supported my head, and Greenie ran her fingers through my hair, easing out the tangles that, without her ministrations, would have to be cut out. “What’s not to like, Janey?”

I heaved a great sigh here, my go-to move when I felt someone wasn't telling me the whole truth. *Hmmmmmmmm*, Greenie exhaled in response.

“You remember the first day you and the baby came over? With your mama and Ben?”

“And I hid the Ruth Ellen in the closet? One of my finest moments.” Here Greenie scuffed my scalp, a warning not to sidetrack her during an explanation I'd asked for. “We all sat on this couch, passing Ruthie around, your mama and Ben on either side of me, all of us cooing like damn chickens. And then I looked over, and you were on the floor. You'd taken your shoes off, and you had one on each hand, making them talk to each other, like puppets.”

“They were actually leopards.” That earned me a gentle pinch on the cheek.

“I looked at you and I thought, *No one has ever loved that girl best.*”

“My parents love me,” I said.

“Hush, girl,” Greenie said. “You know that's not what I meant. Every single person in the world, no matter what, deserves to have someone love them better than anyone else. I saw you and your little puppet shoes and I just knew you hadn't ever been anyone's favorite.”

Unable to either speak or swallow, I inhaled steadily through my nose. After a few minutes, when I felt it safe to talk again, I ask, “Didn't you already love somebody best?”

“I loved my husband. He died the year before Ben married your mama. I loved him fierce and true.” Here Greenie had to pause, and I felt on my head quick puffs of air, short exhales through pursed lips, Greenie's own way of trying not to cry. “I loved all my

boys the same, and I still do, but I loved that man better than anything else in the whole big world.”

“I wish I could’ve met him,” I said.

“That might’ve been nice, but I think he had to go to make room in my heart for you, sweet girl. I don’t think I could’ve loved you best with him still around.”

I rubbed my face back and forth across the pillow, wiping away my tears, but spreading snot across my chin in the process. “I won’t ever love anyone better than you, Greenie,” I mumbled, then turned my face fully into the pillow and let it catch my tears.

“Oh, don’t be stupid. I’ll be gone by the time you’re thirty, which is plenty of time for you to find someone else to love.”

“Nuh-uhh,” I muttered, shaking my head again.

“Just adopt whoever buys this house. I’ll make it a part of my will. Ben has to sell the house to some old person and you can carry right on loving them.”

I turned my head up to meet Greenie’s eyes. Though she’d shed a few tears as well, there was a smirk on her face. “You can’t just give me away to the next oldie that rolls through. What if it’s a handsy ninety-year old guy in diapers?”

“Then you’ll get over your sulking right quick and get busy finishing your life.” She bent and kissed my forehead. “Go wash all those boogers off your face, and I’ll drive us to the Dairy Queen. I’ll even call the girl at the counter Sugar Butt.”

When we reached the front of the line at Dairy Queen, the boy working the counter looked barely any older than me. His dirty blond hair was a touch too long in the back, the start of what would be a deeply unflattering mullet if it was allowed to grow out

much farther. His chin was dotted with angry red acne, and I was glad he took the orders instead of preparing the food.

“Welcome to Dairy Queen, can I help you?” he asked, his voice cracking on the upward inflection at the end of the question.

“You sure can, sugar buns,” Greenie said, smiling widely.

“Oh my god, Greenie,” I said, casting my eyes downward and pinching the bridge of my nose. My cheeks always colored when Greenie showed out like this. Mostly, I looked down to hide my smile.

Greenie nudged me with her shoulder, and with my downcast gaze I could still see her gesturing to the boy behind the register. “What would you prefer? Sweet cheeks?”

“Jesus, Greenie,” I laughed, meeting her gaze. “You might as well just call him *hot ass* and have it over with.”

“The *mouth* on you young people,” she exclaimed in faux shock, placing a palm at the center of her chest. Turning back to the counter she said, “Please excuse my impertinent granddaughter, sir. We’re still working on her manners.”

There was a short silence, the young man’s eyes focused on the middle distance between Greenie and me. He sighed. “Today if you order our Grill Burger with Cheese value meal, you will receive a small sundae for free. Chocolate, caramel, or strawberry.”

“Oh, *yes*,” Greenie said, her voice thick with delight. “We’ll take two of those, with caramel sundaes, Cokes to drink, and an extra order of fries.”

Seated at a table far back from the counter, I realized I hadn’t eaten in almost six hours. I immediately began eating my sundae, forgoing the spoon to stir the ice cream

and transport it to my mouth with the fries. When the small sundae was gone I began to unwrap my burger. I felt Greenie's eyes on me. I raised the burger to my mouth, which I opened as though to take a giant bite. I stared at Greenie, one eyebrow raised in question. She only ever hesitated over *serious topics*. Anything Greenie hesitated to discuss was certainly going to be uncomfortable for me as well, and I wasn't going to help her out by starting the conversation.

She arched her eyebrow in return, crossing her arms on the table in front of her. Still holding the burger to my face, mouth still open, I began to dance my shoulders in time to the pop music filtered through the restaurant's cheap speakers. Greenie laughed, and I bit into my burger, believing I had won.

As I chewed, Greenie reached across the table and laid her hand on my wrist. "So, this boy."

I pointed to my mouth, full of food. "Cheap shot," I mumbled around the partially chewed cheeseburger.

"You're lucky. It's summer, so a lot of the talk will die down. But when you go up to the tenth grade, people are still going to remember what that awful boy said."

I put my cheeseburger down, no longer hungry. Being a girl with a reputation was something that came up several times with Grandmother. My mother was a girl with a reputation, Grandmother said, which was how she'd ended up with me before graduating from high school and divorced from two men who weren't my father before she was 25. I wasn't a fan of Grandmother's logic. It took more than a reputation to get my mother pregnant.

I raised my hands, fingertips aligned with my eyebrows, fingers pressed into my closed eyes. “I’m not going to get pregnant. I’m fourteen. I’ve never even kissed a boy.” I took a deep breath making sure that I wasn’t going to cry in the middle Dairy Queen, and I lowered my eyes to look at Greenie. “I’m not my mom.”

Greenie extended her arms, palms up, across the table and I lay my hands atop hers. “First of all, Jane, I know you’re not your mother. Second of all, what so wrong with being like your mother?” she asked with a shrug. “She’s got beautiful children and she married an excellent man. A lot of women would be envious of her.”

I had turned my head to framed posters of frozen treats on the walls while Greenie spoke, but I nodded. She gave my hands an encouraging squeeze and continued. “If people want to keep talking, you won’t be able to stop them. If you joined a convent, they’d still talk. The only thing you can really do is make sure they aren’t liars.” It took a few seconds for me to catch up to Greenie’s meaning. When I did I turned back to her, mouth agape. “Are you on birth control?” she asked.

I pulled my hands back as though burned. “No, hush,” I whispered as I cast my eyes around the restaurant making sure there were no familiar faces. There was only one other group of people in the Dairy Queen, a family whose hairstyles betrayed a deep religious affiliation, but I flinched in dread of being overheard.

“Have you really never kissed a boy?” Greenie asked next, proving she had untapped wells of public mortification.

“I do not want to have this conversation,” I hissed in reply.

“Not having this conversation is very likely how your mother ended up with you.” Greenie held up a hand to quiet me. “You have been nothing but a welcome blessing in

my life, but I don't get the impression you're ready to pay the blessing forward." I shook my head. "Honey," Greenie said, dropping her forehead and angling her forehead towards me, "do you want to kiss boys?"

"Jesus, hush," I yelped, batting my hands in the air, trying to scatter her words the way I'd scattered the mosquitoes at Rowan's lake.

"It's okay if you don't. Oprah did two shows on it last week. Lots of animals are gay. Sheep, even."

I covered my eyes with one hand. The other hand opened and closed like I was pitching something into a trashcan. "I like boys," I whispered. "I don't like Rowan's brother, but I like boys."

"Cher's daughter doesn't like boys. It took her a while to deal with it, but Cher loves her daughter very much," Greenie continued as though I hadn't spoken.

I lowered my hand to meet her eyes. "This is the worst conversation I've ever had. It might be the worst conversation ever, full stop," I told her. "Most people would be thrilled their grandchild isn't gay or skanky."

I watched as Greenie mouthed the word *skanky* several times. "That is more fun to say than *easy*," she said, pointing a finger my way.

"Good. I'm very glad some good was able to come of this night." I gestured at my abandoned meal. "Are you going to let me finish my food now?"

"Are there any boys at your school that you want to kiss?" she repeated.

"So, no. No you are not going to let me finish my now tepid dinner."

"I'll get us more food," Greenie said with a dismissive flutter of her hand.

"Answer my question. "

“Why do you want to know? Are you going to call on them at Netherfield Park in the hopes of arranging an advantageous marriage?”

“Oh, your other grandmother would’ve been Mrs. Bennet,” Greenie stated.

“My other grandmother was Lady Catherine de Bourgh,” I replied, and Greenie laughed in agreement. “All the boys I want to kiss live in books.”

“Well, when you meet a boy you want to kiss in real life, tell me. We’ll figure out what to do.” Greenie crooked a pinky in my direction, and I linked my small finger through hers, sealing the deal.

I didn't necessarily want to kiss Jay Carroll, but I didn't want to not kiss him, which is how I ended up at the movies with him. He was a year older than me, in my creative writing elective. He saw me reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* before the tardy bell rang and he cautioned me that I'd never be able to enjoy *Jane Eyre*. He played for the soccer team and liked to grouse about the unfair attention accorded to football players. When our assignment was to write love poems, he refused on the grounds that he didn't love anyone.

"Write about soccer and pretend it's a girl," I told him, which made him laugh.

We had to read our poems aloud. Jay sauntered up to the podium, locked eyes with me, and said, "I play her like the game she is." I don't remember the rest of the poem, but by Friday afternoon we had plans for him to pick me up at 6:30 for the 7 o'clock movie that night.

I'd wanted to wear the same clothes I'd worn to school, but Mother insisted I wear a dress. "He's going to know I changed," I whined.

"Yes," she agreed. "He'll know you care about looking nice for him." I was wearing the blue dress I'd worn to church on Easter. It had a lace collar and puffed sleeves.

But I don't think I look nice," I countered. "I think I look like a cartoon maid."

Mother took me by the shoulders, smiling. "This is such an important milestone. I'm so happy for you."

I raised my hands and pulled her hands off my shoulders. "Please let me put my normal clothes on. I am begging you."

"No, Jane," she said. "First impressions are important."

“But we already know each other,” I protested. “We met each other weeks ago, he’s in one of my classes. Are thirtieth impressions important, because *we see each other every day.*”

“I think you’re old enough for some mascara,” Mother continued. “I’m going to get my makeup.”

“I will wear the dress if you promise not to touch my face,” I said quickly. “Or my hair,” I added, when Mother’s eyes strayed to my messy ponytail.

“You at least have to brush it, Jane.”

“As soon as you leave, Mother.” I had no intention of wearing the dress, and my best shot was to get Mother out of my room and then hide out up here until Jay arrived. I felt almost entirely positive Mother wouldn’t order me into new clothes in front of my date. Mostly almost entirely positive.

At 6:47 a quick burst of car horn, *beep beep beep*, came from the driveway. I rose from my bed, where I’d been sitting for the past half an hour, pretending I wasn’t looking at the clock on the wall. When I reached the foyer, Benji was standing in front of the door.

“Did he honk?” Benji asked

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Did he *honk?*” Benji repeated, with a grating emphasis on the last word.

I merely shrugged my shoulders, standing, gathering the ridiculous gold purse Mother had lent me. When I reached Benji at the doorway, he laid a hand on my arm.

“He can’t come to the door like a civilized human? He’s going to sit in the driveway and honk like some kind of...ingrate?” I could see from Benji’s face that he’d

really wanted to use a better word. Before I could reply, Benji was pulling the door open. He pointed a finger at me. “This young man is going to come to the door, or you’re not going anywhere tonight.”

At 6:50 I was still alone in the foyer. I didn’t hear any yelling from outside, which was a good sign, but there were also no civilized footsteps approaching the house to retrieve me. I pulled the door open a few inches, just enough to see Benji leaning into the driver’s side window of a white station wagon. Jay drove a grey Nissan. I opened the door wider. A woman, several years older than my mother, sat behind the wheel. Jay slouched in the passenger’s seat. He was most certainly wearing the same clothes from school that day.

There was a glorious eleven seconds before anyone noticed me framed in the doorway, eleven seconds during which I imagined pulling the door shut behind me, taking off my Easter dress, and curling up with *A Room With a View*. As soon as I began to pull the door shut, though, Benji spotted me.

“Hey, Jane,” he called with a smile and a wave. “I was just saying hey to Jay’s mom. Mrs. Carroll.”

Having been introduced, Mrs. Carroll stuck her head out the window and called out to me. “We gotta get a move on, honey.” She turned to her son. “Jay, get out. Let your friend sit in the front.” Jay rolled his eyes before throwing the passenger door open. He slammed the backseat door closed behind him before slumping down, completely out of view.

“Chop, chop, honey,” Mrs. Carroll said.

Walking down the front steps and crossing to the idling car in the driveway, my legs trembled. Not just my knees, but tremors I could feel from my calves to my hips.

Benji and Mrs. Carroll beamed at me.

“You look very nice tonight,” Mrs. Carroll told me.

I fumbled the door latch, and it took me three tries to get the door open. I was sure I heard a snort from the backseat.

As I closed the car door behind me, I said, “Hi, Jay.” He didn’t answer.

“Sit up and put on your seatbelt, Jay,” his mother said.

“Alright, you guys. Have fun tonight. Have so much fun,” Benji said with entirely too much enthusiasm. He tapped the hood Mrs. Carroll’s car twice, like some kind of official send-off.

“Not too much fun, though,” Mrs. Carroll replied. Jerking her head towards Jay she added, “Somebody already got his ass grounded today.” According to the dashboard clock, it was 7:03 when we pulled out of the driveway. We were going to miss the previews.

Jay said nothing for the car ride. When Mrs. Davis pulled up in front of the ticket box he leapt from the backseat as soon as she’d fully stopped. “Honey,” Mrs. Davis said, turning to me, “I didn’t set out to put such a damper on your date.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She sighed. “I’m sure I don’t have to tell you, but that boy has no manners. They get to that age and there’s nothing decent about them.”

Jay seemed decent enough in class, but by this point the previews were over and I was missing the movie's exposition. "Yes, ma'am," I agreed, in the interest of ending our conversation.

She sighed again, and flipped down her visor. There was a twenty tucked behind the mirror. "Get some snacks, my treat."

"Thank you," I said.

"We're late," Jay bellowed, the first he'd spoken that evening.

Whose fault is that? I wanted to shout, but didn't.

When I joined Jay at the ticket counter, he turned gestured his mother away, sweeping her aside with the backs of his hands. Unbothered, she raised her wrist and tapped an imaginary watch, then held up nine fingers. Jay put his whole arm into the sweeping motion, continuing until his mother drove away.

"What movie?" the girl at the counter asked. The scene between Jay and his mother had left me feeling awkward and uneasy, but she seemed unbothered.

"I don't care," Jay replied.

"That's not showing tonight," she said.

Jay groaned. "Whadda you want, Jane?"

I opened my mouth, prepared to ask for a phone to call Greenie to rescue me, when I noticed, to the left of the snack bar, a small arcade. It only held four or five outdated games, as well as one of those claw machines that lets you believe you're *thisclose* to grabbing a stuffed Mario. "Do you wanna, like, just play Frogger?" I asked.

Jay extended his lower lip and exhaled, blowing his floppy bangs out of his eyes. Then, surprising me, he laughed and slung an arm around my shoulder, pulling me to his side. “Yeah, sure, why not?”

I unfolded the twenty his mother had given me and laid it flat on the counter. “Can you make change?” I asked.

Twenty dollars in quarters goes a pretty far way when neither player one nor player two has any vested interest in actually winning Street Fighter II. Jay and I developed a highly refined battle strategy, consisting of resting the center of our palms loosely on the joystick, a constant low-grade wobble keeping the joystick perpetually in motion. Without our other hand, we hit as many of the kick/punch/flip buttons as we could, as quickly as we could. This resulted in our respective fighters performing spastic twitching breakdances without ever touching each other. The game arbitrarily awarded one of us the victory even though no real damage had been inflicted. Before we’d spent three dollars of our quarters, Jay and I were both laughing to the point of tears.

Jay used half the quarters to buy us cherry icees from the snack bar. There weren’t any seats in the arcade, or any benches in the small lobby, so we sat in the low, orange bucket seats of the Daytona Race Challenge while we sipped our drinks.

“What’d you do? To get grounded?” I asked.

He snorted and shook his head. “My mom wanted me to put on a tie, and I wouldn’t.” Jay turned to me quickly, and his voice turned apologetic. “Not that I don’t think you deserve a tie, but it’s the movies. If we were going to, like, dinner, I would’ve put on a tie.”

I threw my head back, laughing and laughing. “No, no, no,” I said when I saw Jay’s stricken face. “Not you. My mom tried to dress me up like Shirley Temple. I think the only reason I’m not grounded is she was too busy being angry at you for being late.” I looked at Jay for a second, trying to picture him in a tie and nice shirt. He’d probably look pretty good.

“Maybe,” he said, then looked away and blushed – *blushed!* – “maybe next week we could put on our stupid clothes and go get dinner. If I put on the tie, I bet mom would give me back my car.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Cool, okay.” I wondered if I sounded stupid, if I was supposed to sound more eager or more disinterested, and would Jay change his mind if my response were wrong.

Jay wrinkled his nose, huffing out a small laugh. “Cool,” he replied. Then he leaned over and pressed his cherry icee lips to mine. I smiled against his mouth, and by the time the counter girl came in to push-vacuum the arcade floor and found us, saying *go do that in a dark theater for Christ’s sake*, we had gotten the hang of kissing each other, breathing through our noses and angling our heads just right.

For his 18th birthday Jay wanted to visit Graceland. “Do you even like Elvis?” I asked, incredulous, the third time he brought it up. “I mean, you like Snoop Dogg.”

“*With my mind on my money, and my money on my mind,*” he sang in agreement.

“*Laid back,*” I finished before Jay and I knocked our wrists together twice then slapped the backs of our hands together, our sad suburban approximation of Snoop and Dre’s greeting. “See?” I said, raising my arms in a wide shrug. “I’ve never heard you say anything about Elvis. We do not have an Elvis handshake.”

“It’s, like, an experience. People come from all over the world. Japanese people love Elvis. It feels so stupid to be so close and never go.” My hesitation must’ve shown on my face, because he grabbed my shoulders and shook them playfully. “C’mon,” he bellowed, “an experience!” I smiled, at his antics more than the promise of the Presley Manse.

Our *Entourage VIP* tickets hung around our necks, faux backstage passes to Ed Sullivan show. The tickets let us cut to the front of the line, which snaked halfway down the driveway already at just past 10 o’clock. Just inside the door, according to our audio guide, was the formal sitting room, and just beyond that, through an elaborate stained glass archway, was the piano room.

“That’s pretty awesome,” Jay said, his chin resting on my shoulder. The room’s furnishing were white: sofa, carpet, armchairs, cabinets. A fireplace was set into a mirrored wall opposite the sofa. The only splash of color in the room were the two stained glass peacocks on either side of the doorway into the piano room. “I’m already glad we came,” Jay continued.

The room made me sad, though. The carpets and cushions were too pristinely white. It wasn't a space you could live comfortably in. "The peacocks must get lonely," I said, the words overwhelming me as I spoke them.

"Sure, weirdo," Jay said playfully. "The wall art is glum."

The peacocks were in profile, facing each other, but with their beaks tipped up to the ceiling. One of the peacocks reflected in the mirrors by the fireplace, even farther away from his kin. "They can't even see each other," I protested, knowing that if I didn't drop the subject I would start to cry.

The basement rooms didn't necessarily look more comfortable, especially the wooden armchairs, without padding, carved to resemble dragon scales we saw in the jungle room. These rooms looked livable, though, like people could exist here. It wouldn't matter if you spilled a Dr Pepper.

The downstairs rooms put Jay off Graceland. We stared into the television room, the three sets mounted in the back wall each showing a different Elvis concert, and Jay clucked his tongue in disapproval.

"Two mirrored fireplaces in the same house is a bit much," I said, hoping for a laugh.

"It's everything," he said, without laughing. "The fireplaces, the glitter on the pillows, that dumb ceramic monkey. Everything is gauche."

Gauche was one of my pSAT vocabulary words, and he pronounced "gah-ouch." I didn't know if it was a mistake or a joke, or some kind of test to see if I'd correct him.

"I dunno," I replied. "People should get to have what they want. Elvis doesn't have to appease your middle class sensibilities." I don't know why I felt compelled to

defend Elvis, now more than two decades dead, not here to eavesdrop on the judgment of strangers. The house broke my heart. This ostentatious and over-the-top collection of stuff felt like happiness pursued but never caught. The ceramic monkey on the coffee table, glossy white with flat, black marbles for eyes, would want to please. It would want to make us smile, make us feel happier about the world we walked through. Why couldn't Jay see that?

After a plate lunch at the Chrome Grill – catfish, cornbread, dirty rice, and hush puppies – we used our VIP access to see the inside of Elvis's two private jets. The gold plated bathroom fixtures of the Lisa Marie were a little *gah-ouch*, but I wouldn't give Jay the satisfaction of saying it.

Instead of one gift shop, an entire strip mall of storefronts sold everything from bed sheets to dinner plates. On a back wall, behind a rack of discounted sweatshirts, hung a framed poster. The frame was cheap – plastic instead of glass, gaps at the corners where the sides didn't quite meet. The man in the poster wasn't Elvis, yet, but a kid with tousled hair behind the wheel of a car. He leaned slightly out the window, not quite looking at the camera. The arm draped over the steering wheel was strong, life strong, not gym strong, muscles earned through work. The sharp lines of his face contrasted with the perfect bow of his full upper lip. I could tell that, unless he was making the effort to smile, the corners of his mouth naturally edged downward. He was disappointed, maybe, that you weren't getting in the car with him. He was going anyway, though. Your loss.

My face heated and my stomach dropped. Suddenly, and for the first time in my life, I wanted to have sex. How grateful I'd been, all those times Jay kept his hands above my waist, respecting my focus on school work and my fears of following too closely in

my mother's footsteps. How magnanimous I'd been, to respect Jay's commitment to church and chastity each time he taken his hand off my breast and carefully readjusted my top.

Two crazy kids in love didn't have to give into their hormones, I'd told all the concerned adults in my life who asked if I needed to talk about birth control. Two crazy kids in love could respect each other's boundaries, and plans for the future, and covenants with Jesus. They could keep their libidos in check.

Nope. Turned out, when it came to Jay, I just didn't have a libido.

I wanted to bone the shit out of Elvis Aron Presley, a rush of feelings I had never, ever felt towards Jay. I pressed my half-drunk Cherry Coke Icee to my face, hoping to calm my flaming cheeks, convinced that if I chanced looking down there would be a damp patch spreading out from the crotch of my jeans. Jay and I had spent two and a half years holding hands and dry humping, and just that second I realized that I didn't want to have sex with him, that I never had.

On the drive back to Greenie's we listened to the CD of *Aloha from Hawaii* Jay bought. Jay liked me to scritch the back of his head as he drove, and if my fingers stilled for too long he nudge his head backwards, knocking my knuckles into the headrest.

"You're quiet," he said.

"Elvis takes a lot out of a girl," I replied. I dug my fingertips into the top of his spine, the way he liked.

"Oh, God, yeah," Jay growled.

The sort of queasy, full-body shudder that comes with dental appointments or calculus problems ran through me. *Aloha from Hawaii* was old, fat Elvis in the white

jumpsuit, but his voice still caught most of the notes just right, turning my insides to jelly. If Jay would just shut up, I could close my eyes and pretend I'd hopped through the picture and into Elvis's convertible, pretend I was running my fingers through a jet-black pompadour.

At Greenie's, I jumped out of his car and was halfway up the driveway before he called out. "Hey," he said, surprised. "What, I don't get a kiss?"

"Babe, I think the soft serve made me sick. I don't feel good." The dipped cone was the only food I'd eaten that Jay hadn't, making it a plausible scapegoat.

"Ew. Go," he said, laughing. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Bye, babe," I said, hating myself that I couldn't stop using the endearment, quickly tugging the door closed behind me before he could say something stupid. Like *I love you*.

* * *

"You never know what's gonna flood your basement," Greenie said to me after I explained my embarrassing rush of desire for The King.

It took me nearly half a minute to catch her meaning. When I finally got it I covered my mouth in horror. "Nice old ladies shouldn't say things like that to their granddaughters," I admonished her.

"I am not that old, Janey," she replied. *I'm not really your grandmother* she could've added, but she never did.

"What do I do?" I whined, tacking several extra Os on the last word.

"Well, lucky for Jay, you can't dump him for Elvis."

“I don’t even think I like him,” I continued in the same petulant tone of voice.

“Jay, I mean. Obviously I like Elvis just fine.”

“Of course you like Jay,” Greenie answered. “Like just isn’t love, and it sure isn’t lust.”

“While I appreciate that you have validated my feelings,” parroting to Greenie a phrase I had recently learned from Dr. Phil, “I would rather discuss any other of the deadly sins with you right now.”

“My sweet girl, such a prude.” Greenie winked at me and left the room while I sputtered for a comeback.

* * *

“These books are exactly the same,” Greenie chided the next morning. I’d dropped three paperbacks on the picnic table by the pool, the sum total of my exciting Sunday plans.

“No they’re not,” I contradicted. Greenie was the only person I was comfortable indulging my romance novel addiction in front of.

Greenie grabbed the top book. “Oh, she’s a redhead.” She plucked up the other two books, holding them aloft as she passed judgment. “Now they’re in Texas. Surprise, he’s a wanted gunslinger.”

I pointed to the book in her right hand. “Pirate, actually,” I corrected.

“But it’s all the same story,” she continued. “Don’t you ever want a new story? Maybe even a better story?”

“Everyone ends up married, pregnant, and happy,” I said. “Isn’t that the dream?”

Greenie hummed at me, her lips a thin line. “Have you talked to Jay yet? How’s Jay doing this fine morning?”

“Not a pirate,” I answered quickly, turning my face into the book to forestall any further discussion. Though I had gone to bed determined that I had to cut Jay loose, by morning I’d reconsidered.

I could sense Greenie staring at me over her glass of grapefruit juice. “It’s not nice to string him along like that, Janey.”

“I’m not stringing him along,” I protested.

Greenie didn’t immediately answer, her fingertips drumming out a light beat on the tabletop, a morse code of disappointment. She reached over and laid a hand on my wrist, then squeezed until I looked up from the book to meet her eyes. “You’re allowed to say no to people, Jane. No one’s going to stop loving you if you say no to the things you don’t want to do.”

“Well, Jay might stop liking me,” I hedged. I tried to keep of my face how badly her words had startled me, sending a shock like static electricity up my arm.

“But you don’t like him,” Greenie protested. “Do you want to be dating him?”

“No,” I said. “*But*,” I added, loudly, before she could cut me off, “but, Jay is going to college in like three weeks. He’ll be so far away, and he’ll be on the soccer team, and he’s really handsome, and who really cares about their dumb high school girlfriend once they start going to keggers? So he’ll find someone else to date really fast. He’ll cheat on me, and then we’ll have to break up.” I smiled at Greenie, pleased with the elegance of my solution.

“Your boyfriend’s leaving for university and you think there’s a good chance he’s going to cheat on you?”

I reached behind me to knock on the wooden chair back, a wide grin on my face.

“Never, Janey, in the history of the world, have the words *my boyfriend will cheat on me* been spoken aspirationally.”

I shrugged and returned to my reading, confident my cunning plan would work.

My cunning plan did not work. Though it wasn't easy, Jay assured me that his faith and the lower caliber of college girls and my own inherent goodness had kept him steadfast and true. Having a boyfriend away at college for my senior year was pretty great. I retained the status of being desirable, while hardly ever having to see Jay. He was coming home for my senior prom, though. He'd gotten Mother and Benji's permission for us to spend the night together in a hotel. I gaped at him mutely when he said this, at the end of his Easter break.

"I think the time is finally right," he added, stroking the top of my hand. We were seated in Greenie's formal dining room, at the head of her table.

I opened and closed my mouth several more times, a dumbfounded goldfish.

"You don't have to say anything," Jay confided. "I feel the same way."

I walked him to the door, kissed him goodbye, and sank to the floor in a pile of anxious dread as soon as I heard his car start.

Greenie appeared above me. "You need to sort this out, Jane," she scolded. When I didn't reply she dropped a box of condoms on my head. "At least stay safe, dummy," she said over her shoulder as she walked away.

I scooted away from the box, pushing it away from me with one foot. I opened my mouth to yell, but only a faint, whined exhale escaped.

I was so screwed.

"You're so lucky," Mother said to me, between snaps on the digital camera she'd gotten for Easter. I balanced on one of the Clinique counter's uncomfortable stools, wishing Mother didn't feel the need to document every facet of the *senior prom experience*, as she'd taken to calling it. The stool wasn't level, but scooped at an odd

angle, and slippery to boot. Every few seconds, I'd feel myself sliding towards the floor. The temptation to just let gravity take me grew harder and harder to resist with each *click* of the camera.

I'd done my own hair, nothing more than pulling into a tight bun held in place atop my head with a ponytail holder and several bobby pins, and I'd told Mother I was perfectly capable of doing my own makeup. She wanted me to have everything she'd missed out on, though, all the young adult rites of passage she hadn't had. Because she'd had me.

"You're just so lucky," she repeated, between clicks, as the saleswoman carefully darkened my eyelashes.

"To be having my makeup done? Yes, I am. Have I not been suitably grateful?" I asked her.

She scowled at me, and I flattened my mouth with contrition in return. After sighing, Mother said, "You're lucky because you found Jay so young. You don't have to go through all that heartache I did. You already found your guy."

I wanted to tell her that I had gone through all of her heartache; I'd been there for all the boyfriends and flings and short-lived marriages post-my unknown father and pre-Benji. I wanted to remind her I'd made out far worse than she had in a couple of those exchanges.

That wasn't the line of thinking that had icy fingers spreading across my chest, though. I realized that everyone, including Jay, fully expected Jay and I to get married. I'd only applied to one college, Duke, where he was a sophomore on a soccer scholarship. There'd been a point, countless points, I could've ended things, but here I

was, Black Honey Lip Shine on my mouth and a tacit understand Jay and I would be having sex tonight.

I began to hyperventilate, making small squeaks, like a balloon releasing puffs of air. I couldn't breathe. I pushed away the hands of the Clinique woman to double over, resting my elbows on my knees and pressing my palms to my temples.

"Oh, baby, don't smudge your makeup," Mother said, a tissue appearing in my downturned line of vision. "It makes me want to cry, too," she said. "We're all so lucky."

* * *

"Do you feel better?" Jay asked. Last night I had begged out of the hotel room Jay had booked for us, claiming an upset stomach and queasy bowels. Explosive diarrhea an excuse so disgusting he'd have to believe it, I thought at the time.

"I do," I said with forced cheer.

"Great!" he said. "Good, great." After a too-long pause he continued. "Do you want to go to lunch? I made a reservation for brunch at the Peabody." He'd slept in the Peabody last night, in a suite with a king bed. Since Christmas our phone conversations had erratically orbited the idea of finally having sex, in a fancy hotel bed, to celebrate my graduation and the start of our time together at Duke.

"Great!" I said, sure he could hear the panic in my voice.

"Great!"

"Great!" I could feel my breath coming fast again, panic tingling in my fingertips.

What are you doing, a voice in my head cried.

"Be there in ten, babe," Jay said, and the line clicked dead.

I had dialed Jay's number and was listening to the phone ring before I was fully aware of what I'd done. "Yeah," he answered, slightly breathless, before the second ring.

"Jay," I said.

"Hey, babe. What's up? You need more time to get ready?"

Ha ha you have no idea, I thought. "I don't really want to go to brunch."

"Oh," he said, the word packed with disappointment and confusion.

"I don't want to do this," I continued, halting between each word. Heat prickled in my armpits, but chills chased each other across my back.

"Yeah, okay, we don't have to get brunch, babe. It's cool." Jay used his understanding voice. He sounded so rational and genial.

"Not just brunch." I took a deep breath, pictured the girl who'd run away from home to replace a broken glass, the girl who'd backflipped away from David's probing advances. "I don't want to do this. Us. This us." Through the phone I swore I could hear Jay blinking slowly. It felt like an hour before he spoke again.

"You're breaking up with me?" His voice was like two rocks struck against each other, the crack of flint trying to start fire.

I nodded several times, before I realized he couldn't see me. "I am, yes," I told him, relieved he seemed to be on the same page.

"Do you have any idea how much I spent to come home and take you to this stupid dance? Fuck, Jane. This is fucking shitty."

So maybe we weren't on the same page.

"You're a fucking bitch, Jane. Fuck you." The phone went dead in my ear again.

He was right: I was fucking shitty. I had done an awful thing. He had every right to be upset with me. I felt lighter than I had in weeks. I felt *fantastic*. And awful. Fucking fantastically awful.

“Heading out,” I called to Mother and Benji, curled up together on the sofa watching the NFL pre-game.

“Benji isn’t coming to get you?” Mother asked.

“Uh, no,” I replied. “I’m actually going to see Greenie.”

Mother unfolded herself from Benji’s arms, sitting up ramrod straight. “Did he not tell you about brunch? You have reservations. It’s very thoughtless of you not to see him before he drives back.”

“Jay and I.” I paused to frown. “We broke up.”

Now Benji sat at attention. “That asshole. That little punk.”

“No, no,” I interrupted, holding out my hand, palm first, to stop his misunderstanding. “I broke up with him. Just now. I did this.”

“Jane, why?” Mother cried.

“Because I don’t want to be with him forever. Because I don’t love him best.” It was the best explanation I could offer, insufficient, but perfectly true.

* * *

I found Greenie in the backyard, under the shade of an umbrella beside her pool. Two cans of Diet Coke sat on the low table beside her, one unopened. Her book lay open

on her lap, two fingers holding her place. “To what do I owe this pleasure?” she asked me.

In response, I flopped onto the chaise beside her, pulling the burlap pillow from behind my head and pressing it over my face to muffle my scream. I lowered the pillow and turned to Greenie, who studied me without apparent concern. “I broke up with Jay,” I told her.

“What, just now?” she asked.

“He made us brunch reservations at the Peabody,” I said, guilt creeping into my voice. “And a room at the Peabody. We were supposed to have sex, but I had him take me home last night. I did it over the phone. I broke up with him on the phone. Am I the worst?” The pitch of my voice had been creeping upward with each word, and I screeched the final question.

“Honestly? You could’ve handled that better, dearest. You know that,” she gently chided.

I put the pillow back over my face and screamed into the fabric.

“Not that I’m not happy,” Greenie continued, after I’d lowered the pillow again. “That boy wasn’t right for you.”

“Why didn’t you stop me?” I asked.

Greenie *tssked* sharply. “That’s not my place, Jane.”

“I would’ve married him,” I said, believing the words as I spoke them. They felt like rocks in my mouth, crumbly like clods of dirt.

“It might not’ve gotten that far,” Greenie hedged.

“I’m going to his school. I only applied to his school.” Panic washed over me again, starting at my temples and breaking like a wave over my toes. “I don’t want to go to Duke,” I wailed.

“At least you figured it out now, instead of on your honeymoon.” Greenie said, as though there were any kind of silver lining here. “I can call someone at UM. Or Rhodes, if you want. We’ll work this out.”

“I would’ve married him,” I repeated, incredulous. “*Married*,” I stressed, as though at least one of us failed to grasp the gravity of the situation.

“But now you won’t,” she said with finality. “Thank god for small favors.”

“You were just gonna let me?” I demanded. “You weren’t going to stop me.”

“Not my place, Janey.”

“I would’ve. Married. Him.” I screamed into the pillow again. “Why didn’t you say anything? Why didn’t you stop me?”

For what felt like the first time, Greenie spoke to me with real bite in her voice. “Elizabeth Jane Diana McMorris Gardener.” She huffed out an exasperated sigh. “It is not my job to make your mistakes for you. It is not my job to stop you from failing. Failure is how people learn. Mistakes make us smarter.” She stood up, snatching the unopened soda can. “Sometimes, Jane, no one’s coming to save you. Sometimes you have to save yourself.”

I heard the *clap-clap* of her sandals as she walked to the house, the *whoosh* of the patio door as it slid open, then shut. I put the pillow back over my face and let it soak up my tears.

When I graduated from high school, Greenie gave me her wedding ring, a plain gold band engraved with her husband's initials and their wedding date. "You are the child of my heart," she told me.

I slipped the ring down the fingers of my left hand in turn, starting with my pinkie. The ring fit best on my thumb, where it remained. "You were the first person who read me a book," I replied.

"Oh, darling," she said, cupping my chin. "I love you, too."

Despite Greenie's offer of intervention, I took her *save yourself* message to heart, and got myself into Rhodes College without any help from her. That I know of. Even with my GPA and test scores, there was only so much financial aid the school offered, especially on such short notice. I was miserable at Rhodes, where everyone was as chipper and blonde as the sisters I was desperately trying to escape. I fell in with the theater students, as they seemed to be the only others not involved in the elaborate Greek system. The sudden rush of freedom buoyed me through a semester, and in the spring I moved into the faux-maturity conferred by too much cheap beer and dorm room trysts.

The first time sex felt good was with Vince. He wasn't the first person I slept with, and it wasn't our first time making sordid use of his roommate's futon. "Oh," I said, surprised, "that feels good." *Oh*, I thought, *this is why people do this*.

Monday night, three days after we had sex on his living room floor, Vince tracked me down, studying in the young adult section of the university library. It had the comfiest chairs, and after eight o'clock there were never any young adults.

“Look,” he said, kneeling before me after I’d ignored several frenzied minutes of pacing. “Look,” he repeated, pulling my book away from my hands so I’d have to make eye contact. “Are we even going to talk about what happened?”

“Oh, no,” I answered quickly, shaking my head. “Literally: not ever.” I laid my hand on his wrist for emphasis, the same way Grandmother had when trying to drive home how little my personal feeling about attending Wednesday night services mattered to her.

In hindsight, gently touching him in the dim lights of the library’s deserted fourth floor was an easily misconstrued gesture. Luckily, the chairs are soft and the place clears out by 5.

We kept most of our clothes on, which was another mistake on my part. It allowed me to forget that Vince has terrible backne—until the next *next* time we had sex, gloriously naked, at four in the afternoon. This was going to be the absolute last time, I told myself, until sex magically unfolded itself as something worthy of repeat performances. *Really*, I mentally chastised my vagina, as my fingers scratched irregular patterns over his back, trying to skate around the reddened pimples. *This guy?* I thought, before everything felt too good to think about thinking anymore.

The summer before my fourth year of college, Greenie moved into an assisted living facility in Germantown. She'd fallen twice on the stairs of her home, and while no bones were broken, the bruises bloomed purple and lurid enough to convince Benji she needed constant access to doctors. He convinced his two older brothers, and the three of them spent all of June and July looking for a place that met Greenie's requirements for her own autonomy. She got to keep her car, and her apartment had a small kitchen for her to prepare her own meals when she didn't want to eat in the cafeteria.

Mother and Benji assumed they would be moving into Greenie's larger home, which was fine by Greenie, except for she required compensation. She had set a deadline for Benji to agree to her price, or else the property went on the market. I overheard several awkward conversations on weekends I helped box up her books and knick-knacks.

"I can't believe you won't just *give* us the house, Mama. You know we can't afford that much." That tone of voice usually meant Benji was gesturing wildly with his arms in disbelief. It worked on repairmen and car dealers, more often than not.

"I can't afford anything, period, Benjamin, for longer than a year, if I just sign my biggest asset over to you free of charge."

"You don't want the house to stay in the family?"

"Don't you try and guilt your own mother. This isn't staying out past curfew. Nothing would make me happier than the house staying with you, but not at a loss of two hundred thousand dollars." There was a pause, and I could hear one set of feet pacing.

"I'm not even asking market value, son."

Benji left without saying anything else, though he had the good sense not to slam the door behind him. These aggressive talks had become more frequent, and I knew that Greenie liked to compose herself alone, often pretending nothing had happened.

Sure enough she appeared in the sitting room ten minutes later, a smile on her face. "Let's go buy me some onion rings I can lie to my doctor about."

Greenie's new residence had bland but appropriately fancy name, but I immediately took to calling it the Happy Home. The suites came furnished, the sofa and chairs overstuffed, squishy and white. The coffee table was squat and black, with more sharp edges than Benji seemed to think were strictly necessary. I didn't know where the rest of her furniture was, but her large mahogany bookshelves now took up more than a third of my apartment's living room.

"She make you write a check for these?" Benji asked, after dropping them off and helping me rearrange my furniture.

"Don't be an ass," I said.

I spent most of my weekends with Greenie, which didn't change once she moved into the Happy Home. The sofa was long and soft enough to make a comfortable bed, and the thick carpeting muffled all but the most determined of footsteps. On Saturday afternoons Greenie and I played gin, occasionally rounding up a few of her neighbors for a hand of spades.

Like a hotel, there was a doorknob hanger to be put out every morning. Not to request cleaning, but to assure the day nurse on her 10am rounds that her charges hadn't woken up dead. Greenie only forgot once, the pounding and overly concerned yelling of the nurse making enough of an impression that the mistake wasn't repeated. Two weeks

before Thanksgiving, though, she intentionally left the doorknob empty so I could be treated to the door-rattling cacophony of concern.

As I poured myself a cup of coffee, shouting began. “Mrs. Kirkpatrick, are you alright?” The door shook so hard the entire kitchen seemed to vibrate.

“Oops, I’m fine,” Greenie yelled back, smiling broadly.

“Just checking, ma’am. Have a good one.” The voice on the other side of the door became no less intense, even though everything was fine. It felt unnecessary.

Startled by the commotion, I’d dropped and broken one of the myriad **World’s Best Grandma** mugs Greenie accrued over the years. Though on Christmas mornings I nurtured a barely-concealed pride that my love superseded such generic gifts, I was horrified at breaking something of hers.

“I’d rather it break getting used in my lifetime than thrown in the trash when I’m dead,” Greenie told me as I repeated another apology. I refused to listen to Greenie talk about dying, so after mopping up the spill and disposing of the shards, I poured the rest of the coffee down the drain and drove the two of us to the Starbucks in the mall, where Greenie could always be counted on to flirt uncomfortably with whomever was behind the counter.

Most nights at the Happy Home there was some form of community activity, bingo or a square dance. Sometimes they watched Pixar movies. On the Friday after Thanksgiving there was a quartet of Irish fiddlers, all current residents.

“This sounds nice,” I said, pointing to the flyer that had come in her mail slot.

“It’s not nice. It’s shit.”

“Greenie!”

“I saw them in August. I’m not gonna sit there and pretend someone’s talented just because they’re almost dead. I, myself, am almost dead, and I’m not wasting my final minutes doing something I hate.”

We'd had Christmas at Greenie's for as long as I could remember, and this would be the first year we wouldn't open our presents in her home and eat cinnamon rolls around her huge oak table. The morning of the 23rd, I had picked Greenie up at the Happy Home, and we had driven all of her gifts over to Mother and Benji's, placed them under the tree. We each had an overnight bag packed, though they were still in the trunk of my car.

My old bedroom now belonged to Ruth Ellen, but was made up for Greenie. There was an air mattress on Laura Grace's floor for Jenny Ann. Ruth Ellen and I would share the pull-out in the den. Benji's brothers were driving from Birmingham and Little Rock, respectively, on Christmas morning, rather than spend Christmas Eve in the Ramada off the interstate. Almost immediately it became apparent we were too much family for this house. No one room could hold all of us, and there weren't enough rooms to offer any measure of privacy.

Benji and his brothers had divided Greenie's hand-blown glass ornaments when we packed up, but none of them were on the tree. The ceramic manger Benji has refused to cede to either of his brothers was nowhere in sight. It looked like Mother had gone out of her way to make Christmas as un-like anything familiar as she could.

The living room contained a tiny plastic tree and three arrangements of plush snowmen, motion activated, who sang "Holly, Jolly Christmas" if you got too close to them. Greenie looked around the room, sighed, and asked, "Janey, would you like to come sleep on my sofa?"

Back at the Happy Home, curled up with mugs of apple cider, we snuggled together under an oversized quilt. December was warmer than usual that year, and I'd set

the air conditioning on fifty to create the illusion of winter. Come November there was always a public access channel showing a roaring fire on an unending loop, and we turned off the lights and sat in the glow of our “fire.”

Greenie said, “That was cruel of me. At the very least you should go back. Apologize for the both of us.”

I didn’t answer, suspecting that Greenie wouldn’t throw me out if I didn’t volunteer myself off the sofa.

“I’m just a mean old lady,” she continued. “I miss my house more than I thought I would. I don’t want my memories repainted or my floors re-sanded. I’m selfish, and I’m too old to adapt.”

“I miss your house, too,” I said. “I’m sorry you had to give it up.”

“Don’t make me cry, you jerk,” she said, bumping her elbow against mine. “Go get my purse.”

Inside there was an envelop with my name in Greenie’s antique cursive. Inside the envelop was a check. A check for thirty-one hundred dollars.

“I can’t take this,” I said, eyes swimming and hands shaking.

“That’s seven years of ballet lessons, times three. Costumes, toe shoes. Three years of violin lessons, two years of voice lessons, six years total twirling baton in the marching band, three summers at French Camp. Who do you think paid for all that foolishness? You did this to yourself, only ever wanting to get left at the library, not letting me spend money on you like a proper grandmother.”

“But there’s presents under the tree. It’s too much.”

“Those are all just Certs,” Greenie replied easily. “Twenty rolls of sugar-free Certs I got on clearance at the Dollar Tree. Two in a shoebox, three in a coffee can.”

“Thank God, I’ll never get diabetes.” I smiled through tears.

“Go run off to England. Find yourself a prince to marry.”

Starting in January, Greenie asked, every time we saw each other or spoke on the phone, if I had booked my flight yet. “The earlier you buy the ticket, the cheaper it will be. More money to spend on yourself.”

“I know, I know,” I always said, but her words didn’t spur me to call the travel agent or look up prices online at the university library. Once I opened a tab for Delta airlines, then immediately opened another tab to check my email, then another to look at celebrity gossip. I logged out of the system and left the library without ever toggling back to the Delta page.

One Sunday night, as we half watched a TV movie, Greenie working on a crossword puzzle and me occasionally glancing down at the open sociology textbook in my lap, Greenie and I came the closest to having an argument we ever had.

“You don’t have class on Tuesdays, right?” she asked.

“Not in the afternoon,” I verified.

“Good, because you and I are going to see Louise.”

“Who’s Louise?” The last time Greenie had proposed such an outing I’d ended up with a proper salon manicure.

“You know Louise,” Greenie said, casually, not looking up from her puzzle.

“She’s my travel agent. I’ve already had her look up a few potential itineraries.” Here she looked up and smiled at me brightly.

I closed my book, and turned so my whole body was facing her. “Actually, I’ve been thinking,” I began.

“Not that that ever works out well for you,” Greenie cut in with a laugh.

I smiled and nodded in acknowledgement of her joke, one she was fond of making. “Okay, so the money you gave me is almost enough for a good laptop computer. Then I wouldn’t always have to write my papers in the library, and I could take it anywhere with me.”

“Oh, no,” Greenie said with a quick shake of her head. Her voice was so bright it took me a few seconds to realize she wasn’t kidding. “Absolutely not,” she added, this time with finality in her voice.

“Why?”

“Jane,” she said, reaching out and taking one of my hands, as though that was some kind of answer.

“Really. Why?” I demanded, pulling my hand back.

“That money is for you to go to London. If that’s not how you intend to use it, I expect you to give it back.”

“That’s not-“

“Fair? If I gave your mother money for dance class and she spent it on new shoes that wouldn’t be fair. It’s my money, and I gave it to you for a specific reason.”

“But in the long run, a computer would be more useful,” I argued after taking a steadying breath.

“More useful than an adventure? Jane, you’ve been here your whole life. You haven’t done *anything*. This place is too small for you.”

I turned away from Greenie, planted my feet on the ground, crossed my arms over my chest and felt unaccountably mad.

“If you don’t get out now,” she said to the side of my unmoving face, “then you’ll end up here forever.” Greenie turned off the television and pushed herself off the couch. “Switch the lights off, sweetie,” she said to me. “This old broad needs to get to bed.” When I didn’t respond she bent down to kiss my forehead, then crossed to her bedroom, pausing in the doorway. “Come pick me up at one. Our appointment is at 2:30, but I can probably be persuaded to buy us lunch.”

“What if I don’t?”

“If you aren’t here Tuesday afternoon, I’m cancelling the check.”

“I thought I was allowed to say no to people,” I countered, a last ditch attempt to keep her in the room and win her over to my side.

“*People? I ain’t people!*” Greenie replied with a smile and a near-perfect take on Lina Lamont’s shrill cadence. Every summer the Orpheum showed *Singin’ in the Rain* for a week. Until this moment, had been my favorite movie. Greenie pulled the door shut behind her like punctuation, leaving me alone in the living room.

* * *

Of course I arrived at one o’clock sharp on Tuesday. “There’s my girl,” Greenie said, clapping her hands with delight.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I am doing this under duress.”

Over cheddar biscuits at Red Lobster, my choice for lunch over Greenie’s belabored eye roll and muttering about *mall food*, I asked, “But what if it’s awful?”

“Lunch? I have every confidence lunch will be awful. You should’ve thought of that first.”

“Ha ha,” I said flatly, wrinkling my forehead. “What if London is terrible? What if the people hate me and the food is bad and then I get mugged?”

“There’s only one way to find out,” she said, squeezing my unwanted lemon into her sweet tea.

“If I’m going to get mugged? Thanks, Greenie.”

“Don’t sass me,” Greenie said, pointing a finger in my direction. “Do you want your tombstone to say *I spent my whole life doing nothing because I was afraid something bad might happen?*”

“That sound like a lot of words for a tombstone.”

A chuckle escaped, which she turned into a cough, covered by her napkin. “Don’t make me laugh, either.”

“Yes ma’am.” We picked at our biscuits for a few seconds. The tension between us had thinned, so I decided to press my luck. “I don’t know anyone there.”

“You didn’t know anyone when you started college,” she replied with annoying practicality. “Sweetheart, everyone there speaks English, no one is old enough to remember the Boston Tea Party, and if we hadn’t thrown them a bone in World War II, they’d all be Nazis.”

“That’s a little historically reductive.”

Greenie laid her palms flat on the table and frowned. “Jane, did you ever learn how to ride a bike?”

The change of topic caught me off guard for only a moment, before the shame of my childhood failing caught back up with me. Greenie and Benji had spent several Saturday afternoons in her driveway, voices shifting from encouraging to exasperated, as

my sisters pedaled away with determined wobbles and I refused to even sit on the bicycle seat.

“You were so scared to fall off you wouldn’t even try. Ruth Ellen rode away from me with skinned knees, didn’t want to get off her bike long enough to get Bactrain.”

I nodded, confirming her memory. My throat tightened, and I knew my voice would crack if I tried to speak. Refusing to get on my bike was the only thing I remember doing that openly angered Greenie. “I don’t care if you fail,” she’d yelled over her shoulder, leaving me alone in the driveway. “I just want you to try.” I know she watched me watch my bike from behind the curtains, but the weight of her shame wasn’t enough to make me try. The next time I visited the bike was gone.

Greenie flipped her hands over, palms up, a gesture that meant I was to lay my hands atop hers. “You’ve wanted to go ride the big red buses since the first time I read you *Paddington*. Jane. If you want to do something, it’s no one else’s fault if you don’t. If you go and you hate it, come home. If you go and you love it, stay. If you never go, it’ll be the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen you do.” She paused to squeeze my wrists tightly. “Including that perm.”

Unable to meet her eyes, I looked down at the table. Squeezing her hands in response, I nodded my assent at the tablecloth.

“Good,” she said, pulling her hands back. “Good.”

Louise was delighted to help, pausing several times in her typing to wiggle her fingers above the keyboard with a wide grin on her face. After half an hour I was given a white envelope, my name showing through a cellophane window in the front. Inside were the actual paper tickets that would allow me to travel from Memphis to Chicago to

Heathrow. There was no return ticket in the envelope, but the names of three London travel agents who could arrange a flight home for me. I was slated to leave on the first of June. The open-ended ticket meant I could stay until the fall semester called me home. Or I could leave as soon as London proved itself to be more Dickens than Barrie.

After we left Louise, I dropped Greenie at the Happy Home for her afternoon dominoes match with Miss Betty, promising I was on my way to the nearest Kinkos to get my passport photos taken. Greenie kept hold of my ticket, given my propensity for fits of midnight cleaning that left electric bills and unopened birthday cards in the trash. She promised to hand them over the night before I flew out.

Classes did their best to keep me occupied that spring, but I remained distracted at every turn until my passport came in the mail, then distracted as I planned my trip. Every night I took the thin navy booklet out of my sock drawer, leafing through the crisp, blank pages, ignoring the requisite terrible photograph. A single strand of my hair stood upright, extending out of the frame.

“You had to see that,” I accused the photographer when he handed me the small envelope with my prints.

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “You look ridiculous.”

I opened my mouth to demand another set of photos, gratis, and then decided an international traveler doesn't worry about a lousy passport photo. It would be a way to start conversations with my fellow travelers. *Look at how cool I am, not even caring that this picture makes me look like a jackass!*

Passport safely stashed in sock drawer, I bought myself a *Lonely Planet*. The ticket had eaten up just over seven hundred dollars of my gift from Greenie. Paging

through my guidebook I quickly realized that thirty dollars a night would buy a spot on a bunk bed in a hostel, without pillows, another ten required for access to the showers. A proper hotel, with my own door that I could lock, would clean me out in six days without anything left over for food. The check, which had felt like all the money in the world a month ago, would last me a week. No theater tickets, no trips to the pub, Stonehenge. My grand adventure was turning into a long weekend in a low-end hotel, living off of tap water and bags of chips.

Using a public computer at the university library, I typed the phrase “free housing in London” into the Yahoo search bar and found a website dedicated to “couch surfing.” The website promised free accommodations with a traveler-friendly host who didn’t mind a little light sightseeing. Hosts were rated by the travelers who’d stayed with them, ensuring everyone on the site was a verified decent human and non-white slaver. To avoid unwanted sexual advances, travelers were advised to seek out same-gendered hosts. ***WE ARE NOT A HOOK-UP SITE*** blinked in neon lettering at the top of each successive page I scrolled through. A chat forum on this website is where I first corresponded with Bianca.

Bianca's house was in Muswell Hill, a posh neighborhood. Too posh, Bianca explained, for a tube station. "Brings in the riff-raff," she wrote. The best bet, we agreed, was for me to take the tube from Heathrow to East Finchley. She'd meet me at the Starbucks, where we could catch a bus that would drop us closer to her house. "Yanks love Starbucks, right?" she asked in her message. It's impossible to read tone in an email, but I felt certain I was being mocked. Still, she offered me a place to sleep for as many nights as we got on and said she had a friend who could get us stand-by tickets for *Billy Elliot* if I was willing to be at the box office at 9 am to pick them up.

Greenie, instead of being properly concerned for my safety, thrilled at the idea I'd found someone local, someone my own age, to stay with. "You don't have nearly enough friends, Jane," she told me. "This is such a good chance for you to meet new people."

"I don't need friends," I told her. "I have you. You're my friend."

Greenie smiled sadly, reaching out to smooth the frown line that popped up between my eyebrows with the pad of her thumb. "I can't be your best friend forever."

"Why?" I asked. "Are you throwing me over for Mary Kate at the rummy table. Because she's nice enough but also a little racist."

"Jane, I can't be your friend because I am going to die."

"No you're not," I contradicted, turning away from her to sulk at the wall.

"I will, honey. And that's why you need to make some new friends."

"Fine," I muttered grudgingly. "I promise to try."

"Thank you, my dear," she said, smiling as though threatening to die on my was perfectly acceptable behavior.

All the anxiety I could've felt about traveling became focused on the fact that my flight landed at 10 am and Bianca wouldn't be off work until 5 pm and didn't think she'd be at Starbucks before 6. There were dozens of things Bianca suggested I do with those hours, museums and tea shops, pubs and bookstores, but so much could go wrong in those eight hours.

Terrified and overwhelmed, I went straight from the Heathrow to East Finchley. Customs and currency exchange had hardly taken up as much time as I was counting on, and the journey on the underground was shorter than I expected. Despite repeating *Look left, look left* to myself at the intersection, I looked right and was almost hit. Three cars honked at me as I dashed for the Starbucks. It was ten minutes to noon.

It was one of the warmest summers on record in London. Honestly, it was barely any warmer than Memphis, but Memphis was always this hot and everyone had measures in place to combat the extreme heat. There had been huge industrial fans set up in the arrivals hall at Heathrow, making more noise than anything else. The underground was humid, moreso than the air at street level. Here in Starbucks several ceiling fans spun furiously, moving the air around but not making it any cooler.

I drank cup after tiny, plastic cup of the complimentary water from the pitcher on the sugar station. The barista had refilled the pitcher three times by 4 pm, each time shooting me an arch look, and now it was nearly empty again. I poured the last drops of water into my plastic cup, hoping the woman behind the counter would take pity on me and refill the water without my having to ask again.

One of the only times I had actively preferred my mother's advice to Greenie's was when Mother backed up my aversion to daily showers. Greenie was aghast that it

was Sunday night and I hadn't showered since Friday. "If you can't smell yourself then you aren't dirty," Mother had said with a wink.

I could smell myself now. I smelled like heat and dehydration, of course, but also nerves and exhaustion. After triple-checking the locks in the unisex bathroom, I removed my musty shirt and draped it over the paper towel dispenser. I wet several paper towels and tried to scrub down my neck and armpits. Even the tap water was overheated, sluggish and tepid even when turned all the way to cold. The automatic hand dryer, quite shiny and obviously the newest addition to the bathroom, produced a blast of hot air that, rather than drying me off, caused me to sweat all over again. It did dry my shirt out nicely, but only intensified the lingering musty smell.

Re-dressed, I stared at my self in the mirror. By this point my frightful passport photo was aspirational, and ideal I might someday regain if I were lucky. There were exhausted trenches under my eyes. My sweaty hair hung close to my face, limp and defeated, emphasizing the roundness of my features. I looked like someone newly homeless, I thought, someone who had expected things to work out differently.

By 4:15 I had finished my weak attempts at betterment and was back in the pleather chair by the window. I had read both books in my backpack already. The thirty pounds I'd allocated for today's budget had already been spend on snacks at the airport and yogurt parfaits here at Starbucks. I was hungry again, but too embarrassed to order more food.

In her last email Bianca had written: *There's a ton of nice shops on that road if you get bored. Paper shop, bookseller. Just ask them to watch your bag at Starbies and go explore. British people are incapable of saying no.*

Unless I was mistaken, that was the bookstore across the street. The window was painted: a boy on a broomstick, likely Harry Potter, a majestic lion, likely Aslan, and an upside-down blue trashcan covered in plungers. That one I couldn't place. The display made me smile, though, and it was over an hour until Bianca would arrive. I took a deep breath to steady myself and mentally rehearsed what I would say to the barista. *Could I just leave my bag here while I run across the street? Thanks!* Feeling courageous, I turned my eyes to the barista, who scowled at me with open dislike.

"What? More water?" she asked.

"No," I yelled, immediately turning my eyes back out to the road. *Tomorrow, I said to myself. Tomorrow find a place with internet, find a flight back to Memphis. You can be home by Monday.* It was 4:33.

At 4:37 a mass of frizzy blonde curls and jingling bangles crashed into me, wrapped its arms around me and squeezed tightly. "Kipped off work early, didn't I. Fancy a pint, then?"

"Oh, Jesus," I yelled, batting the arms away.

"Shit, are you Jane? Shit, I'm sorry, I'm looking for Jane."

The blonde and I were now holding each other at arms length, eyeing each other suspiciously. After another few seconds of silence, "You're early," was all I could think to say.

"You're Jane?" she countered.

"Yes," I agreed, nodding. "You're Bianca?"

“I am, and I felt awful leaving you alone in the big city.” Bianca had a wide smile with a chipped front tooth and blue eyes surrounded with enough eyeliner that she resembled the Hamburglar.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said, and my stomach growled spectacularly.

Bianca laughed and stood, lifting my backpack and turning to the woman behind the counter. “Me and my mate are going for dinner, leaving this here, yeah.” She had crossed to the counter, shoved my bag into the woman’s hands, and was back across the floor, pushing the door open before the barista managed a weak “Yeah.”

Walking down the road, Bianca informed me our two dinner options were the White Faced Stag or the Old Bald Lion. Placing a hand on her arm I halted our forward progress. “So, if I ever decided to move to London and open a pub, it’s double adjective animal?”

“Exactly,” Bianca said. “Sad Lumpy Crow.”

“Tiny Exhausted Rabbit.”

“Gaseous Orange Kitten.”

“Rotund Nervous Fox.”

“That one’s actually real,” she said.

“You’re lying,” I countered.

“Am I?” she challenged, eyebrow arched.

At the pub Bianca told the waitress, “Mate’s visiting from the states. We should like to eat all the stereotypes.”

“Bangers and mash, fish and chips, two pints of Strongbow,” the waitress replied, a little less bored than she’d been when she handed over the menus.

When the waitress left, Bianca reached across the table and laid her hand on mine. “I’m letting it slide because you need the experience, but Stongbow is what chavs drink. You end up in a pub without me, you want Bulmer’s or a Foster’s shandy. Otherwise the lads in the pub will be getting ideas.”

I nodded solemnly in understanding. “Only a third of your words make sense to me.” We were at a heavy wooden table, next to a fireplace. There was a dartboard, bookshelves overflowing with paperbacks, and pictures of amateur sporting teams framed on the wall.

Bianca’s life seemed patently ridiculous. She was a throwback to the time of Jane Austen, when young people got five thousand a year without any discernable effort. She worked at a boutique down the block from Harrods, and on her lunch break she liked to stand before the gaudy memorial to Dodi and Diana, wiping away crocodile tears and heaving great sighs of mourning for the benefit of the Japanese tour groups.

Though I found the details of my own life boring, they delighted Bianca. She’d grown up an only child, without a yard, and still didn’t have her own car. Her only friend with a car of her own was “sort of royal, and also a bitch.” Bianca spent hours watching black-and-white Elvis musicals with her mother, and, somehow, inexplicably, Graceland was her London.

“It’s just all these sad, old women weeping around mouthfuls of peanut butter and banana sandwiches,” I explained, even though I’d only been the once.

“So just like Harrod’s?”

“Sure,” I said, nodding my head and shrugging my shoulders at the same time. The food arrived, the sausage portion of the bangers and mash (“That part’s the banger,”

Bianca said), balanced upright on its skinny end like a food erection. “I’m too tired to deal with this,” I said, gesturing at the sausage. “I’ve been on a plane all day.”

“Won’t even call you tomorrow, the cheeky tosser.” We clinked our pint glasses and tore into the meal. The food was so delicious, and I was so hungry, that I didn’t care that I was basically eating tomorrow’s budget. As I reached for another fry – chip – from the plate in the center of the table, Bianca placed a hand on my wrist.

“Right, so I’ve got some bad news about me place.”

Too good to be true too good to be true sing-songed the voice in my head. It had been quiet since Bianca arrived in the coffee shop, but it came storming back. My bag was still at the coffee shop, I remembered, likely picked-through and pilfered by Bianca’s accomplice behind the counter. At least I didn’t have a laptop they could steal.

“I can’t stay with you,” I said.

“No, yes, of course you can,” Bianca said, shaking her head. She picked up a chip of her own, careful to avoid the puddle of ketchup I had requested from our server over her shuddered protests. “Said you could, so you can.”

“Okay.”

“It’s my landlady,” she said around a mouthful of chip. Swallowing, she continued. “She’s gonna be furious that I have a guest. If she asks you to pay lodging, which she will, tell her you already paid me.”

“Do I need to pay you?”

“Course not. Then she might ask you for rent to use the common areas. She does that, lemme know, I’ll handle it.”

“She would do that?”

“Oh, of course. She’s a right angry bitch.”

I took a long drink. Whatever chavs were, they had delicious taste in alcohol.

“Why’d you invite me to stay, if it was going to upset her so much?”

Here Bianca broke into a truly gorgeous smile. “Love, I do it because it upsets her. I only invite the nicest, funniest people to stay with me, and I’m very happy to meet you. We’re going to be great mates. My landlady, however, is awful and a snoop and she would let me out of the lease without paying her an extra two thousand quid. Which is totally illegal, by the way, and I could take her to court, but that’s just such a hassle.”

“You take in couch surfers to make your landlady angry,” I restated for clarification.

Bianca nodded her agreement. “Works right fucking well, too, it does.” After a thoughtful pause she continued. “Also you probably won’t be able to sleep in the living room, so we’ll have to share my bed.”

“Okay.”

“This is a shit deal, right? Me brother’s a barrister, says I’m entrapping people. I’m the worst, I’ll pay for dinner. Fancy pudding?”

“As opposed to pedestrian pudding?” I asked, lost in the torrent of her words. I still had a place to stay. I didn’t have to pay for it. I might be getting a free dinner. These were the most salient points.

“Fancy means *do you want*. Would you like to have dessert?” Bianca said the second sentence in a flat, nasal American accent.

“I can pay for my share,” I said, letting my voice trail off in what I hoped was sincerity. I could afford the dinner, but I was acutely aware of how much money I had and how not-very-far it was going to get me in such an expensive city.

“No,” Bianca said, waving her hand dismissively. “I lured you here under false pretenses. And you’re so much lovelier than I was expecting. And I can afford it. Does that sound awful? My brother the barrister says I need to work on my modesty.”

Hoping to steer Bianca away from unpacking her familial baggage, I asked, “How about another beer?”

“Cider,” Bianca corrected.

“I fancy another cider.”

I had another brief panic at dinner, when Bianca had informed me she’d be right back, then disappeared for a full ten minutes. *She’s run out on the check*, the voice whispered, twice. As I craned my neck towards the door, Bianca reappeared with the backpack I’d forgotten about. “We can never go back there, because she stayed fifteen minutes past closing with your bag,” she said, setting the backpack on the floor next to my chair.

“Oops,” I said with a drunken giggle.

Weaving down the street from the bus stop to her home, three hours later, backpack firmly on my shoulders, full and tipsy from several pints of cider each, Bianca linked her arm through mine. The street Bianca lived on was not as outwardly ostentatious as some of the newer houses springing up in Greenie’s subdivision around the time we were moving her out, but they conveyed wealthy in the same way those houses conveyed only excess. Bianca stopped us in front of a proper wrought iron gate, framed on either side by a heavy brick wall that blocked the house behind from

passersby. Through the rungs of the gate I could see a brick walkway. Bianca pressed a series of numbers into a keypad I hadn't seen and the gate swung open at the same time security lights came on along the walkway. Drawing closer I could see an unembellished but still imposing door of dark wood. The façade of the house was the same brick as the wall surrounding it. The shutters on the windows might have been yellow, but it was hard to tell in the darkness. From the outside the house looked quite narrow, but when Bianca gently shouldered the door open it appeared to extend backwards for almost a mile.

“Holy shit, this place is huge,” I tried to whisper.

“Massive, much bigger than it looks from the street,” Bianca agreed. “They built on with the lot behind them. When the sun's up you can see the seam between the halves.” Bianca toed off her shoes and placed them on a rack next to the door, then motioned for me to do the same.

“*They built* or just the landlady?” I asked, making sure my shoes were aligned as unobtrusively as possible.

“Oof, that's a story for in the morning.” Bianca motioned with her hand for me to stay back, then crept three paces ahead to peer around a corner. She seemed satisfied that the coast was clear, and turned back to me. “Staircase,” she said, pointing emphatically. “Up one floor, do a one-eighty so you're facing front again, green door at the end of the hall.” I must've hesitated too long, because Bianca began jabbing the air in the direction of the staircase, whisper-shouting “Go go go!”

As I scampered past her, I saw Bianca was peering down a second set of stairs, which lead down into an open living room whose modern furniture seemed starkly at odds with the rest of the house. I took the stairs two at a time, trying to drop my feet as

quietly as possible. Near the top of the staircase I heard a voice call up from the depths, “Well, aren’t we home late?”

I jogged down the hall to the green door, pulling it closed behind me then wincing when it slammed loudly. A few seconds of feeling along the wall and I located the light switch. Immediately to my left were two accordion doors, only partially closed, with a mountain of clothes threatening to topple on the floor. Past the closets were built-in shelves piled high with books and a desk. The desk chair was also covered in clothes, most inside out, none folded. A massive bed took up almost all the remaining space. It was flush against the far wall, with only three feet of clearance between the bed and the desk and closets.

I set my backpack next to the laundry chair and sat on the edge of the bed. The blankets were all kicked to one side and the pink paisley sheets showed the wrinkles and creasing of many nights’ sleep. I heard Bianca’s feet clomping loudly up the stairs, then her voice, with a much more pronounced accent than I’d heard all night.

“Yah, yah, but in the fecking morning. Jay-suss.” She opened the door and spun into the room, belly-flopping onto the bed in a move she had obviously perfected some time ago, her head only a few inches from the wall. She rolled onto her back, her hip nudging me as I turned to face her. “Grumpy old bird thinks that just because we can’t afford a whole place like this we’re all mannerless, sheep-farming chavs.”

“The landlady?”

“I shouldn’t speak ill. She’s had a rough year, just drives me crazy is all.”

“I continue to assume that we’re speaking of your landlady,” I said.

“It’s her family’s home, so she gets to keep it, but her husband brought all the money and friends and fame to the marriage, and he’s taking them when he goes. She’d have to sell this place if the lot of us weren’t paying out the nose for the privilege.”

“So a tawdry divorce,” I said with affected shock, laying a hand daintily against my collarbone.

Bianca reached over and yanked at my arm. “Get down here. Looking up at you gives me the spins.” After a few seconds of comic tug-of-war with my limbs, we were facing each other, lying wrong way down the middle of the bed. “They’re both authors,” Bianca began once we were settled, raising her hands to make air quotes around the word *authors*. “But he’s been shortlisted for the Booker twice and she wrote two healthy living guides and then three how-to books about tantric sex.”

“Wait, what?” I said, raising my hand as though I had a question.

“Under a pseudonym, of course. When the divorce got messy, some anonymous so and so told the papers that Mrs. Crawford was the true author of *Pleasing Your Lover for Nine Hours* and Mr. Crawford could no longer bear the shame plus he actually found her quite frigid.”

“Wait,” I repeated, laying a hand on Bianca’s arm to show that I was very concerned. “That actually matters to people in your country?”

Bianca rolled her eyes. “Our country is tiny, grey, dismal, boring, and still deeply rooted in class structure. It can get tiring.”

“I am so, so happy to be here,” I said, nodding my head.

“I am so happy to have you,” Bianca said. She reached out and ruffled my hair. “D’ya want to ride the Eye tomorrow?”

I had to blink a few times to wake myself up. “I thought I’d go to the British Museum. They have a special exhibit on Hadrian’s Wall.”

“How about you do that super boring thing Monday when I’m working and tomorrow we ride the Eye.”

I had wanted to ride the London Eye, but tickets were about the same price as dorm bed in a hostel. Almost all of the museums were free, though I would have to pay an extra five pounds to see the special exhibitions. Bianca had already insisted on paying for dinner, and I was embarrassed that my budget didn’t have room for the London Eye.

“Okay, look,” she continued. “I grew up in London, which means I’m supposed to hate the Eye. *It’s so big. It’s so gaudy. Churchill would be ashamed.* I’m dying to ride it, and if we go together and my mum finds out I can just say you insisted because you’re American.”

“I’m your touristy shit scapegoat,” I said, and Bianca nodded in agreement. I sighed, closing my eyes again. Best to be honest. “It’s expensive,” I said, trying to tinge my voice with as much regret as possible.

“I’ll pay for all the annoying touristy shit, and you save your money for museums and cathedrals.”

“Does London have annoying touristy shit that isn’t the London Eye?”

“We can go on a Jack the Ripper walking tour in Whitechapel.”

“Okay,” I agreed.

“Also there’s indoor skydiving.”

“No, absolutely not.”

“Why?” Bianca demanded, jutting out her bottom lip and crinkling her nose.

I took a moment, hunting for a reason that wasn't pure unwillingness to leap from a great height. "Because indoor sky-diving is not London-specific touristy shit. I can do that at Dollywood."

"Dollywood is real?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"*Really* real?" Bianca clarified.

"Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. We went on a school trip once. What, you thought maybe America was just making it up?"

"Well, sometimes you read something in the paper and you just think *Right, the Yanks are having us on, then.*"

"It's really, really real," I assured her.

"Will you take me? Can we go there one day?" Her blue eyes widened as she clasped her hands beneath her chin, pleading.

"Yes, Oliver Twist, I will take you to Dollywood one day."

"Brilliant," she said on a deep exhale. "And tomorrow we can ride the Eye."

"Absolutely," I agreed, as exhaustion and the third pint of cider began to dance behind my eyes.

When I woke the next morning, my nose was flush against the wall, and there was a tremendous pressure on my midsection. I looked down until my forehead butted against the wall, and saw Bianca's arm wrapped around my midsection. Bianca had started the night fully on the other side of the bed, but we were now pressed so closely together almost two-thirds of the bed lay empty.

"I do like a bit of a cuddle when I'm drunk," she had warned me the night before, but this enforced spooning was more than I had anticipated. I tried rocking backwards, hoping Bianca would disengage, but she held fast. Seeing no other way out, I began wriggling downwards, scooting out from under her arm and depositing myself at the foot of the bed, almost as though I had melted. Upon standing I realized the pressure hadn't been only Bianca's grip, and I set my mind to finding a bathroom.

Before we'd fallen asleep, Bianca had explained where the bathroom was, but jetlag, unfamiliar surroundings, and a minor hangover left me disoriented. The size of the house hadn't registered last night. Or, I'd thought it had, but with in the daylight I realized the place was properly huge. Bianca's room was at the front of the house, with windows facing the road, and the hallway before me stretched back at least twenty feet. I stared into the depths of the house, feeling as though I were in *The Shining*.

At the end of the hallway, three stairs led up into an open space. In between there were four closed doors besides Bianca's. I walked to the space in the back, wincing every other step as the floor creaked beneath my feet. I hadn't seen a clock in Bianca's room, but the house was still enough for me to believe it was the very early morning. When I was about five steps back from the short staircase, a petite figure appeared in the

doorway, a young woman about my age with a sharp black bob. Atop the stairs she was the same height as me. Unsure what to say, I waved.

“You’re Bianca’s surfer, then?” she asked. “I’m Lucy.” She extended her hand and I shook it.

“Jane,” I said, with what I hoped was a friendly, welcoming smile.

“I mean, you could be Tom’s overnight, but his don’t usually venture out on their own. You’re not really his speed.”

“Staying with Bianca,” I supplied.

“An American,” she cooed. “Crawford’s going to shit the bed. She’ll blame you for Sarah Palin. You, personally. It’s a thing to see.”

It sounded like a manageable threat, and I laughed. “You live here, too?”

“Yeah, there’s four of us up here, another two on the first floor. This is the lodger’s common area,” she said, gesturing to the space behind her. Peering over her shoulder I saw two sofas, an old television, and, in the far corner, a small kitchen set-up. “I bet you’re up at six wanting the loo,” she continued.

Suddenly reminded of the reason behind my quest, I bit my lip and nodded in a way I hoped conveyed my urgency.

Lucy laughed. “Right up here, on the left, yeah.”

Jogging up the stairs, I followed Lucy’s pointed finger to a small room containing only a toilet and a basin sink. The sink had two separate faucets, one each for the hot and cold water. The cold faucet was instantly freezing, and the hot faucet was instantly scalding. My attempt to get a handful of each and meet my hands in the middle only resulted in me getting the front of my shirt quite damp.

“Shit,” I muttered, not as quietly as I’d intended. Almost immediately there was a knock at the door, which caused me to jump.

“I always just wash my hands out here,” Lucy said through the door.

The kitchen looked like the common area in an undergraduate dorm: sparse, aged, and not well-attended by the people who lived there. There was a deep sink, with only one faucet, next to a two-burner gas range. Farther down the countertop were a toaster over and microwave. The counter itself could’ve gone a few rounds with a sponge. There wasn’t any hand soap, so I washed my hands with the dish liquid. “This is much better,” I said to Lucy over my shoulder.

“Loo sink’s fu-cocked,” she said. “We all just wash out here.”

“Fu-cocked?” I asked as I dried my hand on a paper towel.

“Fucking cocked,” she explained. “Yee old timey plumbing leaves much to be desired.”

“Where do you shower?” I asked once my hands were dry. “I mean, not in there, obviously,” I said, shrugging towards the small bathroom.

Lucy laughed and gestured towards the hallway. “The middle door is a proper loo. Tub, shower, normal sink. Bathroom on the first floor, too, but Crawford hates us using it. She won’t barge in or anything but as soon as you’re done, *You know, dear, there are two perfectly functional toilets upstairs.*” Lucy sighed and rolled her eyes.

“The landlady sounds lovely,” I said.

“Just the best,” Lucy said. She gave a quick wave and turned away, then turned back to me. “I was going to pop down to Pret for a muffin if you fancy joining.”

I opened my mouth to ask her if she'd mind waiting until I changed, but instead yawned so widely I thought my jaw would pop. The sun was up, but a quick glance at the stove's digital clock revealed it was barely after 7 o'clock.

"You can come next time," she said with a smile. "See you around, Jane."

"Bye, Lucy," I replied, and she waggled her fingers over her shoulder.

When I returned to Bianca's room, she had rolled against the wall herself, and was valiantly trying to spoon the wallpaper. I laid down on the side of the bed she'd vacated and wondered if Bianca really intended us to ride the London Eye today.

Bianca woke me again at 8:15, already dressed. I hadn't heard her stirring from sleep or moving about the room to dress. "Up, up, sleepy head," she sing-songed. "Your ingratiating yourself with my flat-mates has already borne fruit, as Lucy dropped of a bagel for you." She tossed a paper bag onto the bed beside me. "We need to be out of here by 9 to get to the Eye."

Bianca carefully scrutinized my outfit – jeans, converse, and a worn t-shirt touting Rhodes Athletics (*the fighting lynx!*). "Do you have a less American shirt?" she asked.

"Very likely not," I replied.

She leaned into her closet, appraising her collection of tops before handing me a polka-dotted button down that looked two sized too large. "Let's see if we can't help you blend a bit."

"Do you dress all your guests?" I asked. "Because this feels an awful lot like something a serial killer would do."

"You don't want the shirt?" she asked, pulling it back towards herself.

"No, I'm now incredibly self-conscious. Give it."

From the Waterloo tube stop we'd taken the exit for the London Eye, but at the top of the stairs we saw only an empty street and several windowless buildings. Bee and I were the only pedestrians.

"This way," she said, pointing towards a cross-street several blocks down.

"Any time I'm the only person on a street, or anywhere, I get nervous that the Rapture happened and I got left behind."

Bianca snorted. "That's a specific, and ridiculous, fear."

“People in the South take the Rapture very seriously.” We had reached the intersection, but still saw no people or cars. “Did we come up the wrong exit?”

A lone pedestrian turned down the path, a pale boy about our age with ripped black jeans and white button down. “Excuse me,” Bianca said, catching his arm. He didn’t say anything, but raised his eyebrows to indicate his impatience. “Do you know how to get to the London Eye?” she asked.

“You fucking kidding me,” he replied. He turned slightly, pointing upwards and to the right. “It’s that big fucking thing in the sky right there.” He turned and walked away, shaking his head.

“Thank you!” Bianca called after his retreating form.

“God save the Queen!” I yelled. We looked at each other, then doubled over in laughter. The London Eye was surprising easy to find, once we walked in the direction of the giant sky wheel.

When we finally reached the banks of the Thames, I stopped to admire Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. “Why did I think Big Ben was red?” I asked Bianca.

“Probably some cartoon or illustrated guide.”

“Was is ever red? I feel like I’m not making this up.”

“This is what we’re working with, Jane,” she replied with a theatrical sweep of her arm. “Are we off London already?”

“I am seriously considering it,” I told her.

Bianca laughed, slipping an arm through mine. “Time to queue up.” For the first time I noticed the dual lines. The line at the base of the Eye stretched back at least a

hundred fidgeting tourists and annoyed schoolchildren. Farther back, a second line snacked out of the ticket office.

“Oh, that just can’t be worth it,” I said. “That’s like every person in your country right here.”

Bianca reached into her jacket pocket, and, like a magician revealing the very card I had selected at the start of the trip, displayed a printout with a barcode. “Fast pass, mate. No lines for us.”

She turned to Eye, but I stopped her with a hand on her arm. “You have been asleep for most of the time I’ve been here. Where did those come from? I just barely agreed to this before you blacked out.”

“Firstly,” Bianca replied, “that’s a hurtful assessment. And I booked online last week. Only an idiot rocks up to the Eye on a Saturday morning without booking ahead.”

She steered us around the massive line to a shorter queue. We waited less than ten minutes before an elderly man in a London Eye patterned polo ushered us forward. The Eye moved slowly, but never came to a full stop to allow us to board. As I stepped into our bubble, the Eye continued its upward trajectory, and I stumbled forward slightly. Bianca caught me, quickly steering us to the back of the car.

“Best views here,” she said. “Gotta stake your claim first.” As we rose above the Thames, Bianca rested her forehead against the clear wall of our carriage and sighed happily as the pedestrians on the walkway below turned to ants. “I know how much you hate this tourist crap,” I said with a smile. “Thanks for humoring me.”

We bought samosas from a street cart and took the Tower Bridge over the Thames. Instead of Westminster, I wanted to see St. Paul’s Cathedral. “It’s where Charles

and Diana got married,” I finally admitted. “We can come back to Westminster next weekend.”

“You disgusting closet romantic,” Bianca chided. “Their love was *doomed*.”

“Keep your judgments to yourself, Indoor Skydiving,” I replied.

“Only if you come to Harrods for lunch tomorrow and see Dodi and Diana with me. You can sign the book of condolences. That’s true love, it is.”

“Fine,” I agreed with mock sourness, and we walked away from the Eye towards the rounded dome of St. Paul’s. For an extra two pounds we could pay to climb the 85 meters of stairs to the overlook on the Golden Gallery. The woman selling tickets to the Gallery looked us up and down, then said, “You understand, once you start up the stairs, you have to go all the way up to get down. Elevator’s on the first floor and the top. You pass out on the stairs, no one’s coming to get you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, handing over my money.

She extended the passes to show the man stationed at the staircase, but didn’t let go until she warned us a final time. “I’m not kidding. No way down once you start.”

“Yes, thank you,” I said.

At the door to the staircase the whole process was repeated.

“You girls need to understand that once you go up, you gotta go all the way up. Elevator only stops on two floors.”

“We’ll be fucking fine,” Bianca said.

We were not *fucking fine* or even regular old fine or even moderately okay-ish. The first level up wasn’t that much of a challenge, and on the Whispering Gallery I could look down at the interior of the cathedral, the arches and carvings and intricate marble

tiles. I could look up at the glittering mosaics of the ceiling, the unflappable angels twinkling at me in golden benevolence. I wondered if anyone in America had ever taken the trouble to make something so beautiful.

Things got dicey on the next flight of stairs. In addition to being steep, the stairs went up in an incredibly tight spiral, turning almost 180 degrees with each step. Hot and dry, the uncirculated air sank heavily in my chest, and my lungs burned as I panted for breath. Because the staircase was so narrow, traffic only able to move in one direction. Ahead of Bianca was a heavysset man whose wide hips brushed both the railing and the central pole of the staircase. For all his girth, his lungs and stamina handily outpaced the two young women behind him. There was absolutely no room to pass, which meant that climbers backed up considerably behind Bianca and I.

“I want to stop and puke,” I said, “but if I stop moving I’ll just give up and die.” Bianca was on the step above me, and I had one hand on the railing and one on the small of her back, half to keep my balance and half to propel her forward. If I took my eyes off the backs of Bianca’s knees vertigo set in, threatening to tip me over. At the very top, as we filed out onto the narrow balcony, a woman passed out pins proclaiming “528 Steps!” I braced my hands against the railing and gulped the brisk air.

Bianca lowered her forehead to the stone balcony, her arms hanging dead at her sides. “The elevator goes down, right?”

“Yes, correct,” I said. I was not entirely sure about anything at this point, except for the pain in my knees and my newfound and abiding hatred for spiral staircases. I suspected, however, that if Bianca weren’t reassured about the existence of an elevator, she’d pitch me over the edge without a moment’s hesitation.

“Then I’m so glad we came up here. It’s almost not exactly the same view from the Eye.”

“Different angle,” I said, and the corner of her mouth twitched up slightly. It was a different angle, lower and on the other side of the Thames. We could see the Eye, as well as Big Ben and Westminster Abbey. It was warm, almost hot, at street level, but the wind up here raised gooseflesh on my arms.

Up close, pausing on the Tower Bridge to stare at Big Ben, the Thames sludged by, as dark and murky as the Mississippi. Opaque, with the occasional snack wrapper floating by, the river reminded me of the unloveliness of home. From the London Eye, it looked much the same. Whether it was the distance from which we viewed it, or the unforgiving plexiglass of the bubble we rode in, the river was as dull and brown as an unpaved road, an eyesore I would struggle to edit out of my photos.

Here, though, on the outside balcony of St. Paul’s, I had found the perfect middle distance. The Thames became a mirror, shimmering where the sun snuck through the clouds, throwing back wavy reflections of Big Ben and the red double-deckers on the bridges. I raised my camera, then lowered it without taking a picture. The photograph wouldn’t be as lovely, I suspected, as my memory. This way I could keep it for myself, perfect.

I remembered suddenly a bit of a song, a flash of Benji shuffling around the living room, swaying to an old LP, singing to himself: *When you see the Southern Cross for the first time, you understand now why you came this way.* I closed my eyes against the prickle of tears and crush of rightness threatening to explode out of my chest. *I could stay here, I thought. I could stay here forever. I don’t ever have to go back home.*

Bianca and I watched the bustle below. I turned to speak, but instead began to laugh. Her precise, winged liner had smudged and run as we climbed the stairs, and she now looked as though she were wearing a panda mask.

“What’s so funny, you bint?” she asked, breathing shallowly between every other word.

“Bee-anca,” I said, waving in the general direction of her face, now laughing so hard tears were threatening to fall. “Because you look like a bee.” She continued to scowl. “You’re all yellow and black,” I said, barely able to finish the sentence before surrendering to my guffaws.

She swiped beneath her eyes with her thumbs. “Shite,” she muttered when they came away black. “Laugh it up, smartass,” she said with a smile. “Smarty-pants,” she amended after a short pause. “Genius.”

“Brain,” I suggested. “Because it rhymes with Jane.”

“You don’t get to pick your own condescending nickname,” she told me.

“By all means, carry on,” I said. “You’re doing a spectacular job so far.”

The elevator was actually down a level, at the Stone Gallery. In our single minded determination to climb the stairs, we’d missed the door leading to this middle level, with offered both indoor and outdoor views.

“So we really just needed to make it up here. That last little bit was unneeded,” Bianca declared.

“528 Steps!” I chirped, waving my fingers in my best approximation of jazz hands. The people on the glossy marble floors below us were as tiny as Legos from this height, but the arches above us still made me feel small. In a different way, the view

inside the chapel was as expansive as the view outside. However, this space was contained, and I felt less like I would float away and be gone forever.

In the gift shop I bought a postcard of the tightly-wound staircase and a book of airmail stamps. There was a postbox in front of the Starbucks less than a block from the cathedral, and I scribbled a quick note to Greenie while Bianca stood in line to order our coffees. Bianca had accepted the ten-pound note I thrust at her. “I was going to treat, but St. Paul’s was your idea. Westminster doesn’t have stairs.”

DAY ONE I wrote at the top of the postcard, then wrote the date beneath in parentheses. *I climbed all of these stairs today. Every single one of them. Thank you so much, I love you.* I signed my name just as Bianca sat down with our lattes. “I’m just going to run this to the mailbox,” I said to Bianca. I understood that the mailbox would still be there when we finished our coffees, and that it was too late in the day for the mail to be picked up. Still, I wanted to send the postcard on its journey immediately.

Knightsbridge lacked the charm of the other underground stations I'd seen, admittedly only a handful. The curving colored tiles on the station walls in Piccadilly Circus, curving around corners only to abruptly dead-end at junctions and stairs, looked just old fashioned enough to be deliberately modern. No two stations were the same, except for Knightsbridge, which looked like a carbon copy of something I just hadn't seen yet. Instead of tiles and mosaics, the walls were covered in large metal plates. Twenty years ago, I thought to myself, this is what someone thought the future would look like.

I followed the exit signs up to Brompton Road and Harrods, immediately confronted with the red-brick edifice towering over me. And an unkempt man straddling a bicycle, yelling at the shoppers through a megaphone. "Do not make this building your church, I beseech you," he called out, as shoppers ducked their heads to scurry the few feet past him and into the store. "Salvation cannot come to you through things, but only through sacrifice. I am imploring your soul." He paused to take a deep breath, inflating his chest and opening his mouth to deliver his closing remarks, only to catch sight of store security coming out the doors towards him.

"Citizens," the man on the bike said, "I must be going now." He pedaled away, prompting complaints from the pedestrians lurching out of his way. It made sense now that he'd stayed perched on the bike, ready to make a quick getaway. Security didn't seem interested in giving chase, just shooing him away.

Distracted by the cyclist's erratic departure – faint yelps could still be heard from people on the sidewalk several blocks down – I hadn't heard Bianca approach. I turned back to the entrance of the store, only to find her in my line of sight. "Hello," I said.

“I’m so glad you saw a bit of Jiminy Jesus,” she replied. “He hasn’t been around in days, and I thought he might’ve found another store to harass.”

“He comes around often?” I asked.

“*This is not the house of the Lord,*” Bianca intoned gravely, taking my arm and pulling me towards the doors. A doorman dressed to look like a toy soldier opened the door. Behind him stood a security guard dressed like the world’s angriest frat boy. We had to pass through a metal detector before entering, apparently in the high-end luggage department.

A quick glance at the people moving through the store and the goods on sale had me pulling my arms closer to my sides, trying to take up less space. “I don’t have enough money to breathe on anything here,” I whispered to Bianca.

She was walking with purpose through the shoppers, looking over her shoulder to answer me. “No one here does, Brain. Except for the tourists. The rest of us are just here to gawk.” She was two steps ahead of me, and, though I tried to catch up, I kept looking down at my feet, making sure I wasn’t stepping on anything I couldn’t afford to replace.

Bianca was waiting for me in a small atrium, at the top of a short escalator. Down only half a floor, the décor shifted abruptly, the walls covered in faux hieroglyphics and support pillars in the shape of sarcophagi. Waiting for us at the bottom of the escalator was a Sphinx behind exactly one length of velvet rope.

Behind us I could hear a murmur of voices, and when I turned I saw first, above the heads of the assemblage, the bronzed bird mimicking flight and two sets of hands reaching up. *Oh, they’re releasing a dove,* I thought, except for it looked like two people trying to catch a goose. The crowd shuffled and thinned, some moving off to the food hall

I could see through an archway, some moving closer to the display behind the sculpture. Finally able to see the whole thing, I realized it was a barefoot Dodi and Diana, he with his shirt open, smiling at each other with inhuman bronzed faces. The base of the sculpture, in sprawling cursive, proclaimed them to be *Innocent Victims*.

“Do they need that pheasant for dinner?” I whispered to Bianca, trying to be tactful since several people around the statue looked to be motivated by genuine grief.

“They are releasing the albatross that shackled them to earthly unhappiness,” she replied at full volume, which sounded well-practiced and earned a chorus of murmured approval. As Bianca signed the book of condolences, for what I imagine could only be the hundredth time, I moved to see the glass pyramid holding Diana’s alleged engagement ring, and the lipstick-stained glass she’s purportedly drunk from on her last night on earth.

When I turned back, Bee was photographing a pair of Asian tourists, holding hands beside the bronzed bird-catchers. “Chin up, love,” Bianca said, handing back the camera. “They’re at peace now.”

With smiles of bland incomprehension, the pair bowed. “Arigato,” the man said. Why did Japanese people like so much weird shit?

“What do you think?” Bianca asked.

“It’s a touch” - and I had to remind myself to pronounce the word correctly – “gauche. Over the top.”

“Nothing is too much for true love,” Bianca told me, resting a serious hand on my shoulder. “Never settle for a love that doesn’t set your heart to pheasant capture.”

“*Pheasant capture* sounds like a phaser setting in Star Trek,” I told her.

“You’re a nerd,” Bianca replied. She checked the time on her watch. “Takeaway sandwiches and come see the shop?” she asked.

The food hall looked almost extravagant as St. Paul’s, with polished tile floors, chandeliers, and painted ceilings. Before I could agree, Bianca was handing over money at one of the many islands of delicacies. “How much do I owe you?” I asked, as Bianca passed me a waxed paper parcel. *Beef and Mozzarella Focaccia* the label read.

“I nicked the change from the coffee yesterday,” she told me. “We’re even.”

I doubted that there was any money leftover from our coffees, let alone enough money to cover a sandwich from Harrods, but I bit down my objections and followed Bianca back out the store. On the busy sidewalk, we huddled against the side of the building and made short work of our lunch. Down the street, at the main entrance, valets helped a painfully thin woman from a black convertible that was surely worth more than Greenie’s home.

Bianca nudged me with an elbow, tipping her head towards the sports car and its occupant. “There’s the real money,” she told me. “All the rest of us are just gawkers.”

The tiny boutique where Bianca worked sat down a block, tucked in a cobbled alley unfit for motor vehicles. The showroom was barely larger than Bianca’s bedroom, just enough room for Bianca and I and the bored androgynous creature flipping through a magazine by the cash register. The store contained only two racks of dresses and a topless mannequin wearing a pair of pre-distressed bell-bottoms that could be mine for the low, low price of half the money Greenie had given me for my trip.

“Jesus,” I said, releasing the price tag like it had stung me. “I can’t afford to breathe on anything in here *either*. Where do the poor people in your country shop? Do y’all have K-Mart?”

“Primark,” said the person behind the counter, tone of voice implying our conversation was heavingly dull but offering no clues as to the speaker’s gender.

“Primark,” Bianca repeated, clapping her hands like cymbals. “Primark’s ace. Fulla nutters. We’ll go this weekend.”

The door behind me chimed, and, with the addition of two actual shoppers, the store became painfully overcrowded. Bianca and her co-worker turned instantly solicitous, and I gestured towards the door with my thumb, getting a quick nod in response. The Victoria & Albert was a short walk away, and Bianca would meet me in the café after her shift ended, in another two hours.

Before stepping into the V&A, the most highbrow cultural experience of my life had probably been a touring exhibit called *The Splendors of Versailles* that Greenie had taken me to when I was 11. I remembered very little of the exhibit, a gilded carriage and a few dozen painting of horses. What I remembered most vividly was the audio guide, how the plastic headband kept slipping forwards and backwards, not being sized for a preteen, how there was no good way to keep ahold of the long black wand, and how Liam Neeson’s voice, both gravelly and musical, so enchanted me that I kept restarting the audio guide from the beginning to hear him say, “Welcome...to *Versailles*.” A black and white photo of the actor hung beside the kiosk for the audio guides, but I hadn’t known who he was that day, aside from the voice coming through the headphones. Two years later I’d get a vocabulary list with *genteel* and *guttural* side-by-side, and immediately

think of Liam Neeson. By the time we turned the headphones in on our way to the car, I had listened to Liam Neeson welcome me to this magical slice of historical extravagance and thank the exhibition's corporate sponsors about 30 times.

In the high-ceilinged gallery of Raphael cartoons, I staggered backwards, letting my knees hit the bench in the room's center, and collapsed, overwhelmed. *Oh, that Raphael*, I thought, then giggled. *What other Raphael would there be? The ninja turtle?* I'd wondered how I'd kill the two hours before Bianca arrived, concerned I should've tucked a paperback into my bag. I saw now that I wouldn't have enough time, maybe not ever, to see everything.

In the museum café, sunlight through the stained glass windows made kaleidoscope patterns dance on the tabletops. I spotted Bianca tucked at a back table, speaking on her phone. A mug of tea and the crumbled remnants of some kind of pastry sat on a tray at her elbow.

I pulled out a chair as quietly as I could as she mouthed the word *sorry*. To the person on the call she said, "Look, my mate's here. I've got to go." After a pause, during which she pantomimed pulling out her own hair, she added, "Yes, fine. If you insist. I'll see you next week." She dropped the cell phone on the table, a startling clattered in the empty café. "Ugh," she said.

"Boyfriend?" I asked.

"Brother," she corrected.

"Brother barrister?"

“Brother builder. I’m the baby of the family, and everyone thinks I’m spinning wheels as a shop girl. Time to grow up and find a *proper job*.” She made air quotes around the last two words. “Do you have brothers?”

“Sisters. Three. Sort of,” I told her.

“I would love a *sort of* family right now,” Bianca laughed. “How do I get myself one of those?”

“They’re half-sisters,” I explained. “So I guess you’d need a step-father and a pretty sizable age gap. The oldest is thirteen.”

“You don’t get on?” Bianca asked. For all her frustration a second ago, she seemed sincerely concerned that I might not like my sisters. She swirled the mug, lifted it to drink, then winced. “Gone cold,” she said.

“I don’t *not* get on with my sisters,” I said, once Bianca had returned the mug to the table. “I don’t actively dislike them.”

“I’m sorry,” she said with sympathy.

“I’m not,” I assured her. I tapped the first finger of my left hand against my nose as I searched for the right metaphor to describe my tangential relationship with my immediate family. “How much math did you take at school?” I asked her.

“As little as possible,” Bee replied.

I laughed in agreement. “But did you ever have those equations where you have to solve for x ?” Once she nodded, I continued. “In my family, I’m x . Everyone else is a random number that makes sense, and I’m the unknown.”

“That actually sounds quite tragic,” she said.

“It’s okay. I have my Greenie. She’s like my grandmother, and I’m her favorite, so it all evens out.”

“Yanks are daft,” she said to me. “I mean, you’re ace.”

Before I could respond she gestured to the plate of crumbs. “I was going to get you a proper scone, but it’s end of day and this one was a bit stale. I think I know a place that’s still doing tea, if you’d like to get a proper scone.”

“Of course. Scones and cream is on my list,” I said.

“Are you making good pace through this list of yours? Getting it all in?”

“There’s too much to see,” I replied. “I’m not going to have enough time.”

Bee's cousin Ali lived in Manchester, and I was welcome on the sofa. I could check out the People's Museum, and Ali and her boyfriend would take me to their local to watch the footie. I agreed to this plan wholeheartedly, only finding out later what I was saying yes to.

"D'ya have any idea what that is?" Bee asked me.

"I bet there's kicking," I replied.

"Football on telly at the pub. You heathens call it soccer."

The plan was for me to go up on Wednesday, and then on Saturday Bianca and I would meet at Salisbury to see their cathedral and visit Stonehenge. I never made it to Manchester. Unsure of when I'd next have access to wifi, I checked my email on Bianca's desktop computer before catching the subway to Euston station. There was a message from Mother, ten hours old. Greenie had collapsed at the mall. Twice weekly she and three other women from the Happy Home traveled to the mall to walk laps indoors. Three laps of the mall equaled 1.25 miles. She enjoyed the company, and the last time we spoke I'd admonished her for making new best friends.

Greenie was unresponsive, the doctors suspected a stroke, the prognosis was not good, how soon could I get home.

I picked up the landline, mashing buttons until I figured out how to place a call to America. It was nearly midnight in Memphis, which struck me as an incredible song title. That was all my brain could think of, Midnight in Memphis.

"Just go to the airport," Mother said. "Use the credit card, we'll pay for everything. Get home now."

As she spoke I hummed an imaginary tune, Midnight in Memphis would be seventies soul-funk. A ballad about lost love. Maybe sex. Maybe it was a sexy song.

“Jane! Jane, are you listening? What are you going to do?”

“Go to the airport, buy a ticket. Come home.” I didn’t sound like myself.

“Honey, I’m so sorry. When you’re in America, call, let us know when to get you. First class is okay.”

“Okay. I’m leaving now. Okay.”

“I love you, Janey. I’m so sorry.”

“I love you, too,” I said, or thought I said. I meant to say it, before I hung up the phone, but I’m not sure if I did.

Everything essential was already in my backpack for the trip to Manchester – passport, wallet, toothbrush, laptop. Over the Pacific I realized I hadn’t left a note for Bee, hadn’t emailed Ali about the change in plans. Some of my clothes were still kicked to the corner in Bee’s room, several books were on the table next to her bed.

At Heathrow I walked up to the first person I saw in any sort of uniform and said, “My grandmother is dying, I have to get to Memphis.” Charlene was actually part of the cleaning staff, but was very helpful, pulling me along by the arm to ticketing counters, relaying the details when I fell mute. In three hours there was a flight to New York, with a six-hour layover, then New York to Memphis. On short notice, it was the best to be had. Charlene deposited me at the security checkpoint with a hug and a lipsticky smack on the cheek. “I’ll be saying a prayer for your Gran. God bless.”

I don’t think I thanked her. Through security, too much time on my hands, I bought and tried to read a Hello! about the marital trials of Katie Price and Peter Andre.

The words were indistinct squiggles, and the pictures shifted before my eyes like Picassos, sideways eyes and upside-down noses. I sat my departure gate, hearing nothing. As boarding wrapped up, and airline employee walked over to my seat, asked if I was on the flight to New York. When I didn't respond she took my boarding pass from my hand. "Just waiting on you, love," she said, pointing to the airplane out the window.

In LaGuardia I ate Dairy Queen because it reminded me of Greenie, a cheeseburger meal with a milkshake, then a large Butterfinger Blizzard, then a plain cone. I walked calmly to the bathroom, wondering the whole way if I wanted more French fries, and threw up everything I'd just eaten. I dug my toothbrush out of my backpack, brushed my teeth, and scrubbed my tongue so vigorously I threw up again, watery bile that washed down the drain when I waved my hands to activate the water.

Just outside the bathrooms were payphones, which I used to call Mother. The call went to voicemail, and I recited my arrival time and flight number. I hung up, then immediately called back. "I love you," I said, after pressing one to record a new message. "I didn't say before. I love you."

At the Hudson News next to my gate I bought a bag of Skittles, a bag of salted peanuts, and a Sprite. I sat on the floor, my back propped against the window, and began to eat. One Skittle, one peanut, one sip of Sprite. I ran out of peanuts first. One Skittle, one sip of Sprite. When everything was gone, I repurchased, repeating the process until it was time to board the plane. I had been awake for twenty-eight hours.

Mother met me at the luggage carousel. Her Buick was parked just outside, engine running, hazards blinking. "Why didn't you turn your phone back on?" she asked

as she hugged me. “We’ve been trying to call since you left those messages. I didn’t answer because I didn’t recognize the number.”

“I think I left my phone in London,” I said.

Mother pulled back, looking at me and holding on to my shoulders. “That’s fine, baby. That’s fine. You’re here. That’s all that matters.”

As soon as I’d settled in the passenger’s seat of Mother’s car, Paul Simon’s “Mother and Child Reunion” began playing on the radio. This was a sign, I thought. The universe was telling me that Greenie would be fine. She was going to live long enough for me to sit beside her and tell her how much I loved her. She was going to live long enough to recover, to leave the hospital, to drink coffee with me after calling the barista “Hot Ass.”

I closed my eyes and leaned back against the headrest. The stress and sleeplessness of 30 hours in airplanes and airports receded, and I felt at peace since for the first time since opening my email two days ago in London. On the road to the hospital I fell into a light doze, relief filling my lungs with each breath I took.

If I ever meet Paul Simon, I'm going to punch him in his stupid goddamn fucking face.

Greenie had died during my layover in New York. They hadn't moved her yet, though. Benji wouldn't let the hospital call the funeral home until I had a chance to say goodbye. Her door was shut, the window cracked with the air conditioning was on high. She was so small, her cheeks falling in on themselves, the veins of her hands rising like foothills above her crepey flesh. Her hair looked thinner than I remembered, and there were bruises up her forearms where the IVs had been.

This was better, though, I knew. Better than seeing her painted peach, plumped face and false smile beaming out of a coffin. I sat in the chair next to her bed, and laid my hand alongside hers. I couldn't bring myself to touch her. Greenie knew I was squeamish. In ninth grade biology, and again in AP my senior year, I'd written multiple paged research papers to make up for my failure to dissect the frogs and fetal pigs the rest of my class had no problem carving into. Greenie would understand.

"Thank you for being so good to me," I said. "I love you so much, Greenie. You've broken my heart."

I sat next to her for an hour, crying my way through the box of scratchy, one-ply hospital tissue on the nightstand, and told her about my trip, everything I could remember. I promised to avenge her honor, should I ever meet Paul Simon. I told her I would never love anyone better than I loved her.

In March, after she'd given me the money, but before I left for London Greenie had fallen ill at the Happy Home, along with several other residents who'd eaten bad deviled eggs at an Easter social on the Wednesday before the holiday. There hadn't been enough beds in the emergency ward, and Greenie had ended up transferred to a hospital several miles away. Only the patients deemed well enough to make the ten-minute ride without crapping their pants were sent to the hospital, Greenie assured me. She just needed fluids and a couple shots of antibiotics. The nurse had promised I could stay until the next time she came on her rounds, and had assured me that Greenie would be released tomorrow.

"Basically everyone back there is walking around will full diapers," Greenie said.

"Well, that's disgusting and you can never go back there," I replied. Greenie had already arranged to go home with Benji and Mother and stay through the weekend until the Happy Home could be successfully disinfected.

Footsteps approached the door and we both paused, holding our breath, like two fourteen year-olds up past midnight at a sleepover. When they passed by we relaxed and laughed. Greenie sighed and looked out the window at the mightily unpicturesque cement parking structure.

"Janey, don't let them stick me in the ground."

"Greenie, hush!" I ordered.

"I'm serious," she said, turning back to meet my eyes. "I don't want to be buried."

"I'll have you stuffed and mounted. Bring you out on special occasions with appropriate seasonal hats."

She laughed and pointed at me. "That's why you're the only one I can trust."

“You don’t wanna be with your husband?”

“I don’t have to be in the dirt to be with him. We’ll be together. I just don’t want to be stuck somewhere forever.” She sighed and closed her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest.

“By your own logic, you won’t really be stuck there.”

Greenie opened one eye to scowl at me. “Don’t test me, child.”

“What should I do, then?” I asked. “What’s the master plan?”

“I want to be cremated, and I want you to take my ashes to New Mexico. Shake me out all over the mesas.”

“New Mexico?” In the thirteen years I’d known Greenie she’d gone on three Alaskan cruises and several yearly trips to visit Benji’s older brothers. I always felt a dull pang of jealousy for all the memories Greenie had that came before me.

“Taos, New Mexico, is the most beautiful place I’ve ever been. It’s the last place I went with William before he passed.”

“I will shake your ashes out all over the mesas,” I said, my throat catching.

“Throw some glitter in there, too, Janey. So it looks fancy.”

“The tumbleweed will feel so underdressed.”

We sealed our pack with a twist of our pinkies just as the nurse returned to usher me out. “She’ll be fine, sweetheart,” the nurse said kindly, tapping the blood pressure cuff against my head.

No one else knew about Greenie’s plans to blow across the red dirt of the Southwest, it turned out. She hadn’t meant it, or hadn’t thought to put it in her will, which is how I came to be sitting at the florist’s with Mother, as Benji’s oldest brother dealt

with the funeral home and the rest of the family conferred with the pastor about the service.

“She doesn’t want to be buried,” I tried to explain. “She wants to be cremated.” My words were met with silence. One by one, the rest of her family walked into another room, leaving me alone on the sofa with Mother. She already had a plot, Mother said, next to her husband. There was already a stone, and everything was paid for.

“You weren’t the only one who loved her, Jane,” Mother said, not without kindness. “These are her sons, and you have to let them do what they think is best for Greenie.”

I’d gone with Greenie once, when I was only ten, to lay flowers on her husband’s grave. Her name was already carved into the marble, her date of birth, and the date of their marriage. When the time came, she said, someone would come along and chisel in the rest of her numbers. It upset me so much, seeing her name there. Greenie was standing next to me, more alive than anyone I’d ever met, and I pictured her trapped underground exactly as she was then, in her smart pink dress with a pot of geraniums in her arms. At ten, her name on the tombstone felt like an awful premonition, a threat that she would be taken and buried alive.

I hung back as she placed the flowers, pulled a few stray weeds, and spoke kindly to the marble slab. I realized there was no safe space for me to stand, that underfoot, all around, were the dead. I imagined them scheming, plotting to take away the person I loved most in the world.

The rain comes on sudden in the south, moreso in the summer when the humidity presses down like a physical weight and the act of walking feels fraught with resistance. At some point the sky has no choice but to break and empty itself. Driving from the cemetery to Mother and Benji's house, the thunder began cracking immediately on the heels of the lightening, and the sky flooded from grey to full dark in a matter of seconds. I'd insisted on driving myself everywhere that week, the time I spent alone in the car the only time I could be sure no one would try to talk to me.

I drove through the rain for half a mile, until I realized the wipers were having no effect. I pulled over to the side of the road and turned on the heat. Thought the temperature had been hovering in the mid-nineties since my return, a chill ran through me. I pillowed my forearms on the steering wheel, dropped my head, and screamed. I screamed until I thought my throat would bleed. In that moment, there wasn't a person on earth whose life I wouldn't trade for Greenie's. There was a weight on my chest. I thought it was the press of the steering wheel against my sternum, cutting off my breath, until I straightened up and the weight remained.

The rain comes on sudden, and it leaves just as quickly. I rolled down my windows and switched off the engine, leaning my head out of the car to watch the just-fallen rain evaporate. Shimmering sheets of steam rose like ghosts from the blacktop.

I don't know how long I sat there, watching the road, but the threat of rain had blown over by the time Benji pulled up behind me. The cloudless, blue sky contrasted with his black suit and stricken face.

Leaning himself into my driver's side window, he looked so much older than he had a month ago. "Jesus Christ, Jane," he said, his voice weary but without anger.

"What're you doing out here?"

"I forgot how to drive." His crossed forearms rested on the open window, and I leaned over, resting my head against him.

I felt his head slump against mine. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I get that."

On Greenie's walls in the Happy Home hung a remarkable collage of photographs: children, grandchildren, her sister, she and her husband in front of a breathtaking vista of red rocks. New Mexico, I thought. Greenie always introduced me to new people as, "Jane, my first grandchild."

As a joke I'd bought a pink picture frame. A plastic appliqued stork that we'd had to re-glue several time perched on the bottom right corner of the frame. The words "Grandma's #1 Girl!" were printed across the top. The frame hung on the wall, with a picture of me in antlers and a tutu, smiling awkwardly, taken on the night of that ill-fated Christmas parade.

A formal picture of Mother, Benji, and I at the wedding was just to the left, in a thick wooden frame. The three of us stood next to the cake. I was between them, and they each rested a hand on one of my shoulders. Benji's other hand was around Mother's waist, and Mother's free hand held the hat against a gust of wind that had our hair and the hems of our dresses dancing. Mother and Benji's appeared caught mid-laugh. I smiled, but had squinted my eyes nearly shut. Whenever teased about my grimace, I blamed the sunny day and my own lack of hat.

Mother and I were packing up Greenie's personal effects: her photos, her jewelry, her collection of **World's Best Grandma** mugs. My hand hovered in the air between the two photographs. I turned to Mother, who was seated on the sofa. "Was Greenie at your wedding?" I asked.

"What?" she answered. We had been working in silence for almost an hour and her voice sounded both startled and angry. She was sitting cross-legged, wrapping plates in newspaper.

“Was Greenie at your wedding?” I repeated.

Mother set down the plate she was holding and sank back against the cushions. She took a deep breath, pressing the heels of her hands into her eyes. “No, Jane, Greenie was not at the wedding.” She lowered her hands and met my eyes. “We sent the invitation, and I’m pretty sure Benji went and begged her to come, even after I said don’t, but in the end Greenie decided not to come to the wedding.”

“Why not?”

Mother’s laugh popped like firecrackers. “It’s no secret that she didn’t like me, Janey. That’s not news.”

“But she did,” I said, and it sounded like a plea. “She did like you.”

“No, girl,” Mother said. “She liked you. She loved you so much it made me jealous. She loved your sisters, and she always loved her baby boy. Me she put up with from time to time.”

I came and sat beside Mother on the sofa, slumping my body into hers. She rested her head on my shoulder and sighed. “Benji was only twenty when we got married. His daddy had just died and here came this divorced old broad with a kid stealing him away. In her shoes, I’d be mad, too.”

“I think she loved you,” I said.

“And I love you, Jane, so I won’t try and change your mind,” Mother replied.

“She told me once I’d be lucky to grow up and be like you,” I said, a note of bargaining in my voice.

“That’s sweet, Jane, but she never said anything like that to me.” Mother braced her arms on the sofa and pushed herself up. “Can you finish the plates for me?” she

asked, without looking back at me. After she shut the bathroom door I heard one bit-off sob. I told myself if I heard anything else I'd go check on her, and was relieved when I didn't have to. Mother emerged from the bathroom ten minutes later. Her face was dry, but the collar of her shirt was damp, as though she'd thrown water on her face.

“Do you know how many toothbrushes your grandmother has in there?” She asked with a forced smile. “Fourteen. Fourteen toothbrushes in a drawer.”

“I hope she left them to me,” I replied with a strained smile of my own.

At four Mother left, telling me dinner would be ready at six. After wrapping the china, while Mother sorted through Greenie's clothes, I'd returned to the photos on the wall. Looking at them hurt too much, and I thought the sooner they were down the sooner I could pretend Greenie's apartment was a nondescript hotel suite or staged condo. I thought this process of boxing up her life would be easier without her watching me from the walls.

I was wrong, but it was worth a shot.

At 5:20, I pulled the door closed behind me, then rested my forehead just below the room number, my hand still on the doorknob. I could hear the gentle shuffling of feet on the thick carpeting moving towards me, and I bit down on my lips so I wouldn't sob audibly. I forced myself to breathe in and out on a three count, determined not to move until the footsteps were past me. Instead they slowed beside me, and a hand came to rest on my shoulder.

“Jane?” a voice asked, and I turned my head slightly to see a watery version of Mrs. McGrath, the woman two doors down from Greenie. “I thought that was you,” she said.

“Just packing up,” I said, my voice cracking.

“She loved you so much, you know. You were such a good granddaughter to her,” Mrs. McGrath said. “Those postcards were the envy of everyone.”

I just nodded. I placed my hand atop Mrs. McGrath’s and squeezed gently. I pulled away as slowly as I felt I could without upsetting her balance. I didn’t want to Mrs. McGrath to take a tumble, but I couldn’t bear the thought of continuing this conversation.

“God bless,” she said to my back, and I had to sag against the wall as I though I were the one in danger of collapsing. I’d sent Greenie a postcard for every day I was in London, including one mailed the day before her death. Each postcard contained the highlights of the day, plus an accounting of what her money had been spent on. I signed with a heart, instead of writing out *I love* you, which suddenly felt like the cruelest undertaking of my life.

I’d only been gone for sixteen days, and I had no way of knowing how many of them were still making their way back to America. It made me feel hollow, this sudden conviction that she would never know the full extent of my love without reading all of my postcards. I thought I’d have so much longer.

I forgot entirely about my abandoned luggage and phone, about Bianca and the train to Manchester. I forgot for nearly two weeks. I'd begun taking long walks near sunset, meandering around the neighborhood for over an hour, well into full dark. I let myself in through the back door, which opened into the kitchen, and went straight for one of Benji's PBRs. I'd been spoiled by the British alcohol, and this *tepid can of piss* was just another way America failed me.

"We've got to get you a replacement phone," Benji said from the doorway, catching me off-guard. "It might be nice to be able to call you when you wander off without a word, so we know you're not dead."

Shit, my phone, I thought. Shit, Bianca. Bianca probably thinks I'm dead. Shit. Dimly it registered that I wasn't concerned about my family's concern. It didn't matter that I'd worried them.

"I know where my phone is," I told Benji, pushing past him to get to the communal desktop computer in the living room. I hadn't messaged Bianca, or checked my email, since coming home three weeks ago. *I just have to go get it back.*

Bianca's emails cycled through concern to fear to anger and back to fear about my whereabouts. The final email, sent six days after my abrupt departure, told me she'd found the number for the landline at my parents' house, called and spoken to my mother, and was disappointed I couldn't just tell her that I wanted to leave. Also she had given away all of my possessions.

News to me that she'd spoken to Mother, who obviously hadn't explained the situation fully. I wrote Bianca back, apologizing and explaining, gently asking if maybe she still had at least my phone. I sat at the computer for the next two hours, drinking the

rest of Benji's six-pack, refreshing my inbox every five or so minutes, until Bianca's reply popped up.

Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!!!!!!!!!! read the subject line.

Was it the Gran I'd sent all those postcards to? She was so sorry. Of course she still had all my stuff. She was so sorry. Should she mail it somewhere? She was so sorry. Could she do anything to help? She was so sorry.

I typed "You think you're sorry guess how I feel," four separate times, backspacing it away each time. After looking at a blank email draft for ten minutes I wrote:

Thank you. I'm doing alright I guess. Can you hang on to my stuff for a bit? Do you have room? I don't know what my plan is right now.

I didn't say it out loud for another few weeks, but right then I started imagining going back to London.

I don't know why I picked the fight in public. Maybe I thought I'd keep my temper in front of so many witnesses. Maybe I wanted the witnesses. Maybe I knew that Mother couldn't easily walk away from me at a restaurant.

Maybe it was because I'd heard Mother say, in various forms, throughout my life, "It wasn't easy having Jane so young, but I did the best I could." She said it again that night, as we ate our complimentary breadbasket and waited for our main courses to arrive. A girl in Ruth Ellen's class was pregnant, the first unwed teen any of my sisters had encountered.

"She wants to keep the baby," Ruth Ellen said, perplexed. "How can she keep the baby and finish school?"

"It's not ideal," Mother said, "but you just do the best you can. I had Jane when I was seventeen and I managed."

"Don't make it sound so glamorous," Benji admonished. He turned to his daughters and said, "No babies. No sex. Period." They laughed, averting their eyes, embarrassed. I found myself suddenly and completely angry.

"Besides," I said, my voice quavering just a little, "doing the best you can isn't the same thing as doing a good job."

The air in the restaurant seemed to pull back, leaving our table in a vacuum, eerily silent. As soon as I'd said the words I knew I'd done something terrible. It wasn't the reaction of my family; I could feel my words in my body, heavy and nauseated in my stomach, tight around my temples like a migraine.

Mother hardly wore makeup anymore, but tonight she'd stood next to me in the bathroom as I primped, borrowed my mascara. "I can't have you girls showing me up all

the time,” she’d said as she snatched the wand from my hand. Now fine specks of mascara clung to her lashes as inky tears gathered under her chin. Mother cried without making a sound.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I said, trailing off weakly.

“We’re done talking right now,” she replied, her voice cool and even. Mother pulled her napkin from her lap and dabbed gently at her face. Two waiters arrived just as Mother re-settled her napkin in her lap. She’d managed to wipe away most of her tears, but the mascara left a faint, muddy cast to her face.

After an over-long pause, the taller of the two waiters began speaking in a high, bright tone. “Alright, I have the fillet with a plain potato.” We raised our hands in turn to claim our meals, responding to the waiters with only nods and shakes of our heads. Ruth Ellen was the first to tentatively fork her food, following by Benji attacking his steak with the serrated knife that came perched on the edge of his plate. I brought a bite of salad to my mouth, though it tasted of nothing. I looked around the table, not at anyone’s face, but at their hands, to make sure they were eating as well. Only Mother’s hands remained still. I raised my eyes to hers.

“You think I’m a bad mother,” she said. I immediately cast my eyes back down to my plate. “No, ma’am,” she gritted out. Peripherally I could see a finger pointing at me. “Don’t act all innocent. You think I’m a bad mother. I want to hear you say it.”

I folded my hands on the table, and kept my eyes down. When it was clear I wouldn’t respond, she continued. “I did the *very best* that I could.”

The familiar refrain snapped in my ears, and something in my broke. “You left,” I said, cutting her off. “You weren’t there. You were never there. I slept in a closet because

you wouldn't give up your bedroom, even though you kept leaving and you never took me with you."

"Jane," Mother cautioned. She was edging into anger, looking over her shoulder to make sure we weren't causing a scene. "Is now the best time?"

"You're a good mother. Now," I said, my voice just above a whisper. I picked a roll from the bread basket; I wanted something in my hands I could break. The cornmeal dusting stuck to my sweaty palms as I twisted the bread back into a lump of unformed dough. "My sisters have an amazing mother. But I didn't meet that woman until I was nearly eight." I dropped the mangled roll on the table, and made a show of dusting the crumbs from my hands. I picked up my fork and took a deliberate bite. By my third bite Mother was crying again, still silently, but with full-bodied sobs that shook her shoulders. I felt triumphant, then immediately worthless. I'd made my mother cry in public.

I put the fork down. "Mom," I said, but I had nothing to follow it with.

Mother wrapped her arms tightly around her waist, rocking slightly. "I feel like a terrible person," she said. "I feel like a failure. Is this what you wanted?" She finally raised her head to meet my eyes on the last sentence.

The worst part: it *was* what I wanted. I wanted her to feel awful, so she'd know how awful I'd felt. My body felt hungover and let-lagged, bruised and raw and hollow all at once. It was the worst I'd ever felt, worse than when Greenie died. Worse because I had done this. I had made this happen.

"Greenie wasn't such a nice lady, Jane," Benji said, abruptly. I whipped my head to face him. "She spoiled you to punish your mother. Greenie wanted you to love her best, more than you loved your own mother."

“Oh, Benjamin,” Mother said. “Please don’t.”

“I don’t care,” I said to Benji, trying to convey the worthlessness of his argument. I then repeated the words loudly enough to be heard at every table in our section. “I don’t care why Greenie loved me. I don’t care if she loved me to spite you. I don’t care if she lost a bet. I only care that she loved me, because if she hadn’t loved me, nobody would’ve.”

“So I was right,” Mother said. “You don’t believe I love you.”

I felt the seed of cruelty in my heart, uncomfortable, the same way I’d feel a pebble in my shoe. I wanted to apologize and be forgiven, or rescind my words and say nothing. I wanted to comfort my mother, and assure her that I loved her and knew how much she loved me. I couldn’t make myself say any of this, though. My arm lurched, a jerking motion to clasp one of her hands. Her eyes tracked my movements, and she pulled her elbows close to her sides, out of my reach.

“I’d like to eat my dinner, now, preferably in silence,” she said. “And then I’d like to go home.”

“Mom, I’m sorry,” I tried.

“Too late for apologies,” Benji scoffed.

“No, Jane,” Mother said to me, ignoring Benji. “We’re not going to talk right now.”

No one ate much of their food, and we flinched off the offer of carryout boxes. When the bill came, Benji began to pull a credit card from his wallet, then, shaking his head, pulled out a group of twenties. “That’s it,” he said. “We’re good. We can go.” I

waited for the rest of my family to stand, then followed them out of the restaurant, three paces behind.

Ruth Ellen had ridden to the restaurant in my car, since five was a tight fit in Benji's Jeep. In the parking lot she looked slightly over her shoulder in my direction, then quickened her pace to catch up with her sisters. "Wait, scootch," she called. The five of them folded themselves into the car, Ruth Ellen forcing Jenny Ann to the middle of the backseat. Benji piloted the car out of the parking lot out without anyone inside acknowledging me again.

I remember nothing of the drive, but I startled, as though from a heavy nap, to find myself parked at the Happy Home. Greenie didn't have a place anymore, I realized. The house where I'd spent so many weekends was gone, sold five years ago. Someone else already occupied her rooms here. All the spaces where I'd known her were lost to me. The thick carpet of her library in was gone, the white sofa that doubled as my bed on weekends, the table in the common area reserved for the most serious of rummy players: all out of reach. Greenie had asked me to take her to New Mexico, and I'd let them plant her in the ground.

There was nowhere I could go to find her, and in my self-righteousness and my grief I'd pushed everyone else away. I'd so jealously guarded my own pain, refusing to share the burden of anyone else's sorrow, and it left me as alone as I wanted and feared.

A circular picnic table, green metal in a diamond weave, unmovable benches attached to the frame, sat in the grass beside the front entrance. Though the residents of the Happy Home were, by and large, ambulatory, I had never seen the table in use on any of my visits. I hopped onto the table, resting my feet on one of the seats. The motion-

activated lights over the entryway blinked out once I'd been settled for a few seconds. After another long minute I let out the breath I'd been holding, worried that an employee of the Happy Home would notice the light and come out to ask what I needed. I knew what I needed, and also that I could never, ever have it.

Full dark had arrived when Benji and Mother pulled into the parking lot, temporarily blinding me with their headlights. Mother opened the passenger door and rose partially from her seat, one foot on the pavement, one still in the car. "Jane?" she called.

The hand I'd raised to shield my eyes from the glare became a wave. "It's me," I confirmed. She ducked her head back into the car. In silhouette, I saw Benji throw up his hands and Mother lay a hand on his shoulder. He turned, facing forward, though I couldn't make out his features. Mother exited the car, and he immediately reserved as soon as the passenger door clicked shut.

Mother made no immediate move to join me. "You just gonna stand there all night?" I asked, proud when my voice didn't waiver or crack.

"You don't mind if I join you?" she replied. I patted the space next to me in invitation, and Mother started towards me, causing the doorway lights to blink on again. She joined me on the table, and we sat in silence. I was determined not to speak first about our fight, but when she put an arm around my waist I sagged against her side.

"Is that how you feel, really?" she finally asked. "Be honest," she continued, when I opened my mouth to answer her.

"Sometimes, yes. Sometimes I feel like I wasn't important to you. Sometimes I feel like I'm still not."

Mother studied me for a few seconds, then rested her head on my shoulder. “For a long time, for too long, I thought I had to find you a father before I could be a good mother.”

I felt my shoulders stiffen, jostling Mother’s resting temple. I nudged her with my side, knocking her head off my shoulders. “Well, you picked some real winners there, Mother,” I said. “You definitely looked better by comparison.” A fresh anger gurgled in my stomach.

“How many things are you going to yell at me about?” Mother asked, her voice angry and defeated at once. I didn’t answer, knowing if I opened my mouth I would either scream or vomit. “I’ve apologized for that, Jane,” she said. “I’ve paid for that mistake.”

“Not as much as I paid,” I bit back.

“You think I don’t remember Steven? I remember more about him than you ever will,” Mother said. When I didn’t dispute her, she continued. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for so much. I’m sorry I wasn’t around enough.”

I nodded, hoping she could see the motion, since I didn’t trust myself not to lash out again.

“I didn’t know how to be a good mother, not really, until I saw you with Greenie,” Mother continued. “She talked to you like you were a little adult, and you just lit up. It’s like you were a whole new person, and I told myself that it was enough that you had her, that she loved you so much. I behaved as though you having Greenie’s love excused me from being more of a parent to you.”

The words didn't make me angry, just tired. "That makes me feel awful," I said. "That makes me feel like your practice run, and then you got a do-over to fix all of your mistakes." I scooted away, putting a foot of space between us, and kept my eyes fixed forward. "I don't get a do-over childhood. I'll always have..." I trailed off, taking a shuddery breath, deciding how much of a fight I wanted to have and how much I was truly ready to talk about. "I'll always have all the time you weren't there and everyone you brought home before Benji. I had to watch you be there for my sisters, had to watch them grow up with a father who can barely swat a fly, let alone another human."

"Does that make you feel better, being cruel to me?"

I think my burst of laughter surprised us both. "Little bit it does, yeah." I sighed, forcing my shoulders down from where they bunched around my ears. "It makes me feel shitty and ungrateful and like the worst person in the world, but part of me is glad I can make you feel unhappy." I turned here, waiting for Mother to meet my eyes. "I have been unhappy for such a long time," I told her.

"I knew that," Mother said, finally. "I knew that you were lonely, and that you could be happier, but I told myself you were fine with your Grandma, and that we'd be a perfect family once I found the right man."

I ignored her focus on *the right man* in favor of defending Grandmother. "It wasn't awful with Grandmother," I told her. "She fed me. She didn't abuse me. She did the best she could." We leaned against each other at the same time, and gently swayed back and forth, shoulders touching, as the fireflies came out to dance around us.

"If it weren't for Greenie, I could've pretended things were fine forever," Mother said. She pulled the hem of her cardigan sleeves over her thumbs, and used the fabric to

wipe her eyes. “I was so mad at her, not because you loved her more than you loved me, but because she made me see how badly I’d let you down. Watching her with you showed me how much more you’d needed from me.”

This time she turned to me, and when I met her eyes, she sobbed out, “I’m so sorry, Jane.” I wrapped my arms around her and let her cry. “I made mistakes,” Mother said, putting her hands on my shoulders and pulling away to study my face.

“And you did things right, too,” I told her. “I made mistakes. Picking this fight in public was a mistake. Exploding was a mistake.”

“That’s the only thing you did wrong?” she asked with a laugh. “That’s all you have for me?” She tried to make it a joke, but my response hadn’t satisfied her.

Here was a chance for us to share the blame, equal partners, but I shook my head. “I’m sorry for how I spoke to you, but not for how I feel. I won’t apologize for being hurt. I’m allowed to be hurt.”

Mother let go of my shoulders and turned her body away from me, staring out into the parking lot. She sighed, distraught and, I thought, overly dramatic.

“What?” I demanded. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to forgive me,” she yelled, throwing her arms upwards.

“What if I can’t?” I asked. “I know this hurts, but I got hurt, too, and I wasn’t the adult in the room. I was five. It wasn’t my job to watch your back.”

“How many times do I have to apologize for that man?”

“Well, you know, just the once so far. You never told me you were sorry for what happened, Mother. You only ever said you were glad it was behind us.”

Mother bit her lip, the way she did when she replayed the past, and decided not to contradict me. “Then what are we supposed to do?” she asked, chin quivering anew.

“We just try not to hurt each other anymore,” I answered with a shrug. “That’s the best I can do.”

Mother laughed with disbelief. “You make it sound so easy.”

“Aren’t you tired of things being hard?” I asked.

Our truce lasted nearly 48 hours. Benji and my sisters were hiding in their respective bedrooms when we came home, and spoke tentatively the next morning, just until they realized Mother and I had reached a kind of peace and were not simply going through the motions of being a family.

“Relax, Benjamin,” Mother chided him. He looked at the mixing bowl of waffle batter in his hands. From his scowl I guessed he wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of such an elaborate breakfast if he knew his mediation services weren’t needed.

“You should still make bacon, though,” I told him. “Bacon makes everything better.”

“Use the Oprah bacon,” Mother added. Mother had mail-ordered very expensive hickory-bourbon after seeing it listed as one of Oprah’s favorite things waiting for her hair to set at the salon. A three-pack was nearly fifty dollars with shipping, but worth every penny we agreed during that first breakfast. There was only one package left, which Benji had long insisted was for Christmas or a virgin birth. He arched an eyebrow at Mother, who nodded until he sighed. Setting down the mixing bowl, he took the bacon from the freezer and set it on the counter to thaw.

“Oh, bacon, we hardly knew ye,” he said.

“Though muchly we ate ye,” I replied.

Two nights later, over dinner, Benji brought up the possibility of taking a family vacation for Thanksgiving, not just to Texas to see his brothers, but a real vacation. Somewhere with complimentary breakfast, maybe even a beach, where no one had to sleep on a fold-out sofa that smelled of dog. My sisters were delighted, shouting out possible destinations. Jenny Ann wanted to go to Disneyland, which Ruth Ellen thought

was childish. She suggested a cruise. Laura Grace, the true middle child of the family, compromised with the idea of a Disney cruise. Everyone looked to each other, waiting for the token protest of complaint. When nothing came, spontaneous applause erupted.

Though I didn't clap, I smiled.

"What about Jane?" Mother asked. "She didn't get a vote."

"What say you, Janey?" Benji said. "Disney cruise good for you?"

"Oh, I can't pick for you," I demurred. "I think you should go with majority rule."

"It's your trip, too," Ruth Ellen said. "You should be happy."

Oh no, I thought. *Oh oh no no no*. I blinked a few times, and shook my head slightly, resting my eyes on a small marking, likely crayon, on the wall behind Benji.

"Mom," I said, then paused. "Mom, Benji. Guys." Another pause. "I'm still going back to London."

"But I thought you and your mother," Benji said, gesturing between the two of us, letting his voice trail off.

"Yes, we talked, and we love each other." I took a deep breath, tried to sound as earnest as possible. "And I love all of you. I really do." Another deep breath. "I still want to go back. To London."

Mother covered the bottom half of her face with a hand, and my sisters took sudden interests in the food on their plates. "Jane," Benji began in his *laying down the law* voice. "Your life is here, in Memphis."

"No," I countered. "My family is here. My life can be anywhere I want it to be. And I want it to be in London."

“You were barely there for three weeks,” Mother said. “You don’t know that you like it. You aren’t finished with college.”

“I can finish college there,” I replied. This was a complete bluff. I had no idea if any universities in London would accept my three-fourths of a degree from the University of Memphis.

“How will you pay for that?” Mother asked, apparently having believed my bluff.

“The same way you’ll pay for vacation. The same way anyone in this family pays for anything. I’ll use Greenie’s money.” My sisters gasped, in unison. Under different circumstances, it would’ve been pretty cute.

Over the next week I walked away from several conversations, once going so far as to get in my car and drive aimlessly for half an hour, knowing the alternative was lots of yelling.

“Now I am leaving the room so I don’t yell hurtful words,” I took to saying. “I can still love you when I live in London,” I yelled from behind my locked bedroom door. “They are not mutually exclusive.”

Mother and Benji sat me down for what they considered to be a sensible, adult compromise. I would find a way to take enough hours to graduate in the spring, no mean feat considering my several changes of major and unwillingness to take the basic math and science requirements. I'd have to take eighteen hours each semester, but then I'd be a fully-fledged college graduate, and I would have their blessing to return to London. I just needed to finish college. It was the sensible thing to do.

Greenie had been shrewd with her money. She'd left my sisters and I enough money to complete college, plus a little nest egg for setting off into the world of adulthood. Mother and Benji argued I had enough to finish my education, and, if I budgeted well, enough to travel to London again. I just had to be patient and meet my obligations first. They'd even sweeten the deal with a replacement cellphone.

On the first morning of classes I stood in the snaking line for Starbucks, my backpack no heavier than it had been in London, but exponentially more burdensome. Just as I reached the counter, a group of giggling sorority pledges pulled the fire alarm, causing emergency lights to flash and a siren to wail.

"Caramel latte," I said to the cashier, raising my voice over the fire alarm.

"Sorry," he said. "We have to close when there's an alarm."

"But," I protested, gesturing to the group of freshmen already getting a talking-to from a professor. "There's not a fire."

"Sorry," he repeated, turning away from me.

"Just a black coffee," I said to his back.

"We have to evacuate," he tossed over his shoulder. "Ma'am," he added, as though that were any kind of consolation.

Turning around, I could see that everyone else was filing out of the student union, leaving me alone at the Starbucks counter. I followed the crowd outside, where campus security herded us farther away, apologizing that we had to be at least twenty feet back from the building.

Under the shade of a tree, I checked my watch and saw I was already two minutes late to my 9 o'clock biology class. I sighted the science building across the quad. It was the first day, the professor would understand if I showed up a few minutes late. Most of my classmates would be freshmen with the sense to take their science requirements in their first year, and there was no way any actual instruction would've happened by the time I got there.

I readjusted my bag on my shoulders and took two steps towards the science labs, then stopped again. Maybe if I'd gotten my coffee. Maybe if that kid hadn't called me ma'am. Maybe if the sun weren't so bright or I'd gotten enough hugs as a child or my best friend hadn't died.

I didn't make it to class that morning.

* * *

For as long as I could remember, as far back in my memory as I was able to reach, I had believed there was a *good enough*, a way of being just a little bit better, and when I managed that, everything in my life would work out just fine. If I could sit stonily enough and walk quietly enough and love my sisters enough, then I would be allowed into that ideal life I seemed to always be on the cusp of. If I were somehow a better daughter, then my mother wouldn't always be looking outside for happiness. If I were a better child Mother's boyfriends wouldn't always take off after three months. All the things that

made my childhood unhappy or tumultuous or painful were my own fault, I believed, because I just wasn't good enough.

When Greenie came, it felt like I'd finally been good enough, because she loved me and I was happy. Even as I got older, I never fully stopped believing this. Greenie was my reward, the prize I'd earned for finally being the bowl of porridge that was just right.

Then she died. I hadn't stopped being good, I was sure. I wracked my brain, but couldn't see a mistake I'd made, couldn't puzzle out what I'd done so wrong. I'd spent fifteen years on my best behavior, and the world had still punished me.

If I hadn't earned this injustice, if it wasn't my fault, then maybe I hadn't earned any of it. And there was no reason to bother being so fucking good all the time.

* * *

I walked away from my science class and into the computer commons, where I booked a flight back to London. My sisters' shares of Greenie's estate were held by Mother and Benji until they turned twenty-one. Mine sat in my bank account, an impossible collection of zeros and bone-deep loneliness, just waiting for me to do something stupid.

Friday night I called Mother from my layover at Dulles, told her where to find my car and keys, that she had two weeks to get what she wanted out of my apartment then the landlord had my permission to sell the rest.

"So," I concluded, savoring the meanness of my words like a butterscotch dissolving on my tongue. "I actually won't be at dinner tonight."

"The fuck are you thinking, Jane? That you'll just run away?" she demanded.

"Guess so," I replied, and hung up.

This time Bianca met me at the airport, holding a cartoon picture of a brain at the international arrivals gate. I'd emailed her my itinerary and asked if we could meet at the same Starbucks. She wrote back that proper friends got a proper lift.

She was delighted to see me, her face lighting up in a way I wasn't entirely accustomed to. "I'm so glad you're back," she said, pulling back from our hug. "It's been dull without you. And Mahoney is going to shit when she sees you. Thinks I learned my lesson after you did a legger. This is the best day ever."

My throat felt thick, and I didn't trust myself to speak, so I merely nodded my agreement and pulled her in for another hug. On the motorway into the city proper, I closed my eyes and drifted to sleep.

When I returned to London, Bianca filled our nights and weekends, any time she wasn't working, with activities. We attended wine tastings and book readings and tours of historical homes, to keep me from dwelling. We finally went on the Jack the Ripper walking tour, on a dizzily night with a group of Australians. The terror that coursed through me when a man in period garb lunged at the last stop was followed by a wave of relief. I could still feel things that weren't rage.

On Saturdays a group of about thirty runners met at 8am in the park two bus stops away. We waited three weeks to join, until the time trials, where new and returning runners were sorted by pace and ability.

I had never run more than a block, and then only twice: one to catch a bus, once away from a brawl forming on the sidewalk outside a bar. Every step that first morning was torture. My muscles pulled, my lungs felt like crumpled balls of paper set aflame, and, at one point, I had to stop and puke. Every step felt like punishment, and I loved it. For the first time since Greenie died, I felt alive.

Bianca ran faster than me that morning, timing into the eleven-minute mile group. I was generously offered a spot in the fifteen-minute mile group, as I would've been the youngest member of the beginner group by a good thirty years. I didn't want to run alone, and insisted on running with Bianca's group. Bianca, after all, had only suggested running as means of getting me out from under the covers and into clothes before 1 pm on the weekends.

I wept and vomited and gritted my teeth the next Saturday, until I could swear I heard my knees screeching in protest. I kept gritting my teeth for a month, and suddenly I could run three miles in thirty-four minutes. Bianca only ran on Saturdays, but I began

getting up in the morning, when she rose to shower, to run through the streets of Muswell Hill. With each footfall I imagined my anger and sorrow driven into the pavement. “Find a mantra,” Charlotte, the de facto leader of our group, told us one Saturday, effortlessly jogging backwards to shout her encouragement. She favored the word *steady* for the flat bits, *dig* for cresting a difficult hill. I liked *fuck*, no matter the situation. I muttered the word under my breath, in time with my steps, for the duration of every run.

Bianca soon realized I would keep running without her, appearing at the park as our runs wound down to bring me a clean shirt and take me to lunch. She promised me a week’s worth of brunches if I worked up the nerve to say hello to Running Man, who, according to Bianca, was besotted with me.

“Can’t take his eyes off you,” she assured me, as I gulped from the bottle of water she’d brought me. About half the water was running out either side of my mouth, joining the sweat drenching my black shirt.

“He’s pissed because I ran faster than him two weeks in a row,” I said on a gasped exhale once I’d emptied the bottle. Last week felt like a fluke, but this week I’d finished a full thirty-two seconds ahead of him.

“Pissed means drunk, Brain.”

“He’s drunk with anger,” I replied. In my best British accent I added, “*I am inebriated with rage that this slovenly human who resembles whichever animal my country reviles most can outrun me.*”

Bianca threw her head back in laughter. “Your British accent is atrocious. You sound like a Norwegian from Brooklyn.” She rummaged in her tote, pulling out a clean black shirt. I had two identical shirts, which rotated through run-wear and brunch-wear.

Bianca set her bag down and shook the shirt out as I grabbed the hem of my shirt. By this point we had the shirt exchange down to an art, with only a bare minimum of exposed sports bra.

“Guess who was watching the whole time?” Bianca asked as the shirt came down over my head.

“*Why must this flabby, pale walrus vex me with its presence, week after week?*”

Bianca appeared not to hear me, all her attention focused on Running Man. She stroked her chin like an evil mastermind with a pointy goatee. She squinted one eye and made a guttural sound of appraisal. Embarrassed, I turned entirely away from the group of stretching runners, eying the sidewalk out of the park with open longing.

“Stop with the super villain routine,” I implored her. “I’m hungry.”

“He’s a ginger, but he’s *fit*.” Though an understatement, *fit* was the highest praise I’d heard Bianca offer about anyone in the time I’d known her. Running Man had a face made entirely made of right angles: jaw, cheekbones, sharp brow. I didn’t think his hair was red enough to earn Bianca’s anti-ginger scorn, but his eyes were almost auburn, just shy of Greenie’s red velvet batter.

“Do I get breakfast or not?” I groused. “I tolerate your cruelty because you feed me, but if you keep shooting eye daggers we’re gonna have to rumble.”

Bianca laughed and turned so we were both facing the same direction. She linked her arm through mine and steered me out of the park. “I think being in a rumble might be quite fun,” she said.

“Until someone shivs you,” I said. “Your disregard for your own safety is alarming.”

The next week I beat Running Man again, only by 27 seconds, but it buoyed my confidence. He was standing about four feet away from me, stretching his hamstring mostly in my direction. *There's nothing better than a man who doesn't look top-heavy in shorts*, a little voice in my head cried in delight. I took a calming breath and turned towards him.

“Good run,” I said.

“Beg pardon?” he replied.

“Good run,” I repeated, enunciating just a little bit more, gesturing behind me to the path we had run.

“You're a yank, then,” he said. One of his eyebrows twitched, and he turned away.

* * *

“That's not what he said,” Bianca insisted, for the third time since we'd taken our seats at a table on the second floor of the pub.

“Four words. You're. A. Yank. Then,” I replied, counting the words off on my fingers as I said them. Gesturing at our table, I added, “I've now had more alcohols than he said words to me.” I hiccupped once, then twice more in quick succession, tasting bile. I stood up without speaking, rapping my knuckles on the table in front of Bianca before walking purposefully to the bathroom.

I've always hated vomiting, but especially in bar bathrooms. Vomiting in a bar bathroom was something tawdry and low-class, something that could have been avoided with just a little more self-control. This afternoon I especially felt the shame vomiting in

the bathroom of the Wolfhound, where my accent was never mocked and my attempts at darts were always praised.

It was also too early in the day to be violently ill. One in the afternoon was early enough to start drinking on a Saturday at the local, but too early to be sick already. We'd come here straight from the park, just before eleven, and I'd finished my first pint before the chips arrived. Nausea kept me from eating before my runs, so even after the food arrived I was never going to get enough in my stomach to counteract all the alcohol.

Bianca and I were the lone patrons on the second floor, with Jordie behind the bar. The upstairs didn't open until three, but Jordie let us sit in the corner while he readied the space for the afternoon rush. We only paid for every other drink, because of his crush on Bianca, and today he'd made us SoCo Lime shots on the house. "Never heard of them," he told us, "but I hear they're popular in your part of the world, Jane."

"My favorite," I replied with a grimace as the bourbon scalded its way down my throat. I now tasted the bite of lime as the alcohol and hastily chewed chips came back up. Even if Jordie couldn't hear me, and I was sure he could, cleaning these bathrooms before the floor opened was his job. He'd have to come in after me and make sure everything was sorted. As neat as I tried to be with my vomiting, he's still have to mop up after me.

I knelt in front of the toilet for a few extra seconds, head turned away from the frothy evidence of my poor choices to be sure nothing else was coming up. Satisfied, I braced my hands on the opposite sides of the stall and stood, wincing as my knees creaked. After flushing and washing my hands, I leaned over the sink and stared at myself in the mirror. My cheeks were flushed and my eyes watered, but I didn't, to my

mind, look like a vomitous drunk. I splashed water on my face and rinsed my mouth out, then neatened my ponytail. I was still tipsy, and suddenly ravenous. Understandable, since I'd just thrown up the first food I'd had since 8 last night.

Walking back to Bianca, I mouthed the word *Sorry* to Jordie. He winked and smiled. "No worries, love."

I sat back down across from Bianca, who scrunched the top half of her face in a show of worry. In return, I thinned my lips and smiled. According to Bianca, my over-large eyes, when coupled with this lipless grin, made me look like a smiley face sticker. It always prompted laughter.

"Wow, you have classy friends," I said when her giggles ended.

"Who amongst us has not thrown up in a bar?" she replied. "I myself have heaved up many Fosters shandy into the local jacks."

"Trashy Shakespearean Bar Chav is my favorite dinner friend," I said, angling my head and batting my eyelashes.

"What'll you do next week? Are you going to talk to him again?" Bianca asked.

"Oh, no," I said, shaking my head with complete solemnity. "I am never going back there."

"You can't just quit running," she admonished. "You love running."

Bianca was right, of course. Running never got any easier, but it made me feel accomplished. It was a place for all my feelings to go, my anger and sadness driven into the path with each footfall. Still, I frowned and shook my head. "I'll figure something out, but I'm done with Running Man."

“Tell me something terrible about Elka,” Bianca said. When I didn’t immediately respond, she prodded. “Come on, you know it’ll make you feel better.”

Another of the distractions Bianca had found for me was a group of aspiring writers that met every Saturday afternoon in an uncomfortable café whose all-white interior reminded me of the galley in *Alien*. Elka led our little workshop.

I initially balked at the writers’ group, but I allowed Bianca to flatter me into attending. “You’re the funniest. You tell the best stories,” she said, and my arm was twisted.

Elka was from a small village near the Lake District, but had spent her university years traveling between South Africa and Portugal. She peppered her conversation with references to these travels in an accent I found to be wholly preposterous and completely fabricated. Lithe and blonde, she was the platonic ideal that all the Kellies in my ballet class had unknowingly striven to emulate. She had an MFA from City College. Though only a bit of internet research revealed CC to be far from the most exclusive program in London, Elka was still the only one of us with an advanced degree. She also taught composition at a private girls’ school, and the other members of the group deferred to her expertise on all matters.

“*Eelk-ha*,” I said to Bianca, exaggerating only slightly her own pronunciation, “has decided that I do not write stories.”

“No,” Bianca said with shock, going so far and to press a hand to her chest. “What is it that you write, then? Recipes?”

“*Anecdotes*,” I informed her, stuffing the word with condemnation. “There is no arc. It’s just *things happening*.” In truth, Elka had a point. She wasn’t wrong about my

writing, but much like running had become the receptacle for all my feelings, Elka had become the place I put all of my unkind dismissiveness, so it didn't bleed out into the rest of my life.

The first week I was back in London, Bianca asked if I wanted Indian takeaway for dinner. In that moment I had never heard a stupider suggestion than chana masala or disliked a person more than I disliked Bianca. "No, I fucking don't want fucking Indian food," I barked, stomping away from Bianca and slamming myself behind the first door I found as loudly as I could.

It was the loo. In my fit of pique I had stormed into a thankfully unoccupied bathroom. A couple of minutes later, Bianca knocked on the door. "Brain, can you come out here please?" I opened the door to see Bianca standing with her laptop tucked in the bend of her elbow.

She pointed a finger at the screen and began to read. "The five stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I'm going to assuming you did all your denial in America, since I haven't seen any of it." She closed the laptop and stared at me until I met her eyes. "After anger comes bargaining. You don't get to stay in anger forever."

"What comes after bargaining?" I asked.

"Depression."

I threw my hands up and shouted. "But I already fucking feel that."

"Actually, that still feels very angry to me," Bianca replied. "You can't be mean to every new person you meet forever," she said, kindly. "All these people who you

interact with everyday, they don't understand. They think you're just *like this* all the time."

"What if I am?" I asked. "What if I am like this all the time? What if this is who I am now?"

There was a coffee shop at the end of our block, but I was walking half a mile out of my way every day, to a place where I hadn't smashed the sugar canister on the ground when my latte was hazelnut instead of vanilla.

"It's not who you are," Bee insisted. "But you're going to have to try harder."

"I'll make you a deal," I said. "A *bargain*, as it were." Bianca made a beckoning motion with her free hand. "I will try as hard as I can to behave with kindness. I will only be mean to people who are mean first." When she didn't immediately agree, I added, "I acknowledge that forgetting my drink order is not deliberate meanness."

Bianca smiled and nodded. "If you fail to live up to your end of the bargain, I reserve the right to pinch you."

"Ouch," I said, stepping backwards away from her. I had seen Bianca's pinches inflicted only once, a stranger standing deliberately too close on the tube, but the result was a deep, bruised half-moon, followed by a pained yelp from her too-close-standing victim.

Running gave me too much to just give it up; Bianca was right about that. So the next weekend I did what any rational, mature, emotionally intelligent person would do: I got up half an hour early and walked up to the group of runners training for the London Marathon. “Hey, guys,” I said. “Can I join you?”

Terrifyingly aerodynamic and impressively spandexed, the marathoners nonetheless welcomed me with open arms. That first morning I ran eleven miles, four more miles than I’d ever run in one go before. I only threw up once, which felt like a real achievement. Though I finished a full fifteen minutes behind the next-slowest finisher, a sixty-two-year old retiree named Magda who was making short work of her bucket list, the rest of the runners feted me liked I’d just secured a world record. And none of them called me a Yank. After stretching, Finn, the de facto leader of the small group by virtue of his having run the marathon three times, took down my email and promised to send me a training schedule.

The next morning, when my calf muscles tried to pull away from my bones like errant icebergs, while I was walking on my tiptoes, and the thought of the stairs brought tears to my eyes, I still felt satisfied at the elegance of my solution. I never had to see

Running Man again, *and* I had learned that I could run eleven entire miles if I really pushed myself.

As much personal satisfaction as I took from running, I never truly learned to love it the way the rest of the marathoners seemed to. It never brought me inner peace or soothed my worries or quieted my mind. When I ran I allowed myself to be as angry and self-pitying and cruel as I wanted. I never spared a kind thought for anyone I saw as I threaded my way through the sidewalk, and nothing made me feel better than overtaking someone else on a run.

“I never want to run,” I said one Saturday, as we stretched. “I leave the house, and I feel it in my jaw, like a screwdriver pulling my joints apart. I’m not kidding,” I added as Magda chuckled.

“You gotta break through that wall every time,” Finn said. We were sitting on the grass, legs outstretched, the bottoms of our feet touching. I held Finn’s hands and leaned backwards, pulling his upper body over his knees until he barked *uncle*. “You ever go out feeling great,” he said, “that’s gonna be a shit run. That’s you stopping half a mile in, popping into Tesco, and eating butter off the shelf.”

He straightened, pulling my arms until my nose touched my knees. “Why doesn’t the wall go away?” I gritted out, certain I could feel the individual strands of my calves popping.

“Just don’t,” he said, more easily now that he was out of the stretch.

“Then maybe we should stop,” I said, letting go on the last word to get myself out of my misery.

Finn toppled backwards slightly without my support, but caught himself easily enough. “Yeah, and you’re free to go,” he said, gesturing towards the footpath out of the park. His face was kind, though. He smiled to show it was a joke.

“Shouldn’t this be getting easier?” I asked the next week.

“It’s not meant to get easier,” Magda said, taking hold of my arm to pull me off the bench where I’d collapsed. “You’re just meant to get better. Hamstrings,” she added, with a point at my legs.

“These bullshit life lessons are almost as annoying as all the exercise,” I said, crossing my left leg over my right and folding over at the waist to plant my palms flat on the ground. I was immediately rewarded with a burning tear up the back of my thigh, so strong it felt like nausea. A few chuckles met my declaration, but only a few. I made yet another mental note to keep more of my cantankery inside. Switching after a mental thirty-count, so my right leg crossed over my right, I decided to keep any more grumbling to myself.

“Running,” Finn pronounced, hands on his hips, arching backwards until his joints released a series of small *pops*, “always sucks.”

“You should make shirts,” said Charlotte, a forty-something banker who consistently posted the best times.

“I will,” Finn replied, pointing at her in approval. “I will have shirts printed up for us to wear.”

Bianca didn’t meet me on the Saturdays when the writers’ group met; there wasn’t time for us to grab food between running and writing, now that I was running nearly two hours every Saturday. On Saturdays when I was free, Bianca arrived at the

park half an hour before I was set to finish running, sat herself on a park bench, a book open but unread in her hands, and glared with flared nostrils at Running Man. It took me a couple of weeks to realize she was doing this, and I was immediately aghast.

“Jesus, Bee, stop it,” I instructed, facing away from the direction I knew Running Man to be.

“I’m scorning him for breaking your heart,” she said, teeth bared.

“One, he did not break my heart. Two, it actually looks like you’re trying to eye-fuck him into submission. Establish dominance and psychically remove his pants all in one go.”

“It’s pure hatred, Brain, straight from my eyeballs to his heart.”

I looked around the parts of the park I could see without having to acknowledge Running Man. “I think the natives are beginning to suspect something. Could you please stop?” When she continued to glower, I grabbed Bee’s arm. “Hey, look at me. I appreciate you standing up for my honor, but please stop.”

“Spoilsport,” Bianca announced. “Oh, wait!”

“What now?”

“He’s looking at us. He’s walking over.”

“Oh my god, because we look like a murder cabal. He probably thinks we cut the break lines in his car. We’re leaving right now.” I cast my eyes on the ground, making sure I wouldn’t leave anything important behind when we made our very hasty escape.

“Well, we have to walk past him to get out the park. That way’s the exit.”

“Not today, friend,” I said, as I began walking in the opposite direction as quickly as I could. Most likely there would be another exit out of the park this way, with a bus

stop or a corner café. Worst-case scenario, we'd have to scale a fence or wade through a ditch.

“Well, there's a reason people go up the stairs two at a time, but down one at a time.” I trotted this answer out any time someone asked me how I'd come to skin my knees and scrap my cheek. There was a soccer pitch at one end of the park where we ran, and the marathoners closed their workouts with several dozen trips up, across, and down the bleachers set up for spectators, because running fourteen miles in one go wasn't enough of our abiding masochism. I was trying to cheat my way out of doing the whole workout, I told people. Trying to shave a few seconds off my time and it backfired.

I had not been taking the step down two at a time, though. I had mentally revising my grocery list, wondering if there was enough paracetamol in my bag for the way my joints were bound to ache after I stretched out, and then suddenly my head became too heavy and I lost all sensation below my knees. I pitched over, a Jenga tower toppling, and my vision narrowed to black.

When I fell I was only three steps from the bottom, luckily. I took most of the impact on my knees, though my left cheek hit a small rocky patch, just enough to draw blood. I came to on my back, a sharp, burning smell causing me to cough and sputter. A hand slid under my back, between my shoulder blades, pushing me upwards slightly.

“Don’t choke, now,” someone instructed. I my eyes squeezed shut against the bleachy prickle.

From a few feet away I heard Graham’s voice. “Jane, you alright?”

“Ah,” said the voice beside me. “That would make you Jane.”

I opened my eyes to Running Man smiling at me with the kind of condescending tilt of the head that would look like concern from behind. About five feet back stood a group of gawkers: Graham, several other joggers, Ravi who manned the snack kiosk, and several mums with strollers. My eyes dropped down to the grass. There was an ancient first aid kit open on the ground beside him, tiny white packages with fine black print discarded on the ground. Smelling salts.

“Jane,” I said. “That’s me.”

“Plain Jane,” he said with a chuckle.

“Yes, thank you so much, I must be going,” I bit back. I tried to push myself off the ground, but immediately collapsed back from the combined dizziness and sharp pull in my knees.

“You’re quite lucky I had this in my car,” he told me. “You’re quite lucky I was passing by to watch your tumble.”

I put a hand over my eyes. “Super,” I told him. I tried to pull my knees in for leverage and groaned in pain. Both knees were bleeding, the left worse than the right.

“Oww,” I moaned, feeling myself dangerously on the edge of a meltdown.

Running Man chuckled. I glared at him, and he quirked the side of his mouth, not even contrite. “I can clean these here, but I suspect you’re going to need stitches on your left.”

“That, of course, being your expert medical opinion,” I muttered, trying to figure out how to stand up with stumbling or starting to cry.

“Yes,” he replied, putting a hand on my shoulder and pressing down just enough that I couldn’t easily stand. “Because I am a doctor.”

“Bullshit,” I said.

He sighed, shaking his head sadly. “Ravi,” he called over his shoulder, a prompt.

“No, Jane,” Ravi replied. “He’s a proper doc. Alex got me sorted when I got the pink eye and almost lost me vendor’s license.”

“That’s, uh, that’s gross, Rav. That’s, just, keep those cards a little bit closer to your chest there.” I said to Ravi. “People buy ice cream from you.”

“Solid advice,” Ravi replied with a nod.

I turned back to Running Man. “You’re Alex.”

“I am Alex, I am a licensed physician, and we’re going to emergency.” He stood, and extended a hand for me to take.

“I don’t,” I began, then shook my head, clearing out the fuzz of the pain. “I don’t have time for that. I have somewhere to be at one-thirty.” I looked down into the first aid kit. There were alcohol wipes and several sizes of bandages. I saw medical tape and a tube of super glue.

* * *

After gluing my knee closed, Running Man – *Alex* – had insisted on driving me to the café for writer’s group. “Don’t get that wet,” he told me, taking a hand off the

steering wheel to gesture at the more-wounded of my knees. I didn't recognize the logo on the hood of his gleaming, black car, but I knew it was too expensive a car for me to feel comfortable riding in. The seats were leather, and the car made almost no sound as we sped through the streets. The voice of his GPS was polite but emotionally distant.

"That's for real stitches, not super glue," I told him. I held up my phone, angled towards him, so he could see it from the corner of his eye. "I googled it," I said, wanting him to know how proactive I was being about caring for myself.

"I, the actual doctor who dressed your wounds, would request that you avoid getting your knee wet for at least a day." He reached past me, keeping his eyes on the road, and opened the glove compartment. We hit a pothole, and the hinged door bounced out of his hand and landed squarely on my knee.

"Son of a whore," I bellowed.

"Leave my mother out of this," he instructed, decelerating at a stoplight, which was *not* an apology. He pulled a silver card case from the glove compartment, which he passed to me as the light changed. "Take one," he said.

Inside were business cards, just the sort of business cards the man who drove this car would have. *Alexander L Evans, MD GP* they read, followed by an address and a series of phone numbers. "Tomorrow, nine-thirty," he said.

"Tomorrow is Sunday," I said.

"Indeed it is," he agreed. "You will come to my office tomorrow at nine-thirty and we'll tend to that properly."

"You don't have to do that," I said. "This is fine."

We idled about a block down from the café's awning. Alex turned to face me. He had the intense focus of a career politician, and the space between my shoulders itched at being watched so closely. "You've got a GP of your own then?" he asked. I shook my head, mostly as a reason to move my eyes to a spot just over his shoulder. "Not very smart of you. Your knee is being held together by superglue, and I suspect you've given yourself a concussion. Since you are too obstinate to receive proper treatment today, you will come by my office tomorrow. Understood?"

I nodded, still looking at his ear and the side of his stupidly square jaw.

"Jane," he prompted, and I met his eyes again. "Do you understand?"

"I'll come by your office tomorrow," I parroted, reaching for the handle.

"Unless," he said, stopping me with a hand on my shoulder. "Unless you get dizzy, feel faint, or become nauseated. Then you will go to emergency and have the attending call my mobile."

"Yes, alright," I said. "What's the nearest tube stop? To your office?"

He sighed. "Can you not take a taxi?"

I chortled a hearty, fake laugh. "Rich people are *hilarious*," I told him.

"Picadilly," he answered, grudgingly. "Please take the lift, not the stairs."

"Yessir," I said with a mock salute.

"Only paracetamol for the swelling. No sleeping pills, no alcohol."

I gestured to the clock on the dash. "I'm already late." When he said nothing else, I carefully maneuvered myself out of the car, twisting so both my legs were on the curb, and pushing myself off from the seat. It hurt a great deal more than I wanted Alex to know.

Elka was unmoved by my plight, but the other four members of the group made up for it. Rita procured an ice pack for me. The coffee shop didn't have plastic baggies, but the woman behind the counter had wrapped two scoops of crushed ice in cling film, then wrapped that in a towel. Lee pulled over a chair from another table for me to prop my left leg on. The minimalist café décor extended to the chairs, which were just metal frames shaped like a lower-case h. The chair kept my back at a sharp right angle, which provided a distraction from the dull ache in my head and the occasional flares of pain from my knee.

“Do you need to see a doctor?” Lee asked.

“Actually, there was a doctor at the park,” I announced, relishing the telling of my mishap. “He glued my knee together.”

“Might we get on with things?” Elka sighed, and we settled in to listen to her eviscerate my latest attempt at storytelling.

Elka's chief complaint with my writing was the lack of an arc, and today was no different. “This is just a funny thing that happened,” she said, gesturing at the papers on the table. “No one is changed. There is no evolution or emotional core.”

“Do you think,” I began, “that we might, given the circumstances,” and here I spread my hands above my elevated knee as though I were displaying the prize on a game show, “try to be just a little bit nicer to Jane today?”

“You weren't injured when you wrote this,” Elka snapped. “Though that would be a handy excuse for the more derivative turns of phrase.”

“Goodness,” Rita whispered.

“Look,” I began, pinching the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger, before becoming aware that someone was hovering just behind me.

“And you’ve already gotten your knee wet,” Alex said. As he spoke a trickle of ice water rolled down from the compress to pool in the crook of my ankle.

“Jesus! Why are you here?” I demanded, turning my head so quickly my neck twinged. Alex raised his right hand to show me my phone. Even though I could plainly see it was my phone, I immediately began rooting through my bag. I dropped it when the glove compartment hit my knee, I remembered. I hadn’t noticed at the time, but I could visualize it clearly now.

“You left your phone behind,” he explained. He set the table on the phone in front of me, but he wasn’t looking at me any longer. He and Elka had locked eyes, their faces breaking into clever smiles at the same instant. She laughed and ducked her head, blushing. The corners of his eyes crinkled in delight.

I had an immediate and disorienting realization: they were meeting cute. This story would be told at their wedding. I brought them together, I was the clumsy, awkward mutual acquaintance they both tolerated.

I regretted, so deeply, not getting more blood on the upholstery in his car.

Turning his attention from Elka, Alex lifted the now-soggy towel from my knee. He sucked his teeth in disappointment, his whole face a wince. “Pack your things, we’re going to clinic now.”

I folded my arms over my chest, knowing full well I looked like a spoiled child pitching a fit. “It cannot possibly be life-threatening.”

“Your knee is going to infect. You need proper stitches. And antibiotics.” When I made no move to rise or gather my things, he exhaled loudly. “Up. Now. Say good-bye to your friends.”

I still didn’t stand, but Elka did, which she hadn’t when I’d arrived injured. She pressed a hand to her gently trembling chest in concern. “Is Jane going to be alright? Does someone need to go with her?”

Alex began to nod, his eyebrows wide with gratitude for Elka’s generous heart. When he opened his mouth, I cut him off. “If I need help, I can call Bianca.” To Alex, I clarified, “You know her. From the park. With the hair.” Here I raised my hands to my temples and wiggled my fingers in a rough approximation of Bee’s wild curls. I turned back to Elka, “I would hate for you to give up your Saturday. I know how much this group means to you.”

Elka grimaced, her lips puckering in an unflattering way, and I decided today wasn’t an entire wash. While I had been speaking, Alex had taken my tote bag from the floor. His other hand took hold of my elbow. “This is all of yours, yes? Not leaving anything behind this time?”

Once upright, I wiggled out of his grasp and held up my phone to demonstrate I had everything I needed. My knee had become less flexible in the hour or so since I’d gotten out of Alex’s car, and getting back in brought tears to my eyes. I could feel the skin around the wound pulling.

Located on the twelfth floor of an impressively glass-fronted building, Alex’s medical office reminded me of my stolen glimpses into the first class lounge on my first trip to London. He walked and I hobbled past a long desk of dark wood and a waiting

area with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the busy streets below. The offices took up the whole floor, though the etched glass entrance told me five other doctors shared this space. Alex had punched a series of numbers into a keypad to open the front door, though his office had a regular lock and key. A slate plaque on the door spelled out A. L. EVANS 1204 in heavy lettering. We were the only people in the office, the only light coming from the wide windows, the only sound our footsteps. It all gave me the unsettled feeling of being a survivor of some kind of global catastrophe.

Alex flipped the lights in his office. Against one wall was an examination table. Storage cabinets and a built-in desk occupied the other wall, a rolling stool in the middle of the floor. Alex gestured to the exam table, raising an eyebrow and saying, “Up.” It was comforting that, no matter how posh this office seemed, even the most upscale of doctors had the same crinkly, uncomfortable wax paper. He sat on the stool, pushing himself over to the cabinets, which he opened to reveal several shelves of boxed medical supplies. “Are you allergic to anything?” he asked, his head turned slightly over his shoulder. “Medicines,” he clarified. “I don’t need to know about pet dander.”

“No medicines or animals, to the best of my knowledge,” I answered.

“Up to dates on your vaccines? Tetus?”

“As of eight months ago,” and I bit my lip remembering Greenie and I in a nearly identical medical office. She held my hand as the doctor repeatedly jabbed me in the arm. Greenie insisted I get vaccinated against everything, including Japanese Encephalitis, before my trip. I’d gotten six shots in each arm, and the nurse had labeled each quarter-sized bandage with a sharpie – Hep A, Hep B, Tet, MMR. If I had a bad reaction,

hopefully the culprit would be easy to identify. These random jabs of grief came less frequently now, but more intensely when they did arrive. I was so tired of being sad.

Alex was turned three-quarters towards me, and I realized he must have asked me something while I was lost in thought. I *hmmmed* at him, an apology and request for clarification.

“No booster, then?”

“No,” I confirmed. Just as he turned back I blurted, “I hate needles.”

His shoulders rose and fell, and he turned to face me fully, hands planted on his knees. “Of course you do. Are you going to faint?” Before I could answer, he raised a hand to point at me. “Don’t lie.”

“There’s a chance,” I conceded.

“Stupendous,” he said, swinging back around to the shelves. He took a rectangular packet off a higher shelf, the reach causing his shirt to ruck up and reveal a freckled stretch of back. He held the packet aloft tucked between his first and second fingers, waving slightly to make sure I saw. “Hands,” he announced, just as he flung the packet backwards in my direction without bothering to look where it was going.

The package bounced off my chin, before I snagged it in a hand. “Ow, asshole! *Catch*. You say catch, or think fast, or incoming. The fuck does *hands* even mean,” I demanded.

He continued speaking to the shelves. “Those are smelling salts. Please consider not fainting.”

“Why not? Why can’t I just faint while you deal with, you know, all this? And then you won’t have to listen to me whine.”

Alex sighed deeply, clearly meant to telegraph that I was ridiculous. He turned before answering. “You faint because the blood rushes from your head. There’s no blood flow to your brain, which is very bad. It’s not like taking a nap.”

“Fine,” I said, chastised. When he turned back to the shelf I asked, “Are you going to stitch over the super glue?”

“No, we will first be removing the glue and re-cleaning your wound. Then I’ll stitch it properly.”

“Remove it with what?” I demanded. Though the edges of my wound had reddened and felt tight, the glue was holding fast. I couldn’t imagine a means of removing it that would qualify as *gentle*.

“I have remover. Yes, it will sting.” Alex swiveled back around, each hand holding a terrifying amount of supplies. He pushed off slightly, coasting over to the exam table, then setting the supplies on either side of me. One of the many packages contained a set of rubber gloves. He blew into each glove, then shook them out, before pulling them on.

“Why do you have super glue remover lying around?” I nurtured the faint hope that if I kept him talking, he might somehow forget about my knee and just let me leave. I’d have to get him off the topic of my injury first, but I had faith in my powers of misdirection.

“Laying, and a surprising number of people glue themselves together on the DIY. The office buys it in bulk.”

“Can’t these people just unglue themselves at home?”

“For some unfathomable reason, they trust the guidance and judgment of a trained medical professional.” I opened my mouth to ask another question, and he tapped the skin to right of my torn knee, just hard enough for it to smart. “Stop distracting me. This has to get done.”

“Will it hurt?” The question came out much sadder than I intended.

“Which part?” He countered, after a sharp exhale of impatience.

“Any part.”

“Yes, that part will hurt. The un-gluing and the disinfecting and the stitches will all hurt. All of these parts would’ve hurt considerably less if you’d come with me straight away, instead of insisting on Normandy Beach-caliber triage.”

“Well, at least you’ll get to see me cry.” I told him.

Alex threw his hands up at the same time he pushed back from the exam table. “Christ, Jane. I am not glad to be causing you pain. I am sorry if that is the impression I have given you. If I sound angry, I am angry at myself, that I was unable to talk yourself out of potentially causing greater injury.” His gloved hand dropped to his sides, and he stared at me for a long moment before turning his head to the side and releasing a disappointed sigh.

Feebly, I said, “I was trying to make a joke.”

“That’s not an apology,” he countered without turning back to me.

My anger rushed back. “Well, neither is *Leave my mother out of this*,” I retorted, parroting his words from the car.

His jaw twitched, twice. From laughter, I realized. As the first chuckle escaped, he swung back to face me. It was impossible to not return his smile, and we both began to

laugh. Soon I had my index fingers pressed beneath my eyes, to catch the tears before they could fall. Still seated, Alex raised his feet until he was on tiptoe, and leveraged his body weight until he was directly in front of me. He leaned in close. “Jane,” he whispered, and I leaned down to be able to hear him clearly. “I am very sorry, both that I bumped your knee in the car, and that I didn’t not immediately apologize.” There were fan-like crinkles at the corners of his eyes, the kind that only come from smiling too much. He spread his hands before me, both as an offering of his sincerity and to indicate it was my turn.

“I’m sorry I ignored your medical advice and then implied you’re a patient-harming sadist. Which, when I say it aloud, sounds fucking awful.”

“Apology accepted, Jane.” He was so handsome when he smiled, really smiled, that for a second I found myself irrationally angry at him.

“Me, too. I’m sorry, too,” I amended, to match his level of formality.

“Would you like a Valium before we start?” he asked.

“What, really?” I replied.

“No, not really. I still think you have a concussion.”

“Okay, but that was mean. You have to see how mean that was.”

Alex’s only response was to laugh, then rest a hand just above the bend of my knee. He pressed down, angled his body so his knee trapped my ankle against the side of the exam table. He expected me to kick him, I realized. Ice sparked beneath my skin, moving from my crown to my toes, in anticipation of how badly this might hurt.

* * *

Lots. It hurt lots.

After I managed to not faint, and Alex had shone a penlight into my pupils more times than felt strictly necessary, I was allowed one extra-strength painkiller, with the caveat that Bianca come pick me up and I didn't attempt to use public transportation. My limbs already felt delightfully disconnected from the rest of my body, and I belatedly remembered how little I'd eaten. I supported myself in the doorway of the small pharmacy, while Alex counted out fifteen days' worth of antibiotics into an unlabeled orange prescription bottle.

"You are to take all of these," Alex instructed me over his shoulder. "Eat yogurt for breakfast if they start to upset your stomach." He pronounced it *yaw-gurt*.

"I really need that many pills?"

His hands stilled and he raised an eyebrow at me. "You might have missed it, what with all the shrieking you were doing, but there was a pebble in your knee."

The pebble was in my wallet now, in the zippered pocket with all of my loose change. Tiny and grey, it was barely the size of a grain of rice.

"That's not my fault, incidentally," he continued. "That's entirely your fault, for refusing proper medical care the first time around."

I considered picking up the thread of the disagreement, but tentacles of painkiller winding through my body had taken all the fight out of me. "Thank you," I said. "Thank you for doing this."

He frowned, firmly took hold of my shoulder. "Of course, Jane." Though I said nothing, he nodded as though he were agreeing with me. "Go call the lift. I can find my

way in the dark after I lock up.” Once I was in the lobby by the elevators, the office shuttered into darkness. I didn’t press the call button until Alex emerged to lock the outer doors.

“Can I drop you somewhere?” he asked.

“No, Bianca. I’ll call her.” I waved off his offer with a hand that felt too heavy.

“If you’re sure,” he said, turning it into a question.

“This is not your Saturday,” I told him, gesturing first to the now-locked office and then my own injured leg. “You’ve done enough.”

The elevator dinged behind us. I pressed the button for the lobby and he hit G3, where his car was parked. We rode in silence until the sixth floor. “Don’t get the stitches wet,” he said, facing his reflection in the gleaming metal doors. “They’ll dissolve in six or seven days. No running for a week. Ten days. No running for ten days.” He looked over to see if I was listening. I nodded my agreement. “Same rules for dizziness: go to emergency, the attending calls me.” The elevator doors opened on the lobby.

“Yes,” I nodded. “Of course.” After a pause, I held my hand out to him. “Thank you.”

He had a good handshake, capable and kind. “You’re very welcome, Jane.”

The door chimed in warning, but I held it ajar with my hip. “Elka. Phillips. She’s at the café every Saturday. If you’d like to see her again.” I smiled, then turned away as quickly as the fog in my head would allow. I was at the building door when I heard the whoosh of the elevator closing, and I released a breath I hadn’t been aware of holding.

Despite my promise, I hadn’t intended to call Bianca. After sitting down in the closest Starbucks to eat a bagel and call up the tube map on my phone, I realized I truly

wasn't in any condition to hop on a bus. The words on my phone screen kept blurring, and, after levering my arms to hoist myself out of the chair, I immediately collapsed again.

Be there in fifteen Bianca texted, once she deciphered the gibberish of my drug-thumbs.

Gon pass out, u havta com in I typed, and it took me four tries to get it that legible.

God ur useless she replied, but I wouldn't see it until I woke from my nap several hours later. I only dimly remembered the journey from Starbucks armchair to Bianca's car to my bed.

"So he likes you," Bianca said, propped up against my headboard, while my own head lolled gently side to side against my pillow, barely under my control. I had just finished recounting the tale of my injury and subsequent bouts of medical attention. Bianca rolled my knee pebble between her fingers, a smile on her face. "I told you he likes you."

"I believe, to him, I am now even more annoying than ever."

"He swooped in to rescue you," Bianca protested. "He's your knight in shining armor."

"He's my annoyed doctor in track pants," I replied. "And also simply the means by which he met Elka. I am now their clumsy, bloodied matchmaker."

Bianca settled herself so we shared a pillow, facing each other. "She's the worst. How could anyone prefer her to you?"

"Well, she didn't bleed on his upholstery."

Bianca opened her mouth to continue her diatribe, and my stomach growled. “How are you always hungry, Brain?” she asked, and I was glad of the distraction.

“Indian?”

“Thai?”

“Only because you’re recuperating.” Bianca rolled away from me, onto the floor with a dramatic *Ooof* that made me giggle, in search of the takeaway menus tucked in the kitchen drawer. I closed my eyes, and drowsed until the smell of spring rolls woke me.

I didn’t run for the requisite two weeks, my inactivity driving both me, and anyone who had to interact with me, insane. “Isn’t there some kind of sitting down, arm cardio you can do?” Bianca asked me. I was laying on her pile of dirty laundry, and I raised my arms and began throwing weak punches at the air.

“This doesn’t make me feel any better,” I told her.

“Go have starfish sex with Tom. I give you my blessing, this once, if it gets you out of my hair.” Tom had a regular thing going, and spent several nights a week with his girlfriend. On those nights he let me sleep in his room, a favor I repaid by washing his sheets and towels. On the mornings Mrs. Mahoney was especially suspicious of my continued presence in the house, he hustled me out the front door in a borrowed shirt under the pretense I was a one-night stand. “Sorry, sorry,” he’d call over his shoulder at Mrs. Mahoney. “Won’t happen again.”

I pulled myself into a seated position and flopped my arms onto the bed beside Bianca. “Starfish sex?” I asked.

“That’s when you just flail out and let it happen,” Bianca explained as though I were terribly stupid.

“Oh, snow angel sex,” I said, nodding in understanding. “You’d really let me have sex with Tom?” Tom was handsome enough, and certainly not picky. The last time he’d escorted me out he’d offered to let me stay the whole night whenever I wanted.

“Absolutely never have sex with Tom. When he first moved in he complained about having a sprained groin and I asked *Oh, yeah, how did that happen?* and he said, *dunno, think I might’ve fucked a boat*. He can’t rule out the possibility of injuring himself sexing up a tug.”

“You don’t have to make it sound so vulgar, Bee. I bet it was actually really special. For both of them.”

“Choo-choo,” Bianca said, pulling an imaginary cord.

“No, that’s a train sound.”

“Also tug boats make the noise. Like, choooooo.”

I shook my head sadly and clucked my tongue. “Thank god you’re so pretty,” I told Bianca. I laid back down on the pile of laundry and grabbed the first book within reach. *Jane Eyre*.

“Then what sound do the boats make?” Bianca asked. She’d rolled over and was leaning off the bed to stare at me.

“Nope, sorry. I’m reading. This conversation is over.”

“And here I was, going to let you have the bed to yourself tonight while I stay over with Jordie. Now you can just keep on on the floor.”

“Luckily for me,” I replied, “your wardrobe is four-fifths cashmere, and your laundry pile is more comfortable than many of the mattresses I’ve slept on.”

Bianca rolled to the edge of her bed at stared down at me until I acknowledged her. “Do you want to come with us? It’s not a fancy date, just to the cinema and then maybe pop into the local. I don’t like thinking of you curled up alone with a book.”

“That’s very nice of you, but staying in is the financially responsible choice and you just told me you’re planning on spraining your groins tonight, so I would feel very much like a third wheel.” I tilted my head back to meet Bianca’s eyes and smiled to show her how happy I was to be staying in, lying on a pile of unfolded clothes.

“Jordie has all kinds of friends,” Bianca cajoled. “We could find one to throw a pity sprain in you.”

“Wow but the physics of that sound demoralizing,” I told her with a laugh. “Please don’t worry about me. I’m content to chill here with Mr. Rochester, literature’s favorite wife-jailing racist.”

I read on Bianca’s floor for another hour, comfortable enough, until the call of the bed became too great. I stood up and immediately teetered, having to brace myself on the closet wall. I closed my eyes against the sudden stab of pain above my left eye, and after a few breaths I felt steadier and my head cleared. Queasiness had been chasing itself across my body all week, which I blamed on the antibiotics.

I tossed the book on the bed before making sure the coast to the bathroom was clear. Mrs. Mahoney hadn’t flat-out and told Bianca I had to leave, but my continued, non-rent-paying presence was a source of friction between Mrs. Mahoney and her tenants. Everyone had joined in the game of hot potato, as they called it, passing me from room to room whenever anyone was out for the morning, everyone pretending I was Lucy’s cousin Martha or Tom’s latest fling.

Washing my hands at the sink, I had to brace myself again, dizzy and flushed. Looking over my shoulder at the toilet, I gagged a few times, but nothing came up. My reflection showed me to be stark white, unnaturally pale.

By the time I got back to Bianca's room I was unbearably hot. There was a box fan in the back of the closet. I plugged the fan in and sank to the floor, draping my upper body over the fan. I wanted to lay down and sleep, but dimly remembered that I wasn't supposed to faint. Fainting was bad.

When the air on my skin became properly cold, I hauled myself onto the bed and gulped down the glass of water Bianca had left on her nightstand. I blinked my eyes a few times, and shook my head. I didn't feel awesome, but I felt better. I didn't think I would actually faint any longer.

Fucking antibiotics, I told myself, even though, for the first time, I began to admit that there might be something wrong with me.

A few days later I could feel the stitches wiggling under my skin when I bent my knee. My knee propped on the coffee table in the small sitting area, I gently picked at the black threads. The cut appeared completely sealed, the skin a thin, raised line, already paler than the rest of my knee. The scar curved upwards around my kneecap, like my body was smiling at me. I smiled back, then pinched the first stitch between my thumb and fingernail and gave a sharp tug. I gasped and shuddered at the sensation, but there wasn't any blood and the scar held fast. I repeated the process with the other five stitches, all but the fourth giving easily. That stitch came out with two bloody clots attached, and oozed just a bit. If not for that stitch, I would've binned the rest of my antibiotics, which did a fair bit more than just upset my stomach. Though I'd lost a bit of muscle tone from

not running, I hadn't put on any weight, thanks to my sparse diet of crackers, yogurt, and Sprite, the only things my intestines were willing to hang on to for any length of time.

I flexed my knee a few times, working the stiffness out. Another trickle of off-colored fluid escaped the cursed fourth stitch, but otherwise everything seemed in working order. "Gross, stitch," I admonished my wound, though I was happily relieved. I decided that as long as everything held together I would get up early and at least walk around the block a few times. And only take the pills for another day.

Two weeks after my accident I rejoined the runners. Finn and Charlotte watched me jog slowly and perform a series of deep-knee bends, then recommended I run a slow 5k and get back on schedule come Monday. "I'm glad you're recovered," Charlotte said, wrapping an arm around my waist. She was petite, child-sized, and fit easily under my arm. The back of my throat tickled, so glad I was to be welcomed back, and all I could do was nod my agreement. "Lucky thing that doctor was here, hey," she continued. This time I nodded to keep my bitterness inside.

I arrived at the café a full hour before writers' group was slated to start, since I'd barely run. I hoped to arrive before everyone else, stake out the back table, and plant myself in the corner so I could watch everyone coming in the door. Unfortunately Elka and Alex were already there, turned into each other, shoulders almost touching. I stopped short as soon as I saw them. I would've turned and run, but my trainers squeaked on the tile floor with my abrupt halt, and the noise drew their attention.

"Jane," Alex said, rising from the table, crossing to me with his arms spread like I was about to get hugged. I took a small step backwards. "Why didn't you call?" he asked.

I looked to Elka, then back to him. “Because I’m fine? Nothing’s wrong? With me?” I hated it when people turned their statements into questions, but the ends of my sentences just kept twirling upwards.

“I didn’t have any way to contact you,” he said, taking my elbow and steering me towards the table. “I wanted to check on you.” He maneuvered me in front of an empty chair and gently nudged my shoulder until I sat. “Right, any pain? Headaches? Did you finish all the pills?” Alex spoke quickly, and his hands opened and closed at his sides.

“I’m fine,” I said, this time managing to phrase it as a statement. “Everything’s a-okay. You’re a great doctor.”

“Yes,” he said, and clapped his hands once. “I mean, thank you. Not, *yes, I am a great doctor.*”

“Alexander is so thoughtful,” Elka said, stretching out a hand to brush her fingers against the back of his hand. “He was worried about you.”

“It’s because I’m demonstrably disastrous,” I agreed.

“May I see your knee?” Alex asked, bending down.

“Sure, but, you know, it’s hunky-dory. Nothing to see here.” I hitched up my jogging pants over my kneecap, exposing the smiling scar.

“How long until they fell out?” Alex asked, tapping the scar with one fingertip.

“Eight days. I pulled them out because they felt loose and itchy.”

He hummed, not thrilled about my choice. “You took all the pills?”

“Ten days.” I held up a hand to forestall the protest he was about to mount. “They made me feel super gross, and I obviously am not dead. I consulted with doctor google, and he thinks I didn’t need them.”

“Doctor google got his degree online in the Caymans,” Alex replied. “I don’t trust his opinion at all. This does look fine, though,” he said, raising his head to meet my eyes. “Clean bill of health, it would seem.”

“Thanks, doc,” I said as he stood up and dusted his palms together. I realized how close I was sitting to Elka, at the table’s only other chair. “Let me get out of your hair,” I said, standing. Alex didn’t immediately take a step back, and I had to pull my arms tight against my body to avoid colliding with him.

“We don’t mind if you join us,” Elka said, in a tone that made it very clear that she would mind, very much.

“I’m actually not finished with the stories,” I fibbed. “And I want to grab a coffee.” I turned quickly towards the counter, very proud of myself for neither tripping nor colliding with another table as I made my way to order. I kept my eyes completely front, refusing to peek over my shoulder, until I was standing before Sid, bantering about which muffin she’d accidentally dropped on the floor and couldn’t charge me for.

The muffin must’ve been old, because I threw it up right after swallowing the last bite. Nothing else felt off, though, and I made it through all of writers’ group with a bare minimum of unpleasantness.

Alex and I waved to each other in the park while we ran once I rejoined my running group. He was in the coffee shop during writers’ group a couple of times, allowing Elka’s moony eyes to fall upon him, but never openly reciprocating.

Huh, I thought. I guess we’re, like, friends now.

I'd been staring at the same application essay for what felt like an hour. Before that I'd been staring at the same scribbled page of half-formed sentences in my writing notebook for what felt like another hour. All told, according to my watch, I'd been effectively talking myself out of any kind of work for a mere thirteen minutes. Giving up, I squeezed my temples between the flats of my hands, as though I could somehow pressure-cook some sort of productivity.

"Headache?" a voice rumbled from somewhere above me.

"Ohmygod," I screeched in terror, before opening my eyes to take in Alex standing in front of my table.

"Shh," he responded, gently tapping down the air as though he could tamp down my outburst. "Must you be so obtrusively American at all times?"

"You talk like an alien that learned English from a Ken Burns' documentary," I shot back. After regarding me for a few seconds, Alex turned and joined the queue for coffee. I immediately turned to a blank page in my notebook and began writing gibberish – *la la la oh shit fuck balls la la la la* – to make myself look busy and indifferent.

A few minutes later the seat across from me was pulled back, and Alex settled himself with an annoying amount of grace, his fingers wrapped around a tiny espresso

cup. For one of the only times in my life, I made the conscious choice to be the bigger person. “Hello,” I said, after closing my notebook and deliberately folding my arms across the table.

“Hello,” he answered, and the corners of his eyes crinkled. I could hear a smile that didn’t quite show up on his face.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Turns out this place makes an above average espresso shot. Worth the trip. You’re dressed up today,” he observed.

I looked down at my clothing, a navy sweater that slipped off one shoulder with black leggings and red ballet flats. “I’m not dressed up,” I countered. “I’m just not dressed for running.”

“You’re dressed up,” Alex repeated, then turned to watch the front door of the café. “Is someone coming to meet you? Do I need to clear out?”

“I’m going to the symphony tonight. I was just tutoring an hour ago, and I didn’t want to go home in between, so I’m just doing some work here.”

He turned back to me, taking a small sip of his drink. When he set the cup back on the table, the size differential between our cups amused and distracted me. “My coffee looks like your coffee’s grandfather,” I told him.

“Copeland?” he asked. To my blank look he said, “Copeland? At the Barbican?”

“Oh, not the coffee. Yes, I’m going to Copeland. Bianca was able to scare us up tickets in the balcony.”

“I as well,” Alex replied. “I have tickets, too.”

“I as well,” I mimicked, poshing up my vowels. “Must you always be so obsequiously British?”

“Irish,” he said with just enough bite I could sense real annoyance. “I’m Irish, not British.” He took another deliberate sip of espresso.

I furrowed my brow and tilted my head to one side. “Oh,” I asked, with put-on confusion, “are they not the same thing?”

He laughed, and I realized I’d been concerned the joke wouldn’t land. “Wanker,” he said, then frowned. “It’s not for hours. You’re fine just sitting here?”

“It’ll take me nearly an hour to get home and back to the Barbican on the tube, and I have work to do.” I gestured to the notebook and papers on the table. “Bianca convinced some very fussy mothers that having an American read over application essays to American universities was ideal.” The latte I nursed represented nearly half of my disposable income until I got paid for my editing suggestions on Monday.

“You’re going to bring all this with you to the theater?” he asked, moving his hands to encompass the papers on the table and the backpack at my feet.

“Sid at the counter lets me stash things here overnight if I need. I can come back for it tomorrow.” Also Sid’s manager wouldn’t be working tomorrow, so I could have my coffee and bagel for free.

“Why don’t I drive you?” Alex offered.

“Are you going alone?” He frowned and looked away. His jaw ticked twice. “Because,” I continued, “you have a very small car and I doubt whomever you’re taking will appreciate the company.” When he didn’t answer or look back I took a conciliatory tone. “Besides, I’m meeting people for dinner before.”

It took another second for his jaw to unlock, but when he turned back to me his voice was warm. “I shall see you there, then.”

“Only if you come up to the cheap seats to muck about with the proles,” I said.

He tilted his coffee cup towards him, to verify that it was empty, then extended an arm across the table and rested two fingers on my temple. “No headache, though?”

“No headache,” I confirmed. “No knee-ache, no anything-ache.” Occasional, spontaneous vomiting wasn’t any kind of *ache*, so I felt justified in keeping that to myself.

Alex braced his hands on the table, bending his elbows to lever himself up. “Hopefully, though, I will see you tonight. Good luck,” he said, making a *shoo* gesture towards the papers scattered on the tabletop, “dealing with all this hibbity-hoobla.”

“Wait,” I said, raising my hands shoulder-high in a gesture of speculative surrender. “Did you just...?”

He remained poised halfway out of the chair, and raised an eyebrow when my question trailed off.

“Are you,” I began again, then bit my lip against the dubious wisdom of finishing my question. “Are you, did you just, are you quoting *8 Mile* at me?”

My question had been louder than I intended, as there was a stifled giggle from the table next to mine. Alex stood to his full height and gave me a withering look, before turning to smirk briefly at the gigglers. He then leaned over the table, his mouth just by my ear, and whispered: “*Clarence parents have a real good marriage.*” He said the words *real good* with a growled innuendo that would’ve been visible from space.

Standing back up, Alex turned towards the exit so quickly I couldn't be sure if he'd actually punctuated the statement with a wink or if I'd imagined it.

When he was out the door, and I was confident he wouldn't return, I pillowed my hands on my arms and stomped my feet for a mental count of ten, a tiny temper tantrum. Without raising my head from the table, I reached for my phone and texted Bianca.

Just lied about having dinner plans with you. Make an honest woman of me?

Less than a minute later, the phone vibrated with her response. *I want a DNA test,* followed immediately by *okay if G's there?*

Bee and Geordie were easy to spot in the pub. They sat in a booth, both gesturing wildly with their arms, a distinctly non-British trait I liked to believe they had picked up from me. They kept their voices pitched at the British standard aggressive whisper, just quiet enough to keep the other patrons happy.

"What's all this then?" I asked, sliding in beside Bianca and dropping my shoulder so my bag slid gracelessly to the floor.

"Mmm, no," Bee replied with an exaggerated wince at my accent. "Yiddish Venezuelan."

I switched to flat Midwestern. "What's all the hubbub, pals?"

Bee laughed as Geordie answered. "We're having a spirited discussion about Sirius Black. Bianca doesn't think he's tortured enough when he escapes from Azkaban and finds Harry."

"He just gets on with life too easily," she insisted. "He should have some kind of PTSD at the very least."

“I think,” Geordie said, “that he’s just so happy to be free. There’s things to do and he doesn’t have time to waste of being glum.”

They both crossed their arms and each arched an eyebrow at the other. I looked back and forth between them for several seconds. “Oh, you are not kidding,” I said. “This argument is something you take” – here I paused, regretting the word before I spoke it – “seriously.” Quickly I added, “Yes, I realize I accidentally made a pun, and I regret it, ergo the pause while I tried and failed to think of a better word to use.”

“I do not understand your irrational hatred of puns,” Geordie said.

“They are the lazy man’s wit,” I replied.

“No, you’re just really bad at them and it frustrates you,” Bee added.

“You are really very bad at puns,” Geordie confirmed.

“I’m so glad you were able to settle your riveting fictional character debate by being mean to me,” I said. “So happy to be of service.”

“It’s not settled,” Geordie said. “You’re the deciding vote.”

I scrunched up my face, crinkling my eyes in thought. “Maybe, and please don’t get angry, Bee, but maybe wizards just don’t need Zoloft or therapy. Abilify!” I exclaimed. “See, it even sounds like a spell. Abilify.”

“Even though you did not take my side, you presented your argument with panache, and I accept it,” Bianca announced.

“Well thank god that’s settled. Peacemaker gets first round?” I asked, titling my head towards the bar. When I stood to fetch pints, all the blood rushed from my head and I had to rest against the table with my eyes closed for a minute.

“What’s wrong?” Bianca asked.

“Stood up to fast,” I explained.

“Have you eaten today?” Bee asked. Before I could answer, Geordie rocked onto one hip, freeing his wallet from his back pocket. He pulled out a twenty-pound note and extended it to me. “You can still get the pints, but get us something to eat,” he said in response to my scowl.

By the time I returned with our drinks, Bianca and Geordie were discussing his theory that James Bond was actually a time lord. I sipped slowly at my Bulmer’s, waiting until the fish and chips came before properly tucking into my drink. Getting drunk enough to throw up in the Barbican all but guaranteed that I’d run into Alex and Elka. Staying mostly sober and pleasantly buzzed meant I could pass my whole evening without having to think about them again.

Our seats were on the third level of the theater, but in the second row, affording a clear view of the stage. The venue was only about two-thirds full, and I was so grateful when the house lights dimmed. Before we were submerged into darkness, I'd caught myself three times scanning the audience for any sign of Alex. My neck twinged from being locked in place as I refused to let my eyes wander across the theater again.

In the program the ushers had given us, the conductor lauded Copeland's "uniquely American exuberance," unsure that his staid European heart could do the piece justice. Bianca tapped the program, then wagged a finger at me. "None of your American exuberance tonight," she whispered.

"It's my best quality," I whispered back in protest.

In response she shook her head, and pointed her first two fingers at her eyes before flinging them in my direction, the universal sign for *I'm watching you*. Ordinarily I'd trust she was joking but this was the second time to today my overtly non-British ways had earned censure. Chastised, I tried to settle myself as meekly as possible.

The location of the seats hadn't mattered, Bianca said, since we could listen from anywhere, but the back rows of the balcony were truly the economy class of orchestral seating. I couldn't cross my legs because the seat in front of me was too close, though I

did make one gangly, ill-advised attempt, lifting my left thigh with my hands, while slouching down as far as I could, trying to make enough room to shift one leg over the other. I only succeeded in nudging my front neighbor on the shoulder with the sole of my shoe. I tried to quickly drop my leg, so that when the man turned he hopefully wouldn't realize he'd been stepped on. Until he got home and saw the faint, dusty footprint on the back of his very nice jacket.

The members of the orchestra were already seated on stage when the lights dimmed and the conductor walked out. We applauded for an excessive amount of time, as he took bow after stiff formal bow. It felt like we were locked in a vicious feedback loop: he would keep bowing as long as we clapped, and we would keep clapping as long as he bowed. My palms tingled by the time the applause died down and he took his place in front of the orchestra.

If the rush of delight the music made me feel was uniquely American, then I felt proud, but also sad that the conductor didn't feel himself capable of this kind of giddy optimism. *This music makes me want to frolic*, I thought, and began to weep. Crying from happiness felt so different than crying from sorrow, like I was filling up instead of hollowing out. I bit down on my lips and pressed my right fist, knuckles first, against my mouth so that my over-abundance of American sobs wouldn't bother my neighbors.

I clapped with all my might when the musicians took their bows, ache in my palms be damned. The last claps echoing through the theater were mine.

Bianca turned to me as we gathered our coats and bags and snorted out a laugh. "You're a wreck, Brain," she said, reaching out to wipe tears from my left cheek. "How much mascara were you wearing?"

“Oh, all of it,” I replied.

“Well, it’s all over your face now. And I have made it worse. You look like a coal-mining clown.”

“Fantastic,” I said. I reached up to wipe at my other cheek, but Bianca caught my hand and frowned.

“You’ll do better with a mirror. Go to the loo and clean up,” Bianca told me.

“Jordie and I will meet you down in the lobby.”

“And you’re sorry for ruining my face,” I prompted.

“Oh, please,” Bianca scoffed. “A few weeks in the mines aren’t enough to dim your beauty. I’m just evening the playing field here.”

Circular lights, mimicking the effect of a theatrical dressing room, were set into the mirrors running above the sinks. I carefully leaned over the marble countertop, avoiding the hand-washers on either side of me, and gently rubbed away the black streaks Bianca had smudged on my cheek. The scratchy paper towel left my face reddened and tender, and I decided the mascara on my other cheek, three faint ink-blot freckles, could wait until I got home to Bianca’s soft towels and Shiseido make-up remover.

Scanning the lobby, it only took me a moment to pick out Jordie’s shock of blond curls. His hair was fairer than Bianca’s and I liked to tease her that their children would be made of sunburn. I quickened my pace as I walked towards them, only to pull up short when I saw Bianca and Jordie’s companions. They were, of course, chatting with Alex. And Elka. She wore a floor-length, gauzy dresses patterned with small blooms. It looked somehow elegant, instead of like a shower curtain. Her hand was nestled in the crook of his elbow.

I tried to swing behind a pillar, mentally composing the text to Bee to explain my sudden disappearance, but Jordie had already seen me. He nudged Bianca, who waved me over. I tried to shake my head in disagreement, but Alex and Elka had spotted me already by then.

“Hi, guys,” I said as I approached, then cringed at how brightly false my voice sounded.

“Did you enjoy the music?” Alex asked, turning away from Elka in a way that dislodged her hand.

“Very much so,” I said, no need to be unpleasant. “I’m so glad Bee suggested it.”

“It was,” Alex agreed, smiling. “It was lovely. I’m not that familiar with Copeland, but I’m curious to hear more now.”

“The not any hooting and hollering you heard was me tamping down my American exuberance for the benefit of my British compatriots.”

He laughed. “I did notice that in the program, so thank you.”

Elka stepped up, re-linking her arm through his. I had forgotten about her. From his startled jostle, I thought Alex might’ve forgotten also. “There’s something on your face, Jane,” she said, smiling with pity. She extended her free hand towards my mascara-splattered cheek, and I flinched away.

“It’s a prison tat,” I said with a nod, once I’d placed myself out of her reach. “I killed someone on the inside.”

“Three someones it seems,” Alex said, lifting a finger and tapping at the air, roughly transcribing the location of the spots.

“We were saying,” Bee interrupted, “that it might be nice to go get a cocktail before heading home. Alex knows a few spots around here.”

I looked at Bianca, hoping no one else could see the incredulous arch of my eyebrows. Four people is a double date. Five people is a double date and someone’s sad, underdressed, make-up stained roommate tagging along. Bee answered with a shrugged grimace, gesturing with one hand towards our group as if to say *Why not?*

No, I mouthed, shaking my head, giving up all pretense of being subtle about this conversation. To everyone I said, “You guys should go, but I need to wash my face, get some rest. I have to tutor early in the morning.”

“You’ve got the key?” Bianca asked me at the same time Alex said, “Don’t be foolish, Jane.”

I looked back and forth between them for a few seconds, before addressing myself to Bianca. “I’ve got the key, and if I hurry I’ll be home before Mrs. Mahoney is done with her wine and canvas night.”

“Cheers,” Bianca said.

“Come by after you’re finished tomorrow. West Ham’s playing,” Jordie added.

“Just one drink, Jane,” Alex said.

“She’s fine,” Elka said.

“I am,” I replied, too cheerfully. “I’m swell. Gotta run if I’m going to catch the tube, though. Goodnight, all.” I practically skipped across the lobby, twice my normal pace for running away from uncomfortable situations.

My foot was on the second step down into the underground when I heard Alex calling my name. I paused, but didn’t turn, and continued down.

“Jane, I know you heard me,” he said. I could hear in his voice how uncomfortable he felt being loud in public, and I told myself I turned back to put him out of his un-British misery. I didn’t say anything, just curled my fingers to say, *well, let’s hear it.*

He shrugged, then hung his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Can we go somewhere and talk?” he asked, his head still down.

“We can talk right here,” I replied.

Raising his head, he said, “I would like it very much if you would come with us to get a drink.”

“Really? Because I don’t think you’re date is super-thrilled at the prospect.”

“I don’t feel for her in that way,” Alex said. “You have to realize that. I care about you, Jane. Surely that’s obvious.”

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no,” I replied, rapidly jerking my head from side to side.

“Surely I realize that you are on a date with another woman. You are *currently, in the middle of* a romantic assignation, which you have *walked away from*, in order to tell me that you would rather be on a date with me, *even though you came here with another woman* who is currently still inside *waiting for you to come back.*”

“Yes,” he replied. Alex scrubbed a hand down his face, looking back to the Barbican, a frown pulling his brows together. “And that’s, less than ideal. I know that.”

“Ya couldn’t have done this tomorrow?” I asked, incredulous. “Or, you know, before you started dating someone else?” Behind me, exiting the tube station, several people had paused on the top step, watching us. It had rained during the performance, and the crosswalk lights reflected in the puddles, wavering greens and reds.

“It didn’t seem that you cared for me,” Alex said. “And Elka was very, hmmm, very insistent in her interest. I thought, today though, that maybe you did, do, care for me as well.” He smiled, and extended a hand. A soft chorus of *awwwwws* came from behind me, and that, more than anything, hardened my anger. How dare these strangers be wooed by his handsome face and stupid words?

“Do you think that’s flattering to me? Do you think I’m flattered that you were only dating Elka until the opportunity to date me presented itself? Have you no conception of how unkind you’re being?”

Neither Alex nor our growing audience had expected my anger. “And apologize,” he began, “truly, Jane -”

“Not to *me*,” I yelled. “Although, yes, partially to me, but *Elka*. You’re being awful to her. She cares about you, obviously. She got dressed up tonight for you. She’s not waiting for the next thing, she picked you.”

He turned to the side, apparently not having considered this wrinkle.

“Women aren’t pants, Alex. You can’t just keep your dick warm in them until something better comes along.”

At this point, several women walking to the tube station had also stopped to observe our exchange. All told, we had attracted an audience of about ten. Alex raised a hand, maybe to hush me, maybe to reassure them, but I cut him off before he could.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding at the onlookers. “I’m standing in front of the symphony, screaming about this man’s entirely-too-cavalier approach to where his penis goes.”

Wow one of the women mouthed, without making a sound. Another took out her cell phone to begin filming, only to have her hand pushed down by another onlooker.

“I know, right,” I said, spreading my arms like a carnival barker. “Would any you like to hang out with his dick for a few hours? From here I can’t tell if you have all your teeth or any sort of communicable diseases, but that’s probably not gonna be a deal breaker. Because,” and here I knelt slightly and pivoted, throwing my arms back towards Alex. “*Because* he ain’t real picky.”

“I am so sorry,” Alex said to the woman closest to us. “You are very lovely. You and your friend both. My friend meant no offense.”

“Oh, not to them,” I agreed. “No offense to them at all. His dick should be so lucky,” I said out of the corner of my mouth, like a sitcom aside.

The women gave us both pitying looks before striding quickly out of sight. As I’d watched them go, Alex stepped closer to me. When I turned back he was only about two feet away. “Perhaps,” he said, “we could have this conversation at a lower volume. Maybe inside. With less focus on my genitals.”

“No,” I said. “We cannot have that, or any other conversation, at any time, anywhere. We are finished talking to each other.”

“Jane,” he said, as though I were a petulant child that to be talked out of a tantrum. “I understand that you are angry, and that I have earned that anger. But you’re punishing both of us right now.”

“Fantastic,” I cried, throwing my arms up to the heavens. “Terrific! *Stupendous!*” I reached out my arms and took ahold of his shoulders. “Just so long as I’m punishing *you*,” I said with at the severity I could muster. When he didn’t answer, I let go like I was releasing something too hot to hold. I turned at walked down the stairs.

I did make it home before Mrs. Mahoney, and could walk through the upstairs freely without worry that I'd be accosted for rent. I found Tom in the communal kitchen-slash-living room area, slouched low in the futon, a bottle of cheap gin resting precariously between his spread legs.

"Cheers, love," he said, saluting me with the alcohol.

"What're you doing all alone on a Saturday night?" I asked, sitting at the far end of the futon, curling my feet under me.

"Oh, now that's a story," he said, extending the bottle to me. "And not one for sober ears."

I took the bottle from his hands, and a bigger swallow of the sharp liquid than I intended. I winced pulling the gin away from my mouth. Tom had spared every expense for this bender. "Tell me all about your common tale of woe," I instructed, passing the bottle back.

"Well, you know Katie," he began, then took another pull of gin. He offered me the bottle again, and I took it.

"Do I actually know her?" I asked. "Has she been around our humble abode, or are you speaking philosophically?" It occurred to me that I hadn't eaten anything since dinner with Bee and Jordie, several hours earlier. Two gulps of gin and I was already drunkenly loquacious.

Tom chuckled. “It turns out that, with the proper application on Lambrusco and take-away chips, anyone can know Miss Katie any way they want. Or that’s what I imagine was transpiring between her and the boy from down the hall.”

He flopped back against the futon melodramatically, causing the bottle of gin to teeter towards the floor. Though the plastic wouldn’t shatter, I didn’t want to mop up spilled alcohol while Tom sulked. And he was probably planning on polishing off the rest at some point tonight. I reached out to steady the bottle, my hand grazing the inside of his knee.

“Easy there, tiger,” he chastised softly, his closed eyes still towards the ceiling.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I replied, pulling back to set the now half-empty bottle on the coffee table. “I’m saving the gin, not your wounded pride.”

He opened his eyes and turned to me, as though seeing me for the first time this night. “You’ve got something on your face,” he said, reaching out with two fingers to tap the mascara stains I had put out of my mind.

“Prison tat,” I said, repeating my earlier joke.

“Eventful night you’ve had,” he said with a smile, keeping his fingers on my face.

I stood, and offered him a hand. “We should get you to bed,” I said.

He let me pull him up, and I was the one to drop his hand. Tom and I stood, silently taking stock of each other. I’d had just enough alcohol and just enough anger tonight for ending up naked under Tom to seem like a foregone conclusion. It’d been so long since I made a truly awful decision, and there was nothing quite like the vicious, masochistic thrill of knowing I was making a mistake.

I let my knees go slack, and crashed into him. One of his over-sharp incisors snagged on my lip, and that was even better than the kissing. After a minute he hummed, taking a step back, but keeping ahold of my shoulders.

“I’m not one to turn down sex. Ever,” Tom said. “But I fear that if we do this, you’ll hate both of us in the morning.”

“Motherfucker,” I said, snagging my fingers in the vee of his shirt, dragging it down to expose more of his skin, “I hate both of us *right now*.”

Tom chuckled. “Can’t argue with that logic, can I?” he said, before hauling me back in.

I had two messages and a missed called from Bee when I woke up. *Just got home, you're not here* the first read. *Do you have something to tell me* read the second. Tom didn't wake as I collected my belongings, or else had perfected his "sleeping while you leave" routine. In the bathroom, I noticed the mascara had flaked slightly during the night, but some of it was still hanging tough. *Wash your face before bed every single night* had been one of Greenie's cardinal rules, and the only regret I felt was for letting her down on that count.

"The fuck did you come from?" she asked after I flopped down on her bed. "Did you sleep on the floor? What did you do last night? What happened?" She was also wearing last night's clothes, though her face was scrubbed clean.

"Where would you like me to start?" I asked, fluffing and smushing a pillow to get it just right under my head.

"Well, you left the Barbican," Bee started, then trailed off for me to fill in the details.

"Alex does not consider the fact that he's currently dating Elka to be a strong enough deterrent from trying to also date me. We yelled about his genitals in front of the underground."

"We?" Bianca asked, pointedly.

"I. I yelled about his genitals while he calmly made his case. I did not go home with him," I told her.

“Oh, I know,” Bianca said. “Because he came back to collect Elka after you shot him down.”

“Oh, no,” I said, pulling up the sheet to cover my eyes in embarrassment on his behalf. “How awful was that?” I asked, peeking my eyes back out.

“Just so awful. First when he followed you out. Like, she was just standing there with me and Jordie. And even worse when he came back.”

“I can’t believe I’m being forced to empathize with her,” I said. I rolled onto my stomach and kicked my feet up and down against the bed, throwing myself a tiny temper tantrum.

Bianca, laying on her back, held up her hands, each folded over like a duck bill, and launched into a puppet show of the previous night. “At first Elka pretended it was fine. *He takes too much on himself, you know,*” Bianca said in a fluttery falsetto, making one hand talk. “And then he just, uh, didn’t come back, and she got mad. *I can’t believe this is happening.* And I wanted to point out that maybe it was what she got for wearing a bleeding necklace on her forehead like we were listening to Oasis in a field. But I didn’t because that would’ve been rude.”

“Anyway, here’s Wonderwall,” I said.

Bianca laughed. “Then he came back, and that was a real treat.” Her left hand opened and closed rapidly, her fingers slapping against her thumb with enough force to make a soft clapping sound. “*Muah muah muh-muh-muh so embarrassing I’m humiliated why did you even ask me here wail sob.* And then he tried to explain.” Bianca’s other hand began moving, hesitantly. “*I, uh, friends take care of each other no man left behind semper fi I never loved you ahhhhhhh...*” After the Alex-hand trailed off Bianca flopped

it onto the bed where it went through a series of death twitches. “Enough about that. Tell me what he said to you,” she instructed.

“Okay, so he caught me outside,” I began.

“No no no,” Bianca interrupted. “Puppets,” she said, poking me until I sat up, freeing my hands. I propped myself up on my elbows, raising my hands just enough to make them talk. I rolled my eyes, but obediently pantomimed my conversation with Alex.

“*Women aren’t pants?*” Bianca asked.

I nodded, then rested my head on my folded arms in resignation.

“Wow,” she said. “Now you really can’t ever go back to writers group.”

I rolled back up onto my side and sighed. “Additionally I might’ve come home and had sex with Tom, so I can also never go back to the kitchen.”

Bianca stared at me, open-mouthed, not sure if she should believe me. I nodded, and she began to shake her head. I nodded more forcefully. “It’s real,” I said.

“You dirty fucking whore,” Bianca said. “You now have some form of oceanic std. I hope it was worth it.”

“It wasn’t not worth it,” I answered with a smile.

“I can’t believe you just hopped in my bed like it was no big deal. *My bed* now has an oceanic std,” she cried, mock pushing me towards the floor. “Go shower,” she insisted. When I moved to roll out of the bed, Bee grabbed my hand to stop me. “Pick just one detail, that will both traumatize me and make me envious.”

“I will never be able to look at an ice cube tray again without getting flustered.”

Bianca quickly covered her ears with the palms. “I can’t hear this. La la la la. Oh, god, I can only drink hot beverages now. What did you do with the ice, I don’t care, get

out.” She pulled a pillow over her head as I laughed, checking the hall for any sign of Mrs. Mahoney before darting to the bathroom for a needed shower.

I was lathering my hair for the *repeat* phase of the shampoo cycle when Bee stuck her head, eyes closed, through the shower curtain.

“You used a condom, though, right?”

“Holy shit, you’re terrifying, go away,” I yelled in response.

“Because otherwise we have to burn my sheets and also your vagina. We have to nuke the site from orbit.”

“Easy down, Ripley,” I said. “We used protection. No one is setting Snatchy on fire. Get out of my shower.”

Bianca slit one eye open. “You cannot call your vagina *Snatchy*. That’s demoralizing for all of us. Terrible, terrible name.”

“It was meant to frighten you away from the shower I’m currently in the middle of taking. Go away. Let me be naked in peace.”

“*Snatchy*,” Bee muttered, shuddering, on her way out. Once I heard the door shut behind her, I exhaled, sticking my head under the stream to wash out the shampoo.

I had just finished wrapping my hair in a towel when my stomach roiled. I barely got the toilet open in time. *Too much gin, too little food*, I told myself. *The shower was too hot, Bee scared me, sleeping with Tom wasn’t my best work*. As I rinsed my mouth with Lucy’s Listerine I ran through all the reasons I’d just been sick, all the reasons I currently felt unsteady, all the perfectly logical explanations, never once meeting my own eyes in the fogged mirror so I wouldn’t have to watch myself lie.

The nice thing about avoiding every place I might conceivably run into Elka, Alex, or Tom meant that I had a lot more time to proof-read application essays, as well as do a little tutoring on the side. I ran my miles on Sundays, wrote my anecdotes in private, stayed out of the common room as much as possible, and spent several hours a week meeting with a group of bookish fifth-years, whatever that meant, who just wanted to read in peace away from their prying mothers.

“You’re singing my song, ladies,” I told them the first time they explained they didn’t actually want to study with me. I double-checked their homework, always near-perfect, and pretended I didn’t see them pulling tawdry romance novels off the shelf. If their essays were anything to go by, they needed a couple of hours to giggle over the words *throbbing member* more than they needed lessons on the past perfect subjunctive.

Mario, who I had never met and didn’t even know was living with Mrs. Mahoney, was moving out at the end of the month. If I started charging two pounds more per essay, and stopped buying flavored lattes every single morning, I could probably swing the rent. As soon as I stopped vomiting and getting light-headed, everything would be perfect.

* * *

Halfway through our game of Scrabble, I’d excused myself to the bathroom. I’d managed to speak naturally, but I could see Bee eying me with suspicion. *I’m fine*, I mouthed to her, walking backwards towards the unisex bathroom.

I gave myself another minute and a half to make sure the vomiting was over, then levered myself up using the sink basin as support. I rinsed my mouth out as best I could with the icy tap water. The constant burnt, sour taste in my mouth was almost as unpleasant as the actual puking. At least the puking gave me an ab workout. Taking in my reflection in the mirror, I didn't look too much worse for the wear. My cheeks had the pink cast of a slight sunburn, but my eyes weren't bloodshot. What ever was happening to me, it made itself easy enough to hide. I didn't look sick.

I turned too quickly towards the door and became dizzy. Bracing myself against the wall with my right hand while I collected myself, the coolness of the tiles enticed me. I felt so hot, and it made all the sense in the world to sink into the corner of the bathroom, where I could press my warm face against the cool wall. I took a deep breath and started counting to sixty in my head. Any longer than that and someone would ask what had taken so long in the bathroom.

* * *

I came awake to the prickly smell of cleanser. I opened my eyes, then immediately regretted having opened my eyes, and shut them again quickly. My brief glimpse of the world had shown a collection of feet and ankles semi-circled around me. I smelled coffee and felt the worn velvet of the shop's one couch under my left cheek. Not in the bathroom anymore, but out in the coffee shop proper, a journey I had no recollection of making. I was laying on my left side, my knees tucked up so my entire

body fit on the narrow sofa. There was a slight weight on the exposed side of my neck, which shifted to soft drumming after I'd opened and shut my eyes. Someone's hand.

"You're burning through my entire supply of smelling salts. I'm tempted to expense you." Alex's hand. Someone, likely Bianca, had called him. I had been out long enough for Bee to summon him here.

I opened my mouth to answer, but, instead of speaking, I produced a sickly gagging cough.

"Is she alright?" Bee asked, her voice farther back than Alex's.

"Obviously she is not," Alex answered. I opened my eyes to narrow crescents. I saw Alex's knees, seated on the low table in front of the sofa, and the midsections of three people clustered behind the table.

I tried speaking again, and managed to say, "I'm fine," but with no force behind the words.

"You laid down," Bianca countered, real hardness in her voice, "on the floor of a public bathroom."

"A coffee shop bathroom," I said to Alex's knees. "It's a very nice coffee shop."

"You blacked out," Bee said. "In a public loo. You were in there twenty minutes. I had to get the manager to unlock the door."

"You actually shouldn't have moved her," Alex told Bianca. I could hear he was speaking over his shoulder, and the drumming on my neck sped up slightly with his annoyance.

"About fifteen people really needed to pee. The queue was insane," Bee answered.

“A handy rule of thumb is,” Alex lectured, “when we find someone passed out on the floor, we try very hard not to *fold* them.”

Bee exhaled dismissively, gave a low-voiced mumble to some profanity. Despite the awfulness of the situation, I chuckled that I wasn't the sole recipient of Alex's anger. “You shouldn't have called him,” I said in the direction I suspected her to be standing.

“Bathroom! Floor!” was Bee's heavily enunciated response.

“How did you even find him?” I asked.

“His card was still in your wallet,” Bee told me.

“Goddammit, stitches,” I said, like it was a curse.

“If you're so sure that you're doing well, I'll just head off then,” Alex says.

Intellectually, I understood that I probably did need to see a doctor, badly, but my present situation embarrassed me. And I was still angry at Alex, so I said nothing.

When she realized I wasn't going to speak up in my own self interest, Bianca took matters into her own hands. “Two days ago she sat down and fell asleep on the stairs at home. I don't know how long she was out.”

“Traitor,” I grumbled.

“You didn't think to call me then?” Alex asked, presumably Bianca, though the question could easily have been addressed to either of us.

“I was just hungry. I forgot to have lunch,” I offered.

“And two days ago is the only other time you've fainted?” Alex was definitely speaking to me, and I didn't answer.

“Jane,” Bee admonished. “You said it was the once. She said once.”

“And how many times, actually?” Alex asked.

“Since when?” I countered for clarification.

“Jesus Christ,” Alex and Bee said in perfect unplanned unison.

“How about since you needed stitches,” Alex said. “Since I no longer believe that you just tripped and fell. Did you?”

“I did trip,” I said.

“Because you were fainting?” Alex prompted.

“Because I was dizzy,” I allowed.

“In addition to that time, and this time, how many other times have you been *dizzy*?” Alex’s voice was grumpily condescending, and I realized I’d missed it.

“I have only fainted twice,” I said, deliberately. “That time and this time.” After a pause I continue, “But I have been dizzy enough to need to sit, I think, six times.”

“Jesus Christ,” Bianca repeated, on her own. “You fell down months ago. That was five months ago.”

“We’re going to hospital now,” Alex said. “Can you sit up?”

“Probably not without puking,” I admitted.

“In that case, aim for the shoes of your neglectful friend.”

“Hey,” Bianca protested. “I called. I called and she lied. This is not my fault.”

“Nice way to talk about the infirm,” I said to Bianca.

“I am so mad at you right now, Brain,” Bianca replied, and her voice was sad.

I felt awful, immediately so much worse. “I don’t want to sit up,” was all I said.

“I can imagine you don’t, but you’ve surrendered the right to have a say in the matter,” Alex informed me. His one hand still rested on my neck, and his other wormed its way under the shoulder pressed against the couch. “On three we’re sitting up.”

“We nothing,” I said. “You’re already sitting up.”

“How fortunate,” Alex said, “that your winning personality remains intact.” I could hear the smile in his voice. “On three,” he repeated.

“Ten,” I countered.

“Five,” he compromised, “or we’ll be here all day.” I heard his body shift, and when he spoke again his voice was quieter and closer to me. “I don’t care if you throw up on me.” His hand squeezed my neck. “I don’t care. But we have to get you some help. Okay?”

I kept my eyes closed and nodded my head slightly. Alex held my neck steady while pushing upwards with his other hand until I was upright. “Breathe,” he instructed me. “Holding your breath only makes it worse.”

I hadn’t realized I was holding my breath, and I took several shaky breaths. Alex’s hand were now on either side of my neck, moving up and down, prodding. “Not twisted or wrenched at all?” he asked.

“Don’t think so,” I said, eyes still shut.

“Move your head back and forth. Just a bit, and slowly,” he said. “Good,” he continued, after I’d completed the movements. “Now back and forth.”

I tipped my head backwards first, then angled my head towards my chin. The forward momentum rounded my shoulders slightly, and I wondered how much trouble it would be to just sink down to the floor.

Mostly to keep myself awake, I chanced opening my eyes again. Alex’s shoes were a gleaming black, immaculately shined. The laces were thin, the toes perfected

rounded. Raising my eyes slightly, I took black socks and dark grey trousers with faint white pinstripes. He hadn't been in the office, or just sitting around at home.

"You we're going somewhere," I said, an apology. "You had plans."

He clucked his tongue softly. "It's fine, Jane. Plans change."

* * *

In Alex's car, goose bumps rose on my arms, but I couldn't tell if the air was on or if the chills were a new symptom of whatever was wrong with me. Alex had taken my passport and wallet when we left the coffee shop, but my bag and cardigan were still there, hopefully safe with Bee. I glanced over at Alex, trying to see how warmly he was dressed. He had on a dress shirt, crisp and white, but no jacket. His mouth was a thin line, frowning with all the however many muscles beauty magazines harped on about.

"Where are we going?" I asked. When he didn't answer, I changed the subject.

"Can you turn on the heat?" I asked instead. "I feel cold."

As he slowed the car to a stop at a red light, Alex flicked on the heat, then reached over to angle several of the vents my way. Pulling his hand back, he didn't take hold of the steering wheel, instead pounding on it several times with a closed fist. "For fuck's sake, Jane," he said, looking out the windshield instead of at me.

"Please don't yell at me," I said softly.

"For fuck's sake," he continued. "You'd rather be dying than ask me for help?"

"Don't yell," I repeated, this time with more conviction. "Please."

"I'm not yelling," he began, but I cut him off with a loud sigh, angling my body away from him and towards the passenger door.

Instead of his Piccadilly office, Alex drove us to a hospital. A man in scrubs and trainers met us in the parking lot. I couldn't tell if the smudges under his eyes were exhaustion or just the grain yellow light from the lampposts. "Well, I feel underdressed," he said, taking in Alex's clothing, before they engaged in the elaborate handshake-to-hug ritual adult males all favored. "And here's our patient," he said, turning to me. "I'm Robby."

I shook his extended hand. "Jane."

"Ah, the famous Jane," Robby said, prompting a huff from Alex. "Let's see what we've got here, then."

We entered through the automatic emergency doors, and I felt their pneumatic hiss rattle up through my bones. Robby led us past the desk, making eye contact with the nurse behind the counter and pointing down a hallway. She nodded in reply, and Robby led us left, then right, until we were in an unoccupied exam room. While clean and functional, this room had none of the high polish of Alex's practice. There was a faint arc worn into the floor, from so many openings and closings of the door. The cupboards and drawers weren't real wood, and they weren't even pretending. Robby and I faced each other in straight-backed chairs. A rectangular light fixture ran down the center of the ceiling, and the light behind Robby flickered with stomach-churning irregularity.

Alex stood, fidgeting in front of the closed door, probably to block any attempt at escape. My chair faced the door, meaning I'd have to get through the both of them to get free, not great odds, but not impossible.

"What seems to be the problem?" Robby asked.

"Dizzy spells, fainting, nausea," Alex answered before I had a chance to speak.

“For how long?”

Alex answered again. “The park was how long, three months ago? Nothing before three months?” he asked me. He finally made eye contact over his friend’s head.

I shook my head. “Really,” I said, my voice a croak, when Alex continued to stare at me with one eyebrow arched.

“Can I have a wrist, love?” Robby asked, then picked up my left wrist, pressing his first two fingers over the vein and consulting his watch. “That’s too fast,” he announced, his eyes still on his watch. “Nearly ninety.”

“Well, this is fairly stressful,” I replied, annoyed to be spoken of as though I weren’t there.

“Might also be dehydration,” Robby told me. “If you’re throwing up a lot. Is it more than two or three times a week.”

I looked down at the floor, watched one of my heels tap against the grey linoleum. If I said it out loud, it was true. “Usually every day.”

“Jesus Christ, Jane,” Alex shouted.

I looked up, staring until I was sure I had his attention. “Stop. Yelling. At. Me.”

“Too much, then,” Robby said. “We should probably get a sachet of rehydration solution in you, maybe put you on a drip.”

“Would I have to stay here?” I asked. “Stay overnight?”

“I suppose I could release you into a doctor’s care,” Robby said, nudging his head towards Alex. He’d meant it either as a joke or a reassurance, but Alex made a strangled, dismissive sound, like the first seconds of a garbage disposal. “Well,” Robby continued,

after the requisite awkward pause, “family history then. Does anyone in your family suffer from...anything like this?”

“Not that I know of. My sisters are fine. My mother never gets sick. Her mother died in a car crash.”

“What about your father?” Robby asked.

“I don’t have a father,” I said, because I didn’t.

“You certainly do have a father,” Alex said. “You didn’t hatch from a stone.”

“Well, I don’t,” I clarified. “I don’t know him.” I pressed the heels of my hands into my eye sockets, determined not to cry.

Robby rested a hand on my upper arm. “Jane, I’m going to fetch you something to drink to try and sort your fluid levels. Would you let Alex take a few vials of blood while I’m gone? I know you aren’t keen on needles?”

Why do you need the blood? Why do you know I hate needles? Several other questions ran through my head, but I just nodded. I covered both eyes with one forearm, bent my other arm outwards exposing the inside of my elbow.

“We’re gonna sort this out, Jane,” Robby said. He gave my shoulder a squeeze, then I heard the chair slide back and the shuffle of feet. The door slid open, and Robby whispered, “*Be nice.*”

I heard the click of the door shutting, drawers opening, Alex scooting the chair closer. I’d lowered my arm, but my eyes were still shut tightly. My pulse ticked up. Needles, I told myself, but that was only part of it.

“I’m sorry. That I yelled,” Alex said. “I’m concerned, but that doesn’t excuse it. Also I can’t find the smelling salts.” He paused. “That’s not a joke. I actually can’t find them, so please don’t faint.”

My mouth twitched. “Okay,” I whispered. “I’ll try.”

“I’ve never met anyone who hated needles as much as you,” Alex said, like we were talking over tea. As he spoke he secured a plastic tie above my elbow, and immediately everything below it felt heavier and hot. “I treat toddlers. Their brains are basically still jelly, and they keep things together.” I heard a rip, then felt the coolness of an alcohol wipe against my skin. “Deep breath,” he said. “Now let it out,” and I complied. “Nothing to see here, nothing to see.”

And then. Nothing happened. I could sense the needle, hovering just above my skin, and my shoulders tightened to my ears. Alex made a sound, *mmmmm*, like he was confused. After a second he sound repeated, this time like he was angry. I heard a small clatter, the syringe set down on the counter, and I knew what had happened. I’d given him the wrong arm.

On the inside of my left elbow, faint unless you knew to look for them, were four concentric scars, four perfect circles in a neat line. His index finger traced down the row, stayed pressed just below the final dot.

“Jane, are these from the chicken pox?”

I shook my head.

“Did you do this to yourself, Jane?” I didn’t answer, and he repeated himself, his voice harder and colder. “Jane,” he said.

“Yup,” I said, opening my eyes. I could only look at his face for a moment, before having to look away. “Sure did. One day, when I was five, I decided that I was making too much goddamn noise and ruining my goddamn hangover and couldn’t I ever just fucking shut up, so I decided to put out my cigarette on my arm and that would fucking teach me.” I made myself meet his eyes again. “Learned my lesson, real good.”

As soon as I’d said the words, I realized: Alex was the first person I’d ever told. Grandmother had known, because she’d found me shortly after it happened. Mother had known, because Grandmother told her. Greenie, I realized, had guessed, some part of it, why I was so timid and skittish.

But I had never said the words out loud, not to anyone. I’d never even written them down.

“Is this why you don’t have a father?” he asked.

I laughed, until I realized I was actually crying. “No,” I said. “That’s why I don’t have a step-father named Steven.” I shrugged: *What can you do?*

Alex put a hand on my face, brought his head in until our noses almost touched. “I won’t yell anymore,” he said. “I promise.”

As he pulled back the door opened, and Robby entered with a plastic cup of cloudy liquid. “No blood yet?” he asked.

“We couldn’t find the smelling salts,” I explained, wiping at my eyes.

“And I dropped the hypo,” Alex said, gesturing at the uncapped syringe on the counter.

“Bloody amateur hour,” Robby said, extending the cup to me. “Drink that.” He turned to rummage in a drawer. After I drank the rehydration solution, three long

swallows with my nose plugged, Alex drew blood while Robby took down my blood pressure and temperature.

“If I gave you more water,” Robby asked, “do you think you could pee in a cup?”

I nodded after a grimace. “No more salt water, please.”

“Ah, but when you’re dehydrated you flush out all the good salts. Got to get them back up. Are you diabetic?”

I shrugged, palms completely upturned. “My first instinct is to say no.”

“I suspect,” Alex said, “that if you were truly diabetic, your first instinct would be to lie about it, never seek treatment, and die.”

“Ouch,” I said to him. “We were doing so well.”

“Oh, children,” Robby said. “Play nicely. Jane, you can pee tomorrow, once I’ve ruled a few things out. I’m on all night, I’ll run some tests, call in the morning. Hopefully, my dear,” Robby said, as he extended a hand to pull me out of the chair, “you’ll never have to see me again. At least, not in this dump.”

“That would be nice,” I agreed. “Not to be in this hospital, ever again.” Just to be sure, I asked, “So, I don’t have to stay here? I can go home?”

“Well,” Robby said, tilting his head to the left and lowering his chin, “you can post up in the doctor’s spare room. Make sure he gives you the green quilt. It’s full of good dreams.”

“Like a magic blankey?” I asked.

Robby threw back his head and laughed. “I bet you’re a riot at full power, Jane.”

I dozed in the car, waking to Alex gently nudging my shoulder. His house wasn't what I expected, a brick townhouse set back from the street by small but tidy yard. I'd imagined something like his office, glass and clean lines, a dozen floors above a busy street. This street was quiet, lit by well-spaced streetlights.

"I'm going to go unlock, turn on a few lights," he said. "Wait here and I'll be back to help you."

I wanted to contradict him, but he'd done so much to help, when he could've ignored Bianca, or told her to drop me at the nearest emergency room. I nodded instead.

"You aren't going to fight me?" he asked with a smile. "Just going to do as your bid for once?"

"I was trying to be nice. I've argued with you enough for one night. I can wait here." I pillowed my hands beneath my head and turned into the headrest to pantomime sleeping. I must've really dozed though, since Alex had to nudge me awake again. Out of the car, he wrapped an arm around me and took shortened steps to guide me into his house.

I plopped down on the sofa, soft navy suede deep enough for two to lie down comfortably. I felt my eyes drooping again, and shook myself awake, determined not to fall asleep in a shirt that smelled faintly of sweat and vomit. I stood up, hoping to buy myself a few seconds of alertness, and studied the framed pictures hanging behind the sofa. In the largest, a young ginger-headed boy sat perched on the hip of an Indian

woman. Behind them stood an older man with white hair and a full white beard, resting one hand on a cane. Alex and his grandfather and the nanny, I thought. It explained so much.

Alex emerged from the back of the house, a gift box in his hands. He extended the box to me. “Pajamas,” he said. “Clean. Never worn. The second door on the left is the spare bedroom.”

“A gift?” I asked, taking the box from him.

“Yes,” he nodded.

“A gift from,” I said, letting the last word trail off.

Alex huffed, smiling and grimacing in the same second. “Second door,” he said, gesturing with his head. The pajamas were made of a thick, slippery fabric, the same rich maroon of his eyes, with white piping around the cuffs and collar. Where the breast pocket would be was a large monogram in a sharp, decidedly masculine font: AEL. Elka had put thought into this gift, maybe hoped for pajamas in return, a drawer in the closet. Alex arrived at the coffee shop dressed to go out. The dots were easy enough to connect.

“What does the L stand for?” I asked Alex when I rejoined him in the living room. He was standing in front of the same picture I’d been studying, a glass of cloudy liquid in one hand.

“Lakishmi,” he said, passing me the glass. “My mother’s maiden name.” He gestured to the photo, young Alex, not perched on the nanny’s hip after all. That explained his odd coloring, then, the red hair and nearly red eyes, the lack of freckles. “Drink up,” he said, tapping the glass that I hadn’t lifted yet. “Or you’ll go on a drip tomorrow.”

I gulped down the rehydration solution as quickly as I could, trying to ignore the salty aftertaste. “Grandfather?” I asked, handing back the glass and pointing to the picture.

“Father,” he corrected, and chuckled when I made a noise of surprise. “He was seventy-five when I was born. Stationed in India while it was still a colony, then retired and stayed on when they gained independence. Met her at wandering through the night market decades later, when he was seventy-one.”

“So, like, he bought her?” I asked, then immediately regretted it.

“No, Jane,” he said, disappointed. “That’s not how I choose to think of it.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled, chin to chest.

“She had a terrible pregnancy,” he continued, reaching out to tap the face of his toddler self. “They wanted more, but I almost killed her. Decided it wasn’t worth the risk.” He turned to me. “I was going to see her tonight, my mum. Not Elka.”

I waved a hand in his direction to show my disinterest. “I don’t care who you have dinner with,” I told him.

“Well,” he said, then stopped. “Okay. But it was my mother.”

I chuckled a bit, in spite of myself. “Just your mother? Not your father?” I asked.

Alex smiled again. “He died when I was twenty-one.” I did the math in my head: his father would’ve been ninety-six. “Feisty to the end, even when I had to read the crossword clues for him.”

“You’re very lucky,” I said, and I meant it. Two decades of a biological father whose memory elicited fond smiles. I had no frame of reference at all.

He nodded, smiling with loneliness but not grief. “About Elka,” he began, determined to have this conversation.

“You don’t, you don’t own me an explanation,” I said. “It’s not any of my business.”

“I have not seen Elka since that night. I have apologized profusely, to her, for my behavior. I have not seen anyone, you know, romantically, since that evening, in the hopes that I might somehow run into you.” When I said nothing, he added, “Sometimes, in the course of a relationship, people make mistakes. Then they apologize for those mistakes, and try very hard to not make mistakes again.”

I laughed; it sounded so similar to advice I’d given once. “Is that what people in relationships do?” I asked.

“What do *you* do in relationships, Jane?” he countered, looking at me.

“I have sex with people. And then, when they’re asleep, I sneak out of their houses so I never have to see them again.”

We blinked at each other for a few seconds. “So we’re both starting from zero here,” he said. “Fantastic.”

He leaned towards me, slightly, smiling. My mouth tasted gross, though, and it felt too much like I might still owe him something. “I’d like to sleep now,” I said, before he could get too close.

“Of course,” he agreed after a pause. He smiled, completely free of disappointment, and I went bonelessly tired with relief. “The magic blanket is already on the bed.”

I let out a small sigh when I stretched out under the covers. “This bed is just right,” I said softly.

He was backlit by the hall lights, and I could only make out Alex’s silhouette, like a talking shadow. “Loo is right across,” he said. “Next door is a closet. After that is me.”

I nodded into the pillow, my eyes barely open.

“If you don’t promise to wake me if you’re sick, I’ll come in and check on you every hour. Do you promise?”

I nodded again, then extended a pinky from under the covers, the way I’d always sealed the deal with Greenie. He kept one hand on the doorframe, still able to lean far enough into the room to link pinkies with me. “Promise,” I agreed, as he pulled back.

I woke the next morning, my left arm asleep from laying on it all night. The pins and needles in my hand roused me, not the full bladder that often got me out of bed. Maybe I was a little dehydrated.

I found Alex in the kitchen, a glass of vivid orange sports drink on the counter in front of him. His cell phone was wedged between his chin and shoulder and he made notes on a pad, making small noises of agreement. He interrupted the person on the other line to say, “Hang on, she’s up now.”

He beamed me with the hand not holding the pen, then gestured to the glass on the counter. I stepped up, reaching for the glass, and his still-extended hand pressed into the side of my neck. I jolted in surprise, only to be hushed.

“Her pulse is still quite high,” he said.

“You did just scare me,” I replied. I took a petulant sip of my sports drink, backing out of his reach.

After making a few more notes, Alex hung up without having said goodbye. He set the phone facedown on the counter and turned to me. I made a show of finishing the drink and setting my glass down. “Which do you want first,” he began, “the—“

“Bad news,” I interrupted. “Bad new first.”

Alex sighed, one corner of his mouth twitching. “You are severely anemic, so much so that I think you need a blood transfusion, at least one.”

I blinked several times in relief. *Blood transfusion* sounded bad, but anemia was manageable. I just needed vitamins. “Okay, that’s not bad at all. What’s the good news?”

“There is no good news,” he said with a straight face. “It’s bad news and worse news. You didn’t let me finish.”

I waited for him to crack a smile, but he didn’t. He was serious. I opened my mouth, but instead of saying anything I reared back and punched him in the arm. “You asshole,” I said, shaking out my fist. I suspected I had hurt myself far more than I’d hurt him.

“Don’t fold your thumb under your fingers,” he said, taking my punching hand. He repositioned my fingers, curling them back around into a proper fist. “Keep your thumb outside. Otherwise, if you hit hard enough you’ll break your own thumb.”

“You’re an asshole,” I said, pulling my hand back. “That was awful. You know I thought there was good news.” He didn’t say anything, but had the decency to look slightly chagrined. “Give me the worse news, then.”

He turned and spoke to the stove instead of me. “You have less than half the red blood cells a healthy woman your age should have. For it to be that severe, it’s typically a side effect of something more serious.”

“Like?” I asked, drawing out the long vowel sound even as my heart thudded in my ears.

“Like cancer,” he answered after a pause. “Given your symptoms, cancer is the most likely culprit.”

The thudding stopped, as did every other sound. All noise seemed to pull back from me, leaving me in a vacuum. Alex's hand was on my arm, and I realized he'd been speaking to me. I shook my head, made my eyes focus on his face.

Alex stood, then laid a hand on my shoulder. "I'm going to fix a cuppa. Maybe a hamburger. We'll figure this out."

"Don't be nice. Don't pretend you're a nice person. What you did right now was cruel." I said. "Turning around and acting nice is worse." And then the tears came.

While he filled the kettle, I walked back into the sitting room and began looking around for an escape route. There was a door on the opposite wall, that, if I was lucky, would lead to some kind of alley I could sneak down.

Of course, there was no way for me to escape. The door opened to a small yard, just a few square feet of grass. Barefoot in a pair of borrowed pajamas, intellectually I understood this was better. There was a wooden patio table, and two plastic lawn chairs, the kind with high armrests and deep, scooped seats. I flung myself down into one of the chairs, only to remember the sound of the rainfall last night as I splashed down in about half an inch of water.

"Stupendous," I said, turning my eyes upward. "Just tremendous work you're doing here." I don't know if I was talking to God or the universe or Greenie, but someone up there, *out there*, had cocked things up.

After a few minutes, I heard the backdoor open. Alex joined me at the table, though he had the forethought to tilt the chair until it rested on its front two legs, letting the collected rain drain onto the patio. The fact that he'd have a mostly dry ass made me mad at him all over again.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was cruel.”

“I’m sorry, too,” I said. I’d been the only one to throw a punch, after all. When he didn’t say anything, I continued, “I used to be a nice person. You never got to meet her, but there used to be a Jane who could hold a pleasant, civil conversation.”

“I don’t find you to be too terrible,” Alex said.

“Of course not,” I said. “You’re awful, too.” The retort was out of my mouth before the words caught up to my brain. “See,” I said, throwing my hands into the air, exasperated with myself. “That’s a thing a terrible person would say. And I made fun of your dad. *And*, I called you a sadist. *Again*. After I hit you.”

“It didn’t hurt,” he said.

“I meant it to, Alex,” I assured him. “I wish it hurt. Because I am *terrible*.”

Alex *hmmmed* in agreement. “I could’ve done better, though. Sometimes a bloke is asking for a punch.”

He’d meant to make me laugh, but I wasn’t ready to be cheered yet. “The other day in the park a little kid dropped his ice cream. Plop, right on the ground. He started bawling, just yelling his lungs off. You know what I thought? *For fuck’s sake, that’s nothing. You don’t have real problems, asshole.* Who does that? Who thinks that about a kid?” When Alex didn’t answer, I put my forehead down on the table. A few more tears crept out, silently at least.

“This is going to make you mad,” Alex said, “but hear me out.” I didn’t answer, which was all the permission I was willing to give. “I’m not sure you were ever *nice*, Jane. I think you were always a bit like this, and you were just better behaved.”

“Asshole,” I mumbled into the wooden tabletop.

Alex laughed. Though I didn't look at him, it sounded like a proper, head-thrown-back laugh. He scuffed my shoulder. "I didn't actually notice you until two weeks after I thought I'd noticed you," he continued.

"That makes you sound like an idiot. I can't believe people trust you with their lives," I replied.

"Mostly they trust me with stitches and sore throats. It's why we're seeing a specialist today," Alex said. "Can I explain?"

I nodded, my head still against the table. The scratch of the tabletop against my cheek was comforting, a tangible sort of pain where I could focus my feelings.

"At first I thought I had noticed your blonde friend," he began.

"Oh, I knew it," I said. "I told her you weren't looking at me."

"No, but I was," he countered. "After I figured out why I was looking at your friend. I didn't notice her because I thought she was fit, I noticed her because she was always laughing. And I realized she was always laughing because she was talking to you. Everyone who was talking to you was laughing. They were all so happy to be around you, and that's what I noticed."

"That is," I said after waiting long enough to speak that I knew it would make him nervous, "the kindest, most flattering bit of dickishness I have ever heard."

He laughed again. His forearms rested on the table, and the whole thing shook with the laughter coursing through him. "See? I suspect you were always the Jane who wanted to tell assholes when they were getting out of hand. Or when they're being stupid or cruel. Maybe that Jane had better manners, but I like this Jane. She makes me laugh. I'm never bored."

I kept my head on the table, but turned my neck so I could open my eyes and look at Alex. He laid his head on the table beside mine and we stared at each other for a bit.

“Am I going to die?” I asked.

“We’re all going to die, Jane.”

“That’s not a no,” I replied.

Alex pulled the hem of his sweatshirt over his thumb and used the fabric to sop up my tears and a bit of the snot. I laughed, because the whole thing was ridiculous, and also it tickled. When he pulled the sleeve back it was crusty with boogers.

“Ugh, gross,” I whined.

“Yes, very,” he agreed, and we laughed some more. “I think you need to get dressed, and I need another shirt, and then we’re going to figure out what’s wrong with you.” He sat up and grimaced at his sleeve.

“What if I don’t want to know what’s wrong with me? If I have cancer, but I never find out that I have cancer, then it’s like I actually don’t have cancer at all.”

Alex looked down at me with disdain. “That’s quite stupid.”

“It’s, like, Schrödinger’s anemia. And I get to live forever.”

“Not actually how it works.” Alex pushed back from the table, stood up and turned towards the house. “Up then,” he instructed, waving me towards the door. “Come on.”

“My butt is wet because I didn’t dump out my chair. I sat in a puddle.” Alex scrunched his face and spread his hands in confusion. “In case you thought I peed,” I elaborated. “I didn’t. I sat in a puddle.”

Alex deliberately sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“For the record,” I said, “either Jane would’ve done this. There’s no version of Jane that isn’t socially mortifying.”

The second car ride to the hospital was so much worse, even though Alex made every effort to keep up a stream of cheerful conversation. Last night I was a woman who got dizzy and nauseated on occasion, just like everyone. This morning I was a woman who probably had cancer.

Robby met us at the door this time, instead of the parking lot. He didn’t look like he’d slept, and I felt guilty that he’d spent the night running tests on my blood.

I must’ve frowned, because Robby said, “Docs on the night shift never sleep. I always look like this come morning.”

“This is actually more handsome than I’ve ever seen him,” Alex added. We all chuckled, rewarding the attempt at humor more than the success of the joke.

“I do have to go home,” Robby said, “and sleep off some of this ugly, but I gave the file to Liz in oncology. On four. She’s expecting you.”

“It’s not necessarily cancer,” Alex said in the elevator. We were the only passengers in a lift big enough to accommodate two gurneys.

“If we leave right now, it’s Schrodinger’s cancer, and I never have to die,” I replied. I badly wanted to throw up the Gatorade, but didn’t want anyone else to have to clean up after me.

Alex and Liz exchanged quick kisses on the cheek, then set to murmuring over a manila folder. We were in another exam room, this one cleaner and better-appointed than the one from last night. I sat on the examination table, swinging my legs with feigned nonchalance.

“Hullo, Jane,” Liz said to me, her Scottish accent as soothing as a cup of cocoa. “We need to do a bone marrow biopsy.”

“Hello, Liz,” I told her. “I am going to faint.”

“It’s not as bad as all that, I’ll numb the area,” Liz began, as Alex surged forward to catch my shoulders.

“Not an exaggeration,” he said. “You’ll be lucky if she only faints the once.”

After being threatened with a sachet of smelling salts and peeing into a cup, I ended up on my side, curled into the fetal position, facing the wall. Alex sat on a chair next to my head, his back against the wall, one hand covering my eyes. The borrowed sweatpants were rucked down precariously low under the sterile sheet that covered my lower body. A hole in the sheet, about two inches in diameter, exposed the skin directly above my right hipbone. Liz swabbed the area with an antiseptic, every pass making me flinch. I hadn’t fainted yet, though Liz might’ve found it preferable, if her huffs of exasperation were anything to judge by.

“You have to lie still,” Alex said softly.

“I’m trying,” I muttered, curling more tightly into myself. I’d taken two Valium half an hour earlier, but still felt like a just-burned sparkler, hot and sparky.

“The worst part is the lidocaine injection,” Liz said. “After that it should all just feel like pressure. Are you ready?”

“No,” I said. “But I’m never going to get more ready, so go ahead.” My hands were clenched in fists, and I pulled them in under my chin.

I felt Alex’s free hand wrap around one of my hands, prying my fingers loose. “Squeeze down,” he said. “Hard as you can. We already know you can’t hurt me.”

“So spiteful,” I complained. I took his hand in both of mine, one hand squeezing his fingers, the other circling his wrist as tightly as I could. I gasped as a thin needle punctured my hip. I forced myself not to wiggle or tremble, the effort from keeping still making my lungs ache.

The needle moved slowly, until it struck bone. Liz made a quiet *a-ha* sound and the needle withdrew slightly. Feeling the hypodermic moving under my skin, then feeling the creep of something cold spreading out from around the needle made me gag.

“Exhale,” Alex instructed. “Inhale. You’re doing very well.”

“I hate everything,” I said, tasting bile. “Especially you.” The needle moved again, pulling up another miniscule amount. This time I could feel it moving, could feel the creeping coolness under my skin, but it didn’t hurt as much. “I can still feel it.”

“Does it hurt?” Liz asked.

“No,” I said. I furrowed my brow, making sure it was true. “It just feels...there.”

“The nerves around the numbed area are getting pulled, and your brain is trying to fill in the blanks for the numbed areas,” she explained. “Your body knows you should be feeling something, so it’s compensating.”

The needle moved under my skin, up and down, spreading the lidocaine. I tensed again as Liz withdrew the hypodermic. “Do you want me to talk you through what I’m doing?” she asked. “It helps some people.”

“Nope,” I said as steadily as I could, and Alex chuckled. “I want zero information about what comes next.” I’d watched enough medical dramas through my fingers to want to know any more about bone marrow acquisition.

“Have you ever been to India?” Alex asked me. I let his glaringly obvious distractionary gambit wash over me, trying to unscrew the muscles of my face as Alex described his school mates’ disappointment that his tales never included incense or mangos or monkey in the kitchen. “It’s a place, like any other place, really,” he said. “Better food, sure, but never exotic enough for my friends.”

“You grew up here?” I asked.

“Very hard to get British citizenship if you aren’t born here, even when your Da’s retired military. Easier to be born here.”

“I thought you were Irish,” I said through gritted teeth. I could sense the larger needle slipping towards my hipbone. Something slid down my skin, towards the table. It was blood, my blood, I realized, and I tightened my grip on Alex’s wrist.

“Almost done,” he said, and I felt pressure against my hip.

“All done,” Liz corrected. “Roll onto your back, and that will put pressure on the wound.”

I winced as I maneuvered onto my back, blinking against the lights. “How long until I can leave?” I asked. I rolled my head to the side, allowing me to see the tops of Alex’s and Liz’s faces.

“Alex is going to run this over to the lab, get some tests started. I’ve got a few questions for you,” Liz said.

“And you might still need a transfusion,” Alex added.

“Shouldn’t you have asked the questions first,” I said.

“The Valium was not actually for anxiety,” Alex said. He leaned down and kissed my forehead. “The Valium was to make you too disoriented to lie.”

After Alex left, Liz asked me a series of questions I would’ve been embarrassed to answer in front of him. No children, no pregnancies, no miscarriages, no tattoos, normal menstrual cycle, one bout of chlamydia two years ago cleared up with antibiotics.

“What happens if I have cancer?” I asked.

“Depends on the type, and the severity,” Liz answered. “And if you even have cancer. You might just need more spinach and less stress in your life.”

“And a blood transfusion,” I said, sounding so much more pathetic than I’d intended. “That was supposed to be a joke,” I added lamely.

“Transfusions aren’t ever our first choice, unless it’s an emergency. We can give you a couple of different injections today, and re-test your blood in a week or so.”

Sensing my doubt, Liz smiled. “Alex is a worry-wart. I suspect you’re not going to need anything more serious than weekly B12 and iron injections for a couple of months.”

“Then why did we do all this?” I wailed, throwing my arms at the ceiling. My arms moved as though through water, *hello Valium*, and the motion pulled at my sore hip.

“Oww,” I added as Liz laughed.

“Because I owe Alex several favors, because this will be an interesting case study to write up, and because there just might be something seriously wrong and we need to catch it as soon as possible.”

I covered my eyes with a forearm. “Does Valium make everyone cry?” I asked.

Liz rested a hand on the arm covering my eyes. “Please don’t borrow trouble, Jane. You’re going to be fine. You’re in good hands. I don’t mean mine.”

I snorted, then used my wrist to wipe away the snot. “Here’s hoping.” Liz left the room for rounds, dimming the lights on her way out, and I drifted into a semi-conscious Valium fog. The clatter of an IV stand being rolled into the room woke me, though I didn’t know how long I’d been drowsing. I turned my head to see who had entered the room, and couldn’t check my smile when Alex’s face fell.

“You couldn’t stay asleep for this bit?” he asked.

I cut my eyes to the two bags of clear fluid on the stand, then back to him. “I could always just faint,” I offered.

“Don’t tempt me,” he replied, hooking the stool with a foot and sliding it beside the bed. “Transfusions are a last resort, but you’re fluids are too low. We’ve got saline, electrolytes, and something for nausea.”

“Do I have cancer?” I asked.

“Results aren’t back yet,” he replied, lifting my hand and swabbing the top with an alcohol wipe. I gritted my teeth and turned my head to the wall, muscles tensed, as the needle pierced the top of my head. Almost immediately I felt coldness spreading underneath my skin.

“We should still get a family history,” he said.

“Once upon a time I had a family. Mostly it was okay, occasionally it was dreadful, I live in London so I don’t have to deal with them, then end,” I said to the ceiling.

Alex reached across my body and folded the fingers of my non-needled hand around his cellphone. “Call your mother. If we can rule something out or start looking in the right direction it’ll make a world of difference.”

My mother was barely awake and deeply annoyed when she lifted the phone on the fifth ring. I hadn’t given any thought to the time difference.

“Jesus Christ, Jane, it’s three o’clock in the morning. Someone had better be dying.”

“Ha, ha, Mom, funny story,” I replied. “I’m dying. What can you tell me about my father?”

Leaning against the doorway, pretending not to listen to our conversation, Alex made a choking, snorted sound.

“What are you talking about?” Mother asked, sounding much more alert.

“I might have cancer. My doctor wants a family history?”

Behind me Alex snapped his fingers to get my attention. When I turned my head to look at him, he mouthed the words *Leave you to it*, and let himself out. I sighed into the phone when I heard the click of the door. “My father?” I prompted.

“You don’t call for weeks, and then, when you do,” Mother said, her voice trailing off. “Are you okay, Jane? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, Mother, that’s why I’m calling. I’m anemic, I keep fainting. I had a bone marrow biopsy today. The doctor wants to know what runs in my family so he knows where to look.”

In the silence I could picture Mother’s concerned face perfectly, the W-shaped furrow between her brows, the hand she rested at the base of her throat, the way her lips

would purse until it almost appeared she was blowing a kiss. I began to clench my fingers in the fabric of the borrowed sweatpants, but stopped when I felt the needle twinge in my hand.

“How long has this been going on?” she asked. “Can I speak to the doctor?”

My hand twitched again, and I had to talk myself into relaxing my jaw. “No,” I said. “I’m sorry. No.” I took a breath, then another. “I don’t want to talk about it. I want to know about my father. That’s it.”

“You haven’t been in touch for nearly a year. You don’t call, you barely answer your emails,” she continued.

I twinged a bit at the accusation. I knew I intended to answer the last round of emails, but I had been ignoring them for weeks now. *Tomorrow*, I told myself, every time I logged out of my account. “I know,” I mumbled. “That’s wrong of me.”

Mother huffed in response. Neither of us spoke for several seconds. I had opened my mouth to ask again, steeling myself to do it politely this time, when Mother finally spoke. “Your father died, Jane. He passed away.”

I felt hollow, like whatever was supposed to be inside me was just gone. “How?” I asked with a voice I didn’t recognize.

“He drank himself to death. His kidneys gave out.” After a pause, Mother continued. “He was an alcoholic, Jane. He was a wreck all his life, and not in any shape to be a father.”

“How old?” I asked. “How old was I when he died?”

“It doesn’t change anything, Jane. He never would’ve been there,” she pled.

“How old was I?” I repeated.

“You were sixteen when he died,” she said finally.

“Jesus Christ,” I yelled. “Fuck! Were you never going to tell me?”

“It must be so nice for you to have another reason to hate me,” Mother said.

I felt my lips curl with derision. “All the time, you ask. You say to me, why is it so hard for me to forgive you.” I could picture my mother’s face, the night I had boiled over at dinner and made her cry. “I want to know why it’s so hard for you to apologize.” My voice was steadier than it had been in the restaurant. Everything gets easier with practice, even saying words you know will cut.

Mother gasped, but she didn’t answer.

“Because you’ve never,” I continued. “You probably don’t think you need to apologize for never telling me about my father. You’ve never apologized for the way Steven treated me, or for how long you stayed with him.”

I listened to her snuffle, unwilling to fill the silence. I wasn’t sure what would happen if I spoke, if I’d forgive her or say something even worse.

“This isn’t even about your father,” she said. “You still want to punish me for the mistakes Steven made.”

“*Mistakes?*” I demanded, incredulous.

“The place we’re from,” she began, “it means something. To stand up and make vows in front of God. It’s shameful enough to be divorced once.”

“That’s an excuse,” I said. “Not an apology. You stayed with a man who hit me more days than he didn’t because you took vows before God.”

“I wish I could make this right, Jane,” she said through tears.

“Do you think if you don’t actually apologize then it isn’t actually your fault?” I asked. “Because I think it’s your fault.”

“You’re not being fair to me,” Mother insisted.

“I hate you,” I said. “I do.” I ended the call, and squeezed the phone as tightly as I could. I wanted to hurl it against the wall. Instead I kicked my heels against the table, but had to stop immediately when pain shot from the sight of the biopsy.

“And now it’s *worse*,” I screamed at the universe. Unsurprisingly, the universe had nothing to say in its own defense.

* * *

A few minutes later there was a gentle rapping on the door, followed by Alex’s voice. “One of the orderlies heard screaming,” he said, sticking his head in the door.

“That was me,” I said.

He came fully into the room, and sat back on the stool beside the exam table.

“Was it at all a productive conversation?” he asked. “Or just a lot of yelling?”

“My father drank himself to death. He died of kidney failure.”

“You’re sure of that? Kidney failure?”

“I think you’re missing the point here,” I said, twitching away from the hand he laid on my brow. “My father is dead. He’s been dead for eight years and no one bothered to tell me.”

Alex moved his hand to my shoulder, gently rested his fingertips at the side of my arm. “Jane, please. His kidneys?”

“What if he was good?” I cried, reaching up to push his hand away. “What if I could’ve had a good father?”

“What if he’d been shit? What if he’d been worse than what you already lived through?” Alex countered. A second later he easily caught the hand I flung in the direction of his face, hoping to connect with his nose.

“Fuck off,” I muttered. I tried to roll away from him, towards the wall, but the pain in my hip stopped me again.

“I am British,” he said. “It is how we think.” Each word was it’s own sentence, tumbling like a domino into the next. “We don’t dwell or romanticize or play *what if*. We just don’t. Also, please stop trying to hit me.”

I swallowed, making space for what I wanted to say. “You have been very kind to me, but sometimes you say things that are cruel.”

“You and funny and loyal and intelligent and mostly kind,” Alex replied. “But sometimes you try to punch my nose.”

I laughed weakly. It sounded like a gargle. “Everything’s ruined,” I said.

Alex threw up his hands, then pressed them into his face. “You yanks are such emotional tossers. Perfectly good at finishing a fight, but God forbid anyone asks you to actually live through something.”

“Hey,” I protested.

“When I was six,” Alex began, “we went to visit my father’s family. My cousins were all very near thirty, and one of them had just bought a dirtbike. He offered to take me for a ride. I begged and begged, but my da said no. Then next day my cousin was hit by a delivery van, completely banjaxed. They had to take his right leg at the knee.”

“That’s awful,” I said.

“*The point,*” he continued, “is that when he woke and started crying about never playing football again, my uncle said, *Jaysus, Owain, youse were never going to the World Cup. Bawling won’t fix a thing.*”

“That’s awful,” I repeated through fingertips pressed to my lips in horror.

“My uncle loves his son. Loves him with all his heart. Brits have stiff-upper-lipped themselves through several millennia of shite. It’s just our way.”

I frowned, offering my most pathetic scowl.

“Fine,” he acquiesced. “Yes. I am sorry your father has passed. I truly am. But he is dead, and you are not, and I care more about keeping you that way than I care about feelings right now.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Good,” Alex replied.

“Is that why you became a doctor?” I asked. “Because you wanted to help your cousin?”

“No,” he answered with a decisive shake of his head. “I became a doctor because I wanted respect and a nice car. I wanted my mother to have something to lord over all her cousins.”

“And,” I prompted, gently poking his arm. “And...?”

Alex winced, his nose twitching. “And because seeing someone I looked up to hurt ruined me and I never wanted to feel that way again.”

“See,” I exclaimed. “Was that so hard?”

“It was,” he replied. “My mouth tastes of burnt meat and I’ll likely have to surrender my citizenship. I hope you’re proud of yourself. Now I’m Dutch.”

“Dutch people are great,” I said.

“They are not,” he shot back. “Name one Dutch person.”

I could only shrug.

“Fair warning,” he said. “I would like to return the conversation to your illness.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Your mother said—“

“I told her I hated her,” I interrupted.

Alex turned away from me and blinked slowly at the far wall. His hands clenched and unclenched where they rested atop his thighs. The tendons stretching down his fingers made little hills and valleys.

“You want to say something about how I just called you unkind,” I ventured.

“Mmmmm, no,” he said through thinned lips. “Not at all.”

“I’m the worst,” I said.

Alex shook his head and exhaled, like shaking off raindrops. He chuckled and turned back to me. “No,” he said, laying the back of his hand against my cheek. “I can think of at least a dozen people worse than you,” he continued with a smile. “Hitler, for example. Pol Pot.”

“I’d like to point out that neither of those men were Dutch.”

He threw his head back with a startled laugh. “Touché.” Alex took a deep breath, raising his shoulders to his ears, letting them drop as he exhaled. “Take two.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Your mother believes your father died of kidney failure brought on by alcoholism?”

“Correct.”

“The organ most likely to fail due to alcohol consumption is the liver. You may have inherited weak kidneys.”

“Would bad kidneys cause anemia?” I asked.

“We need to ask a specialist, but yes, I believe they could,” he said.

“How?”

He laughed again. “Jane, I am fond of you. But you are on sedatives and an emotional wreck. I will explain the science tomorrow.”

“That’s fair,” I allowed. “Should I call my mother back?”

“Only if you think it won’t make things worse,” he said, rising.

“Things can’t get worse,” I replied.

Alex bent and kissed my forehead again. “You have so much to learn about being British, love. Things can always get worse.”

“Great,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“All things considered, it rather is,” he said. “Get some rest.”

I let my eyes drift shut, barely registering the click as the door latched home behind Alex. His phone still rested at my side. I thought I might call my mother later, out of this hospital. Tomorrow, when I had slept and showered. Tomorrow, the same as my unanswered emails. *Now or never*, I thought to myself.

Mother answered on the second ring, her voice like sandpaper from crying.

“Hello, Jane.”

“Hi, Mom.”

I wondered which one of us would begin. It was her. “I thought he would kill us, Jane. I thought if I tried to leave he would kill you to punish me. He could of set me on fire, and it wouldn’t hurt as much as watching him hurt you.

My heart thudded like I’d taken the stairs out of Covent Garden double time. I opened my mouth to answer only to find my tongue trapped between my teeth, bitten to the quick.

“You are my child,” Mother continued. “I love you more than I love being alive. And I am sorry I could not keep you safe. I am sorry I never did enough to convince you how much you mean to me.”

“Oh, God, Mom. Oh, God,” I sobbed.

“All those articles you post on Facebook about toxic masculinity, and you can’t cut your own mother a little slack.”

I yelped out a laugh, which turned into an elongated wheeze. Soon we were both laughing, jagged little barks like hammer blows against glass. Nothing in my life had ever been so funny. *I am losing my mind*, I thought. *This is what it feels like.*

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I said as our laughter died. “I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, darling,” she said. “It’s okay.”

“I don’t hate you,” I continued. “I don’t hate you at all.”

“I know you don’t hate me,” Mother said. “Just like I don’t hate you.”

“I forgive you. And I love you. And I’m so sorry.” I choked over the last words, as my tears started again.

“Stop apologizing,” she said, but I could hear her smile. “What did you say do me? We forgive each other and we just do hurt each other any more?”

“Is it that easy?” I said with a smile of my own.

“Aren’t you tired of it being hard?” she replied.

We breathed together for a few minutes. “I’m falling asleep,” I yawned into the phone. “And you should go back to bed.”

“Wait,” she said. “Did the doctor say anything? Do they know what’s happening?”

“The doctor thinks it might be something that he.” I paused, swallowed. “That my father died of kidney failure.”

“That’s good,” Mother said. “Or, not good. But, if it helps.”

“I know what you meant,” I said. “I’ll call when I know something. I’ll call tomorrow, no matter what, and explain everything.”

“Okay, sweetheart. Rest well.”

“Sleep tight, Mom,” I said. I ended the call, and folded my hands over my abdomen. For the first time I could recall, my face felt completely slack. My jaw was loose, and nothing was pinched in a grimace or frown.

“Thanks, Valium,” I mouthed, even though I knew that wasn’t the reason at all.

“Schrodinger’s anemia!” I shouted at Alex, the first time a patient emergency kept him at the clinic and he forgot to call, leaving me alone in a curry shop.

“Schrodinger’s anemia,” I cried when he surprised me with symphony tickets the same night as Bianca’s birthday.

“You can’t just throw that back at me forever,” he said.

“Sure I can,” I replied. “Absolutely that is what I plan on doing, *forever*.”

“Unless I’m very much mistaken,” he said, after a pause, “we both just agreed on *forever* as an acceptable time frame, and that is a legally binding contract.” He smiled expansively, the fans by his eyes as deep as I’d ever seen them.

“Wait,” I said, trying to figure out what had just happened.

“Yippee,” Alex said. “Mum will be so pleased.”

In addition to the iron supplements I took every day, washed down with Powerade or rehydration solution, I had to have monthly injections of B12 and synthetic erythropoietin, a hormone my kidneys didn’t feel the need to produce on their own. It took another few weeks of prodding to figure out my kidneys were the problem, but nothing so traumatic as the first trip to the hospital. I’d ended up being a very interesting case study for Liz to write up.

“We should call your mother, too,” Alex added.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “Next week, though.” With an ocean between us, Mother and I had never gotten along so well. Eventually we’d have to go home and visit, make proper introductions, but that was a worry for another day. I was learning not to borrow trouble.

My first months of running, I hated nothing more than someone passing me. My first weeks, this often took the form of a hurrying commuter, a office man behind schedule walking faster than I could manage to jog. I felt it between my shoulders, a sharp claw drawing my muscles together too tightly, worsening every time someone made their way around me. I almost quit the first race I ran, barely completing two of the five kilometers, the failure digging into my muscles so much worse than any shin splints.

I finished the race, but I refused to be proud of myself. I wouldn’t even pretend at accomplishment when others asked me about it. I accidentally on purpose left my participation medal behind on the tube, and screamed at Bianca when she suggested trying to track it down.

* * *

I volunteered at a water station for the marathon, hoping to catch sight of Finn and Madga as they ran and cheer them on. I think I spotted the top of Finn’s head, but he didn’t stop at my table. I told each and every runner who stopped *good job*, and congratulated my friends as we celebrated later at the pub. Alex had trained enough he

could've attempted the marathon, but instead hung out in one of the first aid tents. I would've been proud of him, of course, but I was also glad he wasn't running and we weren't working the water station together. Maybe next year we could both run.

He took the next week off from the clinic, and on Monday morning we drove up to the Lake District, trunk full of books and board games and sturdy hiking boots we'd broken in walking up and down the stairs in his office building. He told me he intended to keep our room at the inn until he could consistently beat me in Scrabble. Fine by me, as I'd never seen skies so big or starlit. I'd keep destroying him with triple word scores as long as I could lie on the blanket of the grass at twilight and give myself vertigo as the stars spun themselves out of the darkness.

The first two days we slept until afternoon, staying up until dawn playing cards on the lawn. We didn't make it off the grounds of the inn and onto the walking trails until our fourth day. On our next-to-last morning, Alex still hadn't mastered Scrabble, but I also hadn't paid any attention to the stack of application essays I was meant to be reading and editing for clarity. We picked the longest trail, and filled Alex's pack with dark chocolate and single-serving packs of almond butter.

The lake sat, perfectly still, reflecting the trees and mountains precisely. We sat against a low stone wall, knees pulled up to our chests, watching the reflection of a bird cut across the water, the only movement in an otherwise still scene. Without turning, I said to Alex, "This is the most beautiful place I have ever been."

"It is amazing," he agreed.

"Give me the backpack," I said.

“Oh, Jane, no,” Alex said, turning to face me. “It’s bad for the ecosystem. You’ll harm the fish.” Alex knew about my unkept promise to Greenie, how her non-glittery remains sat under the earth in Tennessee instead of strewn to the winds in New Mexico. Months ago he’d given me a small canister of red glitter, instructed me to keep in handy in case I came across a fitting resting place. I’d carried it with me every day since, like a class ring or lock of hair.

“You shouldn’t have given it to me if I’m not allowed to use it.”

“Naïve of me, to hope you’d take up scrapbooking,” he sighed.

“Yeah,” I agreed, nodding sharply. “Real dumb.”

Alex sighed again, then rose to look over the wall at the hills behind us. “I’m going to climb up there,” he said, extended a finger to a manageable looking rise in the distance. “Take some pictures. Do you want to come along or rest here?”

“I’ll rest here,” I said.

“I’m taking the backpack,” he said. “In case that was your motivation.”

“Heartless,” I said, wrapping one hand around the knee closest to me and nibbling on it through the fabric of his ruggedly foolish walking pants. I’d resisted his offer of ergonomic sporting apparel for the trip, and my sweatpants hadn’t let me down so far.

Plus, they had pockets. Once Alex’s form had become an ant in its retreat, I took the red glitter from my zippered left pocket. I closed my eyes and clasped the glitter between my hands, which I pressed under my chin like a prayer. After several deep breaths I felt as steady as I knew I could. Opening my eyes, I stared at the place where the real world met its reflection, the seam between the two halves of everything.

“I’ll never love anyone better than I love you,” I told Greenie. “But I found someone I can love best. You’d like him. Yeah,” I concluded. “Yeah.” I stood and looked over my shoulder. I couldn’t see Alex in the distance, which, hopefully, meant he was far enough away for me to scatter the glitter uninterrupted.

I took the lid off and shook the jar a few times, making a lovely, twinkling cascade. I resisted the temptation to go down to the water, where the effect would be lovelier, but also likely not great for any creatures living under the water. Fish really, probably shouldn’t eat glitter.

I began spinning in a circle, moving across the grass, nothing in my way, laughing as the world blurred in a glimmering, reddish way. I suspect it was my laughter that brought Alex back. I was on my back, hands dusted with glitter, laughing at the sky, eyes closed against the lingering fuzz of dizziness. I felt flecks of glitter at my hairline, tickling slightly, felt his shadow cross over me shortly after I heard the soft fall of his footsteps on the grass.

“You told me the glitter was in the backpack.”

“That,” I announced, pointing a finger in the direction I suspected him of being, “was a *red herring*. Which is a play on words, because it’s *red glitter*.” Nothing in the world could’ve kept me from being delighted with myself in that moment.

I heard the soft huff as he lowered himself beside me, and chanced opening my eyes slightly. The world smudged just a little, before coming into clear focus. Once I saw where he was, I rested my hand on his knee and offered him a smile.

“At least you stayed away from the water,” Alex allowed.

Using his knee as balance, I pulled myself up to a sitting position. I reached out with my free hand and stroked the side of his face with my palm. Just as I hoped, traces of glitter winked at me when I pulled my hand back.

“Just glittered my face, didn’t you?” he asked.

I nodded. “There was so much for such a little jar.” I reached out to run my hands through his hair. Alex fainted away, but allowed himself to get caught, falling back onto the grass, pulling me down on top of him. “Sparkle ginger,” I said.

“I’m never going to get all this shit out of my hair,” he complained, without meaning it.

“Stuck with it forever,” I agreed.

The hike back took us an hour longer than the hike out had, and we arrived back at the inn just as they opened the restaurant for dinner. The chalkboard propped in front had promised Yorkshire pudding and cottage pie. I raised my eyebrows and frowned at Alex, pleading. “It’s glitter on the premises either way, I suppose,” he allowed. It was only 4:30, early enough I suspected our lax adherence to the ‘smart casual’ dress code would be forgiven.

The barman told us to seat ourselves, and Alex led us towards the back, a table that had one free-standing chair and one cushioned booth seat built into the wall. I slid into the booth, going boneless against the padding. “We must’ve walked a marathon,” I insisted.

Alex checked the pedometer on his hip, another sports shop purchase I’d refrained from mocking to the fullest of my potential. “Fourteen thousand steps,” he informed me. “About seven miles, give or take. Just over a 10k.”

“Oh, that’s far too little,” I said. “We walked at least twenty miles. We were gone for seven hours.”

“We weren’t walking the whole time,” Alex continued, after the waiter took our order and dropped off the pints of lager. “You spent a fair bit of the afternoon behaving like a deranged tooth fairy.”

I giggled in agreement, darting my eyes to the one, single fleck of glitter clinging tenaciously to the arch of his left eyebrow. More people began filing the dining room. I realized the rest of the patrons were Asian. Alex caught me looking, and, by way of explanation said, “Peter Rabbit.”

“Sorry?”

“Peter Rabbit is very popular in Japan.”

“Is he also from the Lake District, because that wasn’t actually enough information to answer my question.”

“Beatrix Potter drew inspiration from the Lake District,” he elaborated. I shrugged and he continued, “She wrote Peter Rabbit. I’m a little concerned by your inability to infer from context clues, Jane.”

I flicked him off, in the British way, and smiled, a little sadly. I thought about the Jane that might’ve been. “Elvis, too,” I said. “Very popular in Japan.”

“Well, there’s no accounting for taste.”

“Hey,” I said. “Elvis great.” Alex nodded, not in agreement, but in acknowledgement of my opinion.

Two tables down, a presumably Japanese family took their seats. There was a small child with them, a boy no older than two, wearing a powder blue blazer of crushed

velvet. I nodded slightly towards the family with my head. “That boy is dressed at Peter Rabbit, isn’t he?”

Alex nodded, studying the family. The boy had a plastic cup of cereal bits, which he shook in one hand like a tiny maraca, while his mother scanned the board of specials and his father hopped a toy bunny across the top of the high chair.

Their faces were so fond, so content: the small family, but Alex, too. Slowly, coldness sank into me. I didn’t peg his exact wording, but I knew the next thing he was going to say, the gist of what he would ask.

“What do you think about having children?” Alex asked, still smiling at the boy.

“What do *you* think about having children?” I replied. I’d tried to keep my voice light, but I could hear the garbled doubt and panic in the words.

Alex turned back to me, took a sip of beer, and nodded, just once. “I think I’d like to have children,” he said. “I’d like to be someone’s father.”

I didn’t take just a sip of lager, but several long swallows, gathering my thoughts and my courage. Alex had been born when his father was seventy-five, and he still got two decades more biological parenting that I’d had. When his father died, Alex no doubt had mourned; when one of my step-fathers left I was glad. He had no ideas all the ways being a parent could go wrong.

“I really,” I began, then paused, and really considering what I wanted to say. The Jane that had never found a way to break up with Jay would now be at least one kid deep in her marriage. I thought about that child, the other Jane’s daughter. I wondered if she were a buffer and a joy and a bright spot in a marriage that shouldn’t have been, or if she was just one more resentment I hadn’t had the backbone to avoid.

“I really don’t think I want to have children. Certainly not now, probably not ever.”

Alex exhaled, not sharply, but with surprise. “Is it because you don’t think you’d be a good parent? I think you’ll be a terrific mother.”

“I’d be a bad parent the same way anyone is bad at a job they’re not interested in having. Not all tall people want to play basketball.”

He smiled. “Maybe,” he conceded. “But maybe you won’t know until you try it,” he offered after a small pause.

I laughed, a full-on scoff. “It’s not anal sex or calamari, and, if I hate it, I never have to have it again. Even if I hate it, I’m obligated to have that child for the entire rest of my life.”

Alex looked slightly left, then slightly right. He did this, I had realized, when my conversation veered in too many directions, and he was trying to decide which path to follow. “You do mean those as two discrete elements, correct? It’s not anal sex *and* calamari? They happen independently of each other?” I could see Alex’s hand retreating slowly off the table, as though some libidinous, nefarious creature were already rising from the shadows behind me.

“Jesus Christ, yes! Gross. I hope your internet history deletes automatically, you depraved asshole.”

“I did not start this,” he replied, indignant, pointing a finger at me like a television barrister.

“You’re the one that mentioned kids.”

“Yes, kids. Children,” he said, drawing out the vowels in the final word. “Not, god, *sex appetizers*,” he continued, waving his hand as though trying to clear the cigarette smoke of this conversation.

“Butt stuff squid,” I said. “Sex appetizers is, like, almost palatable.”

Alex tried to stare me down, but he cracked in a few seconds, snorting. His head rocked back with laughter, before coming to rest on the tabletop. His shoulders shook and he slapped the surface with one open palm. I leaned back into the booth, arms crossed over my stomach as my body shook with laughter. When our eyes finally met, we were both crying from mirth. Simultaneously, we reached out to wipe away the other’s tears, which set us off on a renewed jag of hysterics.

When we finally had ourselves under control, the errant barks and snirts petering out, Alex rose out of his chair and came to sit beside me. “I’m going to be serious,” he began. “So, comport yourself.”

I passed a hand over my face, trying to blank away my smile.

“Jane,” he said, then rested his fingers on my lips when they began to twitch with threatened laughter. He shook his head, and I bit down the giggles. “I would be sad if I never had children,” he said, and I felt my mouth droop under the hand that still covered it. “*But*,” Alex continued, “I think I would be much sadder if I never got to talk with you again. I don’t want to have children if it means being bored for the rest of my life.”

“Don’t say that,” I told him, pulling back. “I know you mean to be kind, but that just means I’m to blame when you decided you really do want children in ten years.”

He didn't scoot forward into my space, which I was grateful for. "I have thought about this, I promise. I have thought often about what I'd say in this situation. Jane, I don't want to have children if you're not their mother."

Oh.

I looked down at his hand, resting on the seat between us. It meant more than I could've known, that he'd never followed me when I backed away. I took his hand and held it in both of mine against my chest. "I promise to think about it. *Really* think about it. Just, you know, not tomorrow. Not for a few years."

"Not ever, if you don't want, Jane. I mean that."

I thought about these hypothetical offspring. If, like Alex, they'd have their mother's eyes and their father's hair. If they'd be sharp-tongued and bookish, if they'd eventually run away from me, run until they couldn't run anymore. I thought about sleepless nights and vomit and diapers, all the things my mother had accidentally done wrong, and every awful thing I'd said on purpose. I thought about the way Alex's eyes crinkled from smiling, and my younger sisters prancing their meaningless reindeer dance until they were too dizzy to stand. I thought, maybe, I had a head start, with everything I already knew not to do.

"Can we start with a cat?" I asked.

Alex cupped a hand around the back of my neck, pulled me against him, and kissed my temple. "What dreadful name have you already concocted for our pet?"

"Hairy *Paw-ter*."

His laughter ruffled my hair. "Not Chairman Meow?"

I pushed him away in mock offense. "So obvious," I chided.

He sat back against the wall, pulling me to his side and wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “I want a cat of my own, then. And I shall call him Chairman Meow, and he shall be the finest cat in all the land.”

I closed my eyes and turned completely against Alex, resting my head on his shoulder and curling an arm around his waist. I looked to the seat he had vacated, imagined a child’s seat there, applesauce splattered around. I imagined childish laughter, then crying, then a tantrum.

I didn’t have to decide right now.

“Two cats,” I agreed, burrowing into his sweater. Alex’s chin came to rest atop my head, and I knew his eyes were drifting shut, the same as mine were. We’d nap until the supper came, then go up to our room and nap some more, possible all the way until tomorrow, when we’d drive back to London. If we got back early enough, I’d make Alex go to the shelter as soon as we were home.

At the shelter, there was a box of tabby kittens, one standoffish female longhair, and a tom with no tail and only one eye. His right eye was a clear green, and his grey fur called out for pets. There was only fur, and a small indent, where his left eye should've been. A jagged scar bisected his pink nose. When I stuck my fingers through the slats of his pen, he licked my knuckle before butting his head under my fingers, angling for a scratch on the head.

“Don't let the scar fool you,” the attendant said. “He's a sweetheart. Always crying for snuggles.”

“Is that Hairy Pawter, then?” Alex asked. He'd rested his chin on my shoulder, peering into the cat's cage.

“I think we should call him Clarence,” I said with a smile.

“I think that's a fine idea,” Alex agreed.

Clarence was a sweetheart, box trained and appreciative of ear scratches. He shed a fair bit, inconvenient with the dark sofa, but he didn't have front claws to dig into the cushions. He always let it be known when he needed feeding, or thought he needed feeding, but was otherwise a quiet cat. Sometimes Clarence would lift his head off his

delicately folded front paws and looks around the room, pleased but not boastful about the turns of fate that had landed him happily here. I knew just how he felt.

I joined Alex in the kitchen, considered asking if I could help with dinner. I had put on one of his Oxford sweatshirts, backwards, and tucked Clarence into the hood. He head and front paws rested over the edge, allowing himself to be carried from room to room with as much stoic forbearance as a cat has for anything.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Alex asked, sliding diced onions into a skillet with melted butter.

“Someone on the internet did it with popcorn,” I replied, scratching the top of Clarence’s head to show how not bothered he was by the situation.

“Popcorn doesn’t have claws.”

“Neither does Clarence,” I countered.

“Teeth, then,” Alex replied. “Popcorn doesn’t have teeth.”

“It does in the nightmare I’m now going to have for the rest of my life, so I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

Alex didn’t answer, instead set to chopping carrots and celery.

“Do you need help?” I offered.

“This is all I have before it goes in the oven,” he said, gesturing with his knife to the cutting board. “Have you finished marking all the essays?”

“I don’t wanna,” I huffed, stamping my foot. Clarence meowed slightly in protest at the resulting jostle.

“You finish your marking, I’ll finish our supper, and then we can watch *Bake Off*,” he said. “Everyone wins.”

I leaned over to kiss him, mushing Clarence between us and earning another *meow*. Re-settled on the sofa, I extricated Clarence and set him on the floor. He promptly jumped back onto the sofa and settled by my feet.

I hummed to Clarence, a few bars of a half-remembered rap, sang him the few words I could recall, before turning my attention to the marking. Clarence nudged his head against my foot, purring. “Yes, yes,” I told Clarence, loudly enough that my voice would carry into the kitchen. “I love you best, too.”