Terrible Am I, Child?

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Camille Eileen Arnett

May 8th, 2020
Terrible Am I, Child?

A novel

Camille Arnett
I.

The Arms of Gold

“Like the incessant nightingale,
Her father’s sorrowful fate, she scorns
the thought of dying—as if she wished
To renounce the light—and to entice
The Fury twins to come and avenge.
Could anyone be so loyal to a father?”

Sophocles

“O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at
Your gate, father – your hound-bitch, daughter, friend.
It was my love that did us both to death.”

Sylvia Plath
Chapter 1

Oriole

Illinois, early morning, eighteen years later. In another life Rhetta would be a week away from a trip to the emergency room in the middle of the afternoon—allegedly accidental near-death in the porcelain clawfoot bathtub of her mother’s shiny New York brownstone. That house had been so beautiful to her growing up, especially in her teenage years: high ceilings and shiny oak floors and burgundy floral wallpaper and plush white furniture like powdered beignets, almost perverted in its cleanliness. How many times had Rhetta been chastised for putting her sneakers on the ottoman? She could almost feel the rumble of shame flow through her now.

She stared down now at a very different floor. Her first memories of this place were from when she was maybe five years old, when she would crouch in the corner of this very kitchen and watch bugs crawl under the cabinets. She remembered the centipedes and ants and cicadas that could nearly vanish into the black-brown of the tile.

And from even before that, in the primordial images of infancy that came to Rhetta now only in the moments just before she fell asleep, she saw the haze of smoke in her parents’ bedroom and the mounds of clothes, books, cassette tapes, and vinyl climbing the walls, piles of junk which back then must have seemed like skyscrapers.

The kitchen was more or less the same. The ceiling fan had lost a blade and the toaster that charred everything had been replaced at some point.

“There’s, uh,” said the father in the center of the room, standing straighter than seemed comfortable, “there’s some eggs in there, and some jam from Yvonne down the
street, you remember her. I’m out of beer though. I don’t know what you need food-wise.

You’re not one of those non-meat eaters, are you?”

Rhetta shook her head.

“Good, that’s good. There’s lunchmeat and stuff for sandwiches. I better check on that egg salad, see if it’s still good. It might be rotten. And I bet you drink coffee. There’s a can above the fridge there, though my damn pot bit the dust a while back, so I’ve just been makin’ it on the stove.”

They shared a pregnant, humid silence. Then Rhetta asked to use the bathroom. She remembered that, too—once likely considered a biohazard. It wore a familiar gaudy yellow-and-white floral pattern from floor to ceiling, tile, curtain, hand towels, even the toilet seat. But the moment Rhetta walked in she was petrified by a smell that was familiar to her despite all these years—how does something like that not go away?

And how, riding into town, were the streets still recognizable? How could her brain conjure them nanoseconds before they actually appeared? I-69 through Indianapolis, the last panoramic shots of cityscape and industry, then onto I-64 and then US Highway 45, as the world around falls away and away, flatter and flatter, drier and drier. Exit off the highway onto the county road, and then onto Silas Highway through the guts of town, no building higher than two stories and no closer than fifteen feet apart. Turn left briefly onto Kansas City Road, dogleg right onto St. Victoria Street and then sharp left onto Poplar Avenue—all these places her mind had registered with a moment of fierce, childish recognition. Her heart had thought ahead of her brain—That’s the way we used to walk to church! That’s the park where we watched fireworks on the Fourth of July! And the old barber shop, and the old preschool, and the old library! Oh God, how
could these places be so close to her when her consciousness saved no scenes from within them?

And the final turn onto the sanctified Carroll Boulevard after having been dumped on a street corner with her backpack and overstuffed suitcase. Rhetta had made the humiliated march down the sunken street, residential, spread out, sallow. Dried grass and crumbling foundations and gravel driveways.

And then her old house—looking well-enough, dog chain outside in lieu of a fence, address hand-painted on the mailbox in lieu of metal numbers, pole barn in the back, a familiar 1975 moss green Chevy pickup and a newer ‘97 Chrysler sedan parked at odd angles. The lawn was mowed but not trimmed at the curb, the driveway was riddled with too-large loose stones. The sidewalks running on either side of the road had wide cracks with dandelions and wildflowers sprouting through them. The house had been repainted within the last decade a soft yellow that, even in the intense noontime sun could not manage to look bright.

Her father, Cormac Jubera, had the best house on the block. Rhetta clung desperately, misguidedly, to that last vestige of pride.

Cormac was pacing when she returned to the kitchen. He had shrunken slightly to a standard, hunched posture, which made him appear older than sixty-four; Rhetta imagined he felt so as well. The years covered him like a second skin.

He was “father” in her head, or his first name, though she disliked the idea of stripping him of a title. “Dad” seemed too intimate, it felt gummy on her tongue, but what else was she supposed to say? He had been taller in her memory.
The living room looked like him. Gray, mostly, and worn, but sturdy, or Rhetta liked to think so. Shag carpets and bulky furniture made the place appear frumpy and sagging, but the TV stand was at least two decades old and barely had a scratch. In the corner was a dog pen, where her father’s dog, a mixed-breed he said he’d found asleep in a field covered in fleas and had just followed him home, rested. He called her Stinky but she didn’t have a collar. One of her ears stood up to a point, the other laid flat.

“I don’t know how long you mean to stay,” Cormac said suddenly, loudly. “The sofa’s a pull-out, if that’s adequate. You’re just passing through I imagine.”

“How long?” parroted Rhetta without thinking.

“What’s the plan? Couple months? If you’re huntin’ a job in St. Louis or Chicago they’re all close enough to drive. Where’d you go to school?” She told him, and he huffed. “Well, Christ, you won’t have trouble finding work out here. Your mother know about this plan?” He said mother with a heavy grind.

“She knows I’m here. Is it a problem if I stay for longer?”

“Not necessarily,” he said, sounding affronted and looking at the floor. “But I wouldn’t want you becoming idle, that won’t fly.”

“I’ll get a job here,” Rhetta said. “Are you still going to work?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Why the hell wouldn’t I?”

Rhetta rubbed her fingers into her palm to allay the sweat. She should have waited another year or two before coming back. She felt like an intruder. “Can I see the rest of the house?”

There was little else to see. The front room would be hers: mother-in-law’s quarters that jutted like a tumor out the front of the house, complete with its own separate
entrance and bathroom. It was filled to the seams with leftovers, boxed up and piled floor to ceiling. Hundreds of ancient cardboard boxes blanketed under a heavy layer of dust.

To top it all off, the room was wrapped in a patterned, algae-colored wallpaper, not quite paisley. Scrolls and blossoms and teardrops, accompanied by wide-open jaws of tigers, the crazy eyes of roosters, the massive shoulders of wolves.

After that was her father’s room. He led her back slowly. The bed was low to the ground and mattress infirm—Rhetta implicated it in his slouch. The walls were white, but the blinds were folded down, and the bedside lamp had a rancid, yolk-colored glow. A few photo frames on top of the dresser, placed facedown. It bore no resemblance to the room in her memory. No skyscrapers.

Rhetta peered into the bathroom—no flowers. The bloodstain on the floor that had brought her here in the first place was mostly washed away, but its shadow remained. She averted her eyes before he could catch her looking.

“The sofa bed will be okay for a bit,” Rhetta said, smiling.

Cormac eyed her with uncertainty. She wondered if he’d recognized her before she introduced herself. And to have to introduce herself at all—Hi, I’m your daughter. Remember?

“Welp,” said Cormac quietly, “might as well run get us some lunch then. Nothing much good here. You can drive around and see what you remember. Take the sedan.”

“That’s alright, I’ll walk,” she said, instead of, “Thanks, but I don’t know how to drive.”

He drew her a crude map on the back of a gas station receipt, and asked if it wasn’t too far to walk, and Rhetta said that she walked everywhere in the city. Then he
listed off a few groceries he needed and instructed, “Find me at the Haw when you’re back,” and walked out the door, the dog following his heels to the threshold but being left behind.

Rhetta itched the base of her scalp where a strand of hair had fallen out of her bun. She looked embarrassingly professional and switched into some tennis shoes, before petting Stinky’s haunches and leaving after her father, offering no verbal goodbye to the good quiet house.

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The bees were out and humming all along the road to the grocery store—another specter from a fleeting childhood come back to validate her. From the insect’s view, Rhetta and her father’s house must have looked enormous, but it did have the power to fly up into the atmosphere and look down, turning the paradigm on its head, making the giants seem small. It could be a nice, pointed fuck you to the human race, but a bird could just as easily eat the bee in mid-air. All things travel relatively like that.

Rhetta entered the grocery store with blisters on the backs of her ankles. She saw all and none of what she expected to see. When informing her coworkers of her intent to return to the Midwest, they had responded to her in a typical east-coast fashion:

“It’s going to be swarming with Republicans,” said Grant, a gay leftist who had been in one of Rhetta’s elective courses in college, a seminar on Balzac.

“There’s no culture,” said JB, a graphic designer and Grant’s boyfriend.

“You’re going to get fat,” said Nicole. She was a runner. Rhetta was not.
She had decided to reserve judgement, but associating with people who had conservative ideology was a form of passively accepting said ideology, or so said Grant and people like him. Like Rhetta. She had accepted on the Greyhound that she would have no choice but to smile and nod, smile and nod, and feel herself being pulled back in time.

They were all right, but Rhetta was glad to be rid of them. None of them knew her before college, so they might as well have not known her at all.

How could she expel all her fears of judgment? How could she efface all her embarrassing reflexes? How could a woman walk through a supermarket, pushing a cart, reading a list, bothering no one, and not fear the eyes or scorn of others? How could she exorcise that fear? In New York, she had felt like no one was watching her, but it was different here. In New York she didn’t stick out.

Rhetta was thankful to be quiet in nature, otherwise she couldn’t have helped herself from wondering aloud multiple times if something was organic. Of course it wasn’t organic. But was it disrespectful to assume that it wouldn’t be, just because the supermarket was under two-thousand square feet and in the middle of nowhere? Truly, nowhere but a couple-hundred odd houses, a few stores, a few more bars, the necessary services, and miles of sprawling, pallid hills on all sides.

And worst of all was the blight of the strip mine that loomed in the background miles off. It was a wonder that frightened Rhetta somewhat, a fault that looked like the aftermath of an earthquake or a natural disaster. She’d seen landslides in upstate New York, visiting friends or family, but nothing that looked so like a canyon. It was the kind of thing she couldn’t help but judge.
Cormac had requested a rotisserie chicken, sauerkraut, chips, salsa, sour cream, popcorn, and a six pack of beer. Rhetta got herself some hummus, rice, curry, bananas, and fresh vegetables.

She tried not to pay mind to the man checking her out in the produce section, but she worried intensely if the woman in front of her in line thought she was tacky or unattractive. To strangers, her whole life, Rhetta had always been friendly and pliant. New York possibly was never a good fit for her, because, as she realized, life happened, and you just had to move on, but Rhetta never could do that herself. If someone seemed unhappy walking down the street she instinctively wanted to know why. Her stepfather warned her never to give money to beggars or panhandlers, but she always did anyways.

Rhetta returned to her father’s home arms full of groceries, sweating in the still-vibrant September sun. The neighborhood of dilapidated houses made Rhetta think of news footage of Katrina from the previous year. She’d sat alone in her apartment, curled in a blanket and watching with horror as thousands of people were displaced, their lives destroyed, while she lay idle. She’d donated a generous amount to the relief fund and told no one, and still didn’t sleep well at night for being so useless.

Two blocks from her father’s house was the Haw, a bar the size of a trailer home with a sign that suggested it was, conservatively, at least sixty years old. From the collection of broken-down duck trucks out back and the hub caps used as lawn decorations Rhetta deduced that it had once been an autobody shop (of which there were plenty around town). Despite it being midday and the building having the dimensions of a school bus, it was busy. Rhetta hadn’t passed another restaurant on this side of town, it might have been the only option. Her father sat in a row of other men at the bar. Tables
surrounding sat groups of men, all hunched over their beers and talking to each other in
drawling phrases that overlapped each other. A heavy overcast of smoke hung below the
ceiling. Her father was smoking, too.

And there were no women. Someone wolf-whistled her. A few people looked, but
in truth Rhetta had never attracted much attention.

She went to her father and tapped on his shoulder. When he jolted and whipped
around to look at her, it seemed to take his eyes a moment to adjust to her existence, like
pupils shrinking in the harsh sunlight, and she feared he’d already forgotten her.

“If you wanna eat,” she said quietly.

He grumbled something and finished his beer. Then he nudged the man next to
him and said, “Bill, this is my kid, Rhetta.”

Bill was about the same age as Cormac, though fantastically overweight, and had
a large gray Santa Claus beard that went down to the middle of his chest. He smiled
kindly and said, “Pleasure.”

Rhetta smiled. Her shoulders were drawn and stiff as stone.

Cormac pointed people out to her one by one: “Bartender’s Reggie, Hank’s the
owner, he’s standing over there by the bathroom, and that young guy there is Zeb, he
works at the shop with me. Hey, Zeb! Come ‘ere.”

A man in his mid-twenties at one of the round tables stood, put down his
cigarette, and approached them. He was tall, with a ratty mustache, a droopy look to his
eyes, and broad shoulders, like he used to be a linebacker.

Cormac put a hand on Rhetta’s shoulder and introduced her, adding, “She’s been
living in New York this last little while.” She could barely register the absurdity of the
sentence because this, *this* was the first time they had made physical contact in eighteen years.

Zeb raised his eyebrows and held out a hand for her to shake, and Rhetta did.

“Fancy. Don’t know what the hell you came out here for. Your dad’s a real bore, he just works all day and goes to bed at nine pm, right?”

“More or less,” grumbled Cormac. “You should show her around sometime, just come on by,”

Rhetta shook his hand off her shoulder. “That’s fine.”

“No, I don’t mind,” Zeb said. “It’d be my pleasure.”

Rhetta bit her lips into a smile. She didn’t want to be rude, give her father the impression she was a snobby rich girl with particular taste (though maybe she was), but the man towered over her, and his size seemed to be the thing he was most proud of. It sent a chill down her spine. “I’d rather explore on my own, but thanks.”

“Wanna get a drink later instead?” he asked.

“I don’t drink,” Rhetta said, harsher this time. She turned back to her father, told him the food was getting cold, and walked out the door.

Her father appeared after a minute. “You always so unfriendly? He was only being nice.”

“I wasn’t interested,” she said, walking and looking ahead. She sensed him walking behind her and minded her stride so that they eventually met in pace. Cormac was five inches taller than Rhetta, but walked at almost half her speed, with the rough ambling of someone who used to be much sturdier, fitter.
They both preferred the dark meat. They sat in the breakfast nook, in the threshold between the living room and kitchen, Cormac angled at 45 degrees to watch Fox News as he fed Stinky scraps from the table. He managed to get her to roll over for a hunk of chicken breast and seemed so proud that he smiled, *really* smiled, and scratched her belly.

“Where you thinkin’ to work?” he asked, going to the kitchen for corn bread.

Rhetta said, “Probably the library, for now, until I find something permanent.”

“It’s on the other side of town. You couldn’t walk there. ‘Specially not in winter.”

“That’s fine,” she said. She suspected *other side of town* still indicated a shorter commute than she was accustomed to. “Why did you say that I’d only been in New York for a little while?”

Cormac plopped back down and offered her a piece of corn bread, and Rhetta took it. “Well, it hasn’t been supremely long.”

“Eighteen years is a long time, Dad,” she said, feeling strange to call him *Dad*, just as it felt strange for his hand to rest on her shoulder. He seemed to be trying for familiarity, and her rejection of that hand in the Haw must have offended him. The shock of her existence had seemingly worn off a little, and the beer was making him louder, unfiltered.

“Well, that’s long for you. Not that long for me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Is there anymore family around here?”

“Your family? No. All died, while back. My dad, your granddad, he just passed in ’04. If you’d come back a lick sooner you would’ve seen him.”
“I don’t think I could have come back sooner,” said Rhetta. “I started work right out of college.”

“Doing what?”

She hesitated. “I worked for a start-up. Didn’t pay much, but I don’t really care about that sort of thing.”

“And in all that time you never thought to come back here?”

Rhetta stood up too suddenly, her body reacting to some gut feeling of offense that she wouldn’t have known she’d felt otherwise. She let a beat pass before she spoke.

“If you wanted me to visit you then you should have said so.”

“And how the hell would I have found you?”

She took her plate to the kitchen. “Just use a computer. You can find anyone on White Pages. Or just look up Mom in a phone book, give her a call. Or write.”

“Can you imagine the conniption Lilian would have had if I’d called you?”

Rhetta reached into the fridge, grabbed herself a Coke, and sat back down. “I can, but I guess it doesn’t matter anyways. I probably wasn’t allowed to visit you before I turned eighteen.”

Cormac squished his lips together and looked away from her now, eyes filled with what Rhetta thought might be a hint of shame. His right elbow was propped up on the table, and the hand holding his slice of cornbread was shaking noticeably. “Guess that’s possible,” he finally said, bringing the trembling hand to his mouth and taking a careful bite.

“I’ll start cleaning out the spare room soon, then,” Rhetta said.
“Don’t be in a hurry, there’s not much to do,” Cormac replied, disinterestedly watching the television. “All you gotta do is take it to the basement, anyways.”

“There’s half a century worth of stuff in there,” Rhetta replied.

“Who taught you to backtalk so much?”

She glared at him. She couldn’t tell if that had been a joke or not. “I want to have a room,” she said. “I have scoliosis, a sofa will be bad for my back for too long.”

“Since when do you have scoliosis?”

“Since I was a teenager,” she said.

Cormac sighed and took another sip of his beer. “You’re awfully—demanding.” It seemed like he was biting back the word “spoiled.” Perhaps she was. No, almost certainly. But that was his fault, to an extent.

“I’ll be doing all the work,” Rhetta said. “You don’t have to worry. Unless—” she hiccupped a little, “you don’t want me to stay here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Cormac said. “I’m happy to let you stay. It’s just all real sudden, you know. No call beforehand or anything. You’d think someone in New York was trying to kill you. Or was there a boyfriend?”

“Nothing so exciting,” Rhetta said, not comforted. She felt like having one of her mother’s conniptions just for fun. She collected his plate, took it to the kitchen, and washed it down. He didn’t even have a sponge out. She stared at the knife block. Cormac watched the television and eventually dozed off sitting up. Rhetta swallowed all her silent regrets and watched now out the back window, where a violently orange bird was perched, innocuous. She needed to call her mother. She wouldn’t.
Her proper parents were Jared and Lilian Wolff, possibly the happiest couple anyone around them had ever met. They led a clean, refined life of partnership where they pretended to be each other’s equal, but individually, silently, believed themselves the breadwinner. They both rose before six in the morning, a habit Lilian had carried for most of her life from her parents. Her father had risen at five to be at the mine at six, and Lilian, every day without fail, rose to see him off.

Jared was from northern Kentucky, nearly Cincinnati, and Lilian southern Illinois. Their accents were nearly identical: formerly midwestern-cum-Appalachian singsong buried under the fast-and-heavy Brooklyn nose piping. Jared worked in software, had gone all the way to California for school, then Boston, and then had come back home because he’d just missed it too much. The only loss he would admit in his marriage to Lilian was her convincing him to leave the Midwest, “As if it was some big tragedy,” she would say.

Lilian had just achieved partner at her law firm. She was the first of her family to have finished high school, first to have gone to college anywhere. Growing up she’d wanted to be a poet but had abandoned those dreams somewhere along the way. She was a devout sentimentalist, so she had family portraits taken regularly by a photographer friend. Sometimes they would be joined by Jared’s extended family, some of whom had also relocated out east. The photos were always beautiful, mainly because Lilian was beautiful. Lean, fine, hair soft like linen and the color of wheat, shiny eyes. Jared looked nondescript enough that he fooled people into thinking he was Rhetta’s biological father.

When friends or coworkers asked Lilian where she grew up, she always told them with zest: “I was raised in the tiniest little mining town with a miner father and stay-at-
home mother. No one born there ever left unless they were pregnant out of wedlock or killed somebody, and even then people just stuck around.” But she got out.

And Rhetta had gone back.

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Rhetta found herself in a new world, unlike anywhere she had ever been, even her memories. In the first few days she spent in the town, between fits of attempting to forgive herself for idleness, she felt an amazing serenity, something she’d rarely experienced in New York. Even in the quietest moments, on the roof of her high school staring up at the blank sky, alone in her room when no one was home—nothing compared to the absences she felt here. Absence not of people, but of bustle. Absence not of purpose, but self-importance. The gentle roar of an occasional airplane overhead, the twittering of birds, the buzzing of bees, seemingly everywhere. She had forgotten the sound of wind through blades of grass, how calming it was.

The town itself, Aspen—a name that had conjured for Rhetta first ski trips in Colorado—was hardly a town at all, really more a hodgepodge collection of buildings with something resembling a downtown street running through the western half of town. Most of the homes were ramshackle and small, but some managed to be beautiful in their own way, though it was a type of beauty Rhetta wasn’t yet accustomed to, either.

There was an army surplus store and a few little mom-owned boutiques in town, a cupcake shop, a small bagel deli across from an abandoned community garden, and an all-night joint called the Equality Diner. The name referenced the town of Equality, Illinois, just twenty minutes away, whence the owner hailed. It was all-night, Rhetta
discovered, because there was a gentlemen’s club on the opposite corner. Rhetta couldn’t imagine how many people needed a gentlemen’s club in a town so small (barely 5,000 people), but she gathered that university students and people from even smaller neighboring towns took special trips up to Aspen to satiate their masculine desires.

She counted twelve churches but knew there was one north of town too far for her to walk to. She hadn’t come across a synagogue or mosque. She hadn’t encountered many non-white people outside of ethnic food establishments, except for Amelia, who was black and owned the aforementioned bagel deli, and Reggie, the bartender at the Haw.

Her walks went from minutes into hours. The first days she just paced up and down the street, somewhat nervous, trained her whole life to look continually over her shoulder. But by her fourth day, she packed a lunch, took the map her father drew her, and set out like an adventurer in a children’s book. It almost filled her with joy.

Her life inside the house on Carroll Boulevard was different. That life was about Cormac.

She monitored him for days. He was like this:

The morning, waking up at five-thirty. Showering, dressing, taking his pills, combing his hair. Not shaving—it had been tacitly forbidden.

Taking the dog outside, watching to make sure she did her business while smoking a cigarette or two. (He smoked so privately Rhetta almost forgot he did it, but would realize later just how many times he stepped outside, how many empty cartons were stacked in his closet.)
Breakfast: toast and sliced meat, sometimes an egg if he was hungry. He said he liked them hard-boiled but wouldn’t make them ahead for the week because if they were already made, he wouldn’t feel compelled to eat them. He wasn’t a sloppy eater like other men Rhetta had witnessed before. He ate carefully, slowly, sometimes even with his eyes closed, maybe to deny the shaking of his hands. He made coffee in a pot on the stove and cringed after every sip. It drove Rhetta close to insanity.

Then he left for work, to weld. He was union. He had been a miner in his youth—that Rhetta knew for sure. Her mother had told her so a few times, though she rarely talked about Cormac at all, or her own family members, who Rhetta had never met. But Rhetta understood that the events that had mattered most in Cormac’s life were these: be born, finish high school, join the mine, be laid off. The kind of slight that shapes a person more than any good can repair.

That was the kind of man she came to take him for in the span of a few days, and naively she clung to that notion as some sort of dogma. She believed to know who he was, more or less. A reticent man who desired to change little and do little. Nobody wants to change their routine when they’ve been stuck in it for as long as he has. Rhetta accepted that and strove only to create a symbiosis.

Her sweet days of taking long, thoughtful walks were interrupted when Cormac insisted that she get a job. “Nothing worse than doing nothing,” he said.

“It’s not nothing,” Rhetta countered.

He shot her a pointed look. Occasionally, he looked frighteningly cold. It seemed he had to make a concentrated effort to soften himself, and often with Rhetta he didn’t take the time to do so. “Make yourself at least somewhat useful, please.”
And thusly her ramblings diminished in their frequency. Eventually she would lose them altogether. She was there with a purpose, after all. She was needed, so she believed.

But not yet. Now, her mother was calling her. She was standing at the bottom of the library steps, watching her phone buzz in her hand. It was like holding a dying bird, but she dared not open it to hear her mother’s wrath. She knew what was coming her way. Eventually it fizzled out.

The library was on the opposite side of town from her father’s house. Not a significant walk, maybe a mile or two, but Rhetta had good shoes and liked to walk everywhere anyways. Her trek through town had been mostly fine, but one back street had been so deserted that it sent a chill down her spine, and she’d clutched instinctively at the pepper spray in her pocket.

But the library stood at the top of the hill, overlooking what was effectively the most beautiful side of town. The buildings here were made of weathered old brick and limestone, seeming to have already survived the tests of time, and no two looked the same. And though Rhetta had before thought that there were no residential buildings above two stories, she now saw, miraculously, a house that had a spire coming out of the middle of it, which almost appeared to be a lookout tower.

From her father’s side of town none of this would have been visible. She gathered, after her brief surveys over the past few days, that Aspen was partitioned into four distinct sections: the middle class, the extremely well off, the standard poor, and the miners.

That had been enough time for her mother to leave a voice mail.
“Hi honey. I hope you got to Cormac’s house alright. Call me when you can.” A hesitation. “I love you—and miss you, of course. And I’m so proud of you. You know that.”

Remarkably mild. Lilian had always been good at reigning it in on short notice. Her voice was sweet and drawn, like the honey she put in her tea. Even from a thousand miles away Rhetta could feel the squeeze on her wrist. It made her feel…impatient, she decided was the best word. It had been a long time since Rhetta wasn’t held at arm’s length by her mother. She was twenty-four for Christ’s sake.

“I can’t believe it,” her mother had said, when Rhetta approached her a little over a week ago. “No, I won’t bear it. I can’t think of you going back there. I won’t think of you giving up your life for him.” She’d begun to cry then, clinging to Jared’s arm as he soothed her. “After I worked so hard to give you a good life.”

It would hurt less if Cormac could bear to look her in the eye yet. But every morning, Rhetta had sat at the breakfast table with him, looking through the newspaper, asking him directions and questions, and all the while he gazed into his coffee cup. Before leaving for the library, she’d announced she was going job hunting, and all he’d done was say, “’Bout time.”

Rhetta deleted the voicemail and snapped her phone shut.

The library was considerably larger than the bar, with high, vaulted ceilings and pinkish light floating through the windows. The bookshelves were generously stocked, and she wondered if that was because people didn’t read much around here, or because read voraciously. A few people sat at tables with books, high schoolers with their study
materials, a woman with an encyclopedia of plants. A man in an oversized coat with a trash bag at his feet sat at a desktop computer working on his resume.

She first acquired a library card, still having to consult her little moleskin to remember her father’s home address, and then inquired if there were any open positions. “I just moved here,” she explained.

She was speaking with a friendly woman in her late forties, with straight brown hair and crow’s feet. The woman’s eyes flashed in recognition, and she said with some elation in her voice, “You must be Cormac’s daughter.”

“Yes, I am,” said Rhetta unsteadily. Did they look alike, she wondered?

This woman was Yvonne, the neighbor who had been bringing jam to her father for the past few decades. She spoke in a lilting, pliant midwestern affect, prone to fits of exaggerated empathy. She seemed to envision herself as a close friend of Cormac’s, but Rhetta couldn’t imagine her father having any female friends. “I stopped by to see your father once he got back from the hospital and he just carried on as if nothing had changed,” she said. “Sort of sad. I don’t think he wants to admit it, but it’s been evident for a while. Other guys have noticed he’s been…struggling.”

“He doesn’t seem to be dwelling on it,” Rhetta said carefully. She didn’t want to go so far as to accuse him of denial, even if that was her hypothesis.

“You got here so quickly,” Yvonne said, retrieving an application from under the counter. “He’d barely been back three days before you showed up, huh?” She seemed to be waiting for Rhetta to say something affirmative or sentimental, but something caught in Rhetta’s throat. “How long are you in town for?” Yvonne continued.

“For as long as I’m needed,” said Rhetta.
“And you’ve never been back? In all this time?”

Rhetta shook her head.

Yvonne said something offhand about her being welcome home. “I remember when your mom left,” she said. “It must have been a hard time for her, but your poor father. I don’t think he quite deserved it, he’s an honorable guy. Though I guess I understand why you’d want some time away. He was not a happy man when you were young.”

“He doesn’t seem that happy now,” Rhetta said.

Yvonne shrugged and waved sweetly to a patron she recognized. “At least he’s occupied now. When he has to quit working, that’ll be rough. And I think that was the biggest problem back then, after all the mine layoffs, he just got stir crazy.”

Rhetta cleared her throat. “That big chasm north of town—”

“Strip mine,” Yvonne piped up. “The blasts can get pretty loud, and sometimes we’ll get a big cloud of dust and soot roll in. Terrible for your health. You know, there’s so much sulfur in Illinois coal, I think it’s just unbearable.”

Rhetta pictured it: the huge cloud of smoke, looming, bearing in quietly closer and closer like a tsunami, or a sandstorm. With the flatness, beigeness of the land here it could surely be seen from miles away, and the people were forced to just watch it and wait patiently, resignedly. Rhetta took the application.

Later, Rhetta returned home, fed the dog, and started keeping house. She wondered if this was the work she had condemned herself to for an unclear extent of time. It was antifeminist to look down on housework, but truthfully she had never been able to envision herself as a homemaker. She hadn’t been able to envision herself as
anything specific, she was barely able to envision herself older than twenty-five, but not even the most abstract of her plans involved her becoming a domestic servant.

And so it was strange, then, being in the house without him. She was devoting almost all the space in her head to Cormac and his life, but his life without him in it was alien, almost uncanny. The house without its subject was a great mystery. Could anyone live here but him? Could this house exist anywhere in the country? Could every house on Carroll Boulevard look like this one on the inside? She liked to think not, but there was no way to be sure.

She walked the trash can out to the curb and waved and smiled to a neighbor she didn’t recognize. Sure, it was quiet here, but the people seemed friendly. Unselfconscious. The unfiltered sunshine poured down on the gravel roads, giving them such a shimmer that they became indistinct, like the stony bottom of a fast-flowing river.

She wondered if her father ever spoke freely about himself, though imagined that he hadn’t had the need to in a long time. When it’s just you and your head, externalizing feels like betraying a secret. Lying feels safer than self-immolation.

In peace, the only sounds being the faint touch of wind through birch leaves and the twits of little orange birds from outside, Rhetta stood pensive at the door to the mother-in-law’s quarters, her hand on the doorknob. She knew the mountain of history stuffed inside, knew what sort of denizen awaited her within. It was a library of her father’s life, mildewy, gray, unkempt as it was. A place that was ripe for excavation, and yet she shrunk from it.

Later, she and Cormac sat together at the table eating dinner in silence. She watched his jaw, his chin, looked intently at the growing shadow of his beard, watched
the way he chewed. The sound of teeth crashing together like stones of a crumbling
building. He still wasn’t looking at her.

This was sort of how it had been growing up. The ritual of only seeing her parents
at dinner, spending the rest of the days at school or in her room, slumped forward over a
book or her journal or word processor. Her parents surely didn’t want to hear about what
she was interested in—she knew they didn’t, and so she eventually gave up on them
entirely.

That wasn’t totally fair. Jared had tried, for a while. But he was one of those men
who got so caught up with work that the rest of his life fell to the wayside, and Rhetta had
witnessed more than one nasty argument between him and Lilian during one of these dark
spells. When he reset, came back to himself, despite any assurance that he was feeling
better, it was hard to not feel like a wounded animal.

“I met your friend, Yvonne,” Rhetta said tentatively, poking at her salad. “At the
library today.”

“Mhmhm,” grunted Cormac.

“She seems really sweet. Is she married?”

He looked up and cocked an eyebrow. “Nice try, kid.”

“What?”

“Trying to set me up. You got pissed when I just suggested you hang out with
some of the guys around here and now you’re doing the same thing to me.”

“No, I’m not,” Rhetta snapped, defensive. “I’m just surprised you never remarried
is all. It’s kind of lonely here.”

“I got Stinky,” he said, gesturing.
“Yeah, but what about before her?”

He shrugged. “I don’t like it too loud around here, I don’t see what’s so wrong with that.”

“No one else came along in eighteen years?”

He glared at her. “None of your business.”

That struck a strange nerve in Rhetta. She wanted it to be her business, maybe selfishly, but she didn’t see what was so wrong with him indulging her.

“How ‘bout you,” he said. “Don’t you have friends back in New York?”

Rhetta shrugged. “Nobody much, not other than Mom and Jared.”

“You still call him Jared?”

“He doesn’t mind. He’s not my real dad.”

“That’s not his fault.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Cormac took a long sip of his beer, sighed, and looked off into the middle distance. The walls in his house were white. Rhetta thought it might be unhealthy to live in such starkness. “I’m just saying, he raised you. He might be more your dad than I am, ever thought of that?”

She said nothing.

He took another swig. He seemed unhappy to have voiced the concern. Insecure.

“Isn’t that a thought,” he muttered under his breath, and then whistled for the dog to come over so he could scratch behind her ears. “Ah, well. You’re here all the same, I guess that’s what matters, isn’t it?”
Rhetta ate quietly. The skin under Cormac’s chin was sagging with age. He was noticeably tan, and Rhetta wondered if there wasn’t some racial mixing on his side of the family. She noticed, too, a fine gold chain around his neck hidden under the collar of his shirt.

“I guess I’ll start in earnest on the bedroom tomorrow,” Rhetta said.

“Shouldn’t take you too long. Want help?”

“No, I wouldn’t make you do that. You need to take care of yourself.”

He glared at her. “That so.”

Rhetta sighed, exasperated. “Are we not even going to talk about it? Am I not here for a reason?”

Cormac slammed his fork down on the table, making things rattle. His eyes bulged, and he backed up, picking up his drink and stepping into the kitchen. “Yeah you’ve got a reason, but I haven’t the faintest idea of what it is.”

*Just say you’re sick, Dad,* Rhetta wanted to beg, but he was taught like a wire and gazing out the window in some bitter daze. He announced he was going out for a smoke and took Stinky outside with him while Rhetta sat in rumination, spinning the fork in her fingers. She felt like a vagrant, out of options. *With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship.* Rhetta, then, took to the roots, deep in the ground where she never dared to venture. This was not surprising in retrospect.

Out the kitchen window Rhetta looked on her father, the heaving of his big shoulders, the shaking of his hand gently holding the cigarette. She didn’t understand how his body could be so confused, so strong, yet delicate and intentional. She didn’t understand him in the slightest.
Walking silently on the balls of her feet, she entered his bedroom and went over to the dresser to pick up some of the face-down photographs. One, a picture of his parents. Another a family photo, him and his parents and another boy. One of him as a teenager with a pretty brunette girl. One of Lilian holding Rhetta as a baby. One of Rhetta herself, covered in mud and grinning like she didn’t know anything but the joys of the world. She had no idea when the photo was taken.

Her father didn’t look at her when he came back inside. He never looked anyone in the eye, not a person, not a camera. Rhetta could, though. She would try.
Day one of unpacking the mother-in-law’s quarters was barely underway when Rhetta heard a knock at the door, and Cormac’s gruff voice: “Bill and his wife invited us over for dinner, you should come along.”

She was sitting on the floor, cross-legged, almost monk-like before the mountain of dusty boxes, one open before her. Cormac’s mother—Rhetta’s grandmother, who she remembered fleetingly—had kept an enormous collection of cookbooks. Cormac obviously used none of them.

Inside one book, instructions on butchering deer and game animals, were a few black-and-white photos of a man and boy with a dead deer hanging by its back legs in the garage out back. She’d never taken Cormac for the hunting type.

She said she would come along and folded the book closed. Rhetta knew that if she took her time looking through every box, she would be there forever, but the temptation was incredibly strong. She set the cookbooks aside and reached for another, heavier box sitting on the ground, opened it gently (all this she did with the utmost delicacy, like she was inspecting the buried tomb of an Egyptian royal).

After some unwrapping, she found that within were several round, glass paperweights with different colors and patterns within. The collection totaled about a dozen, each still shiny and pristine after what Rhetta assumed to be decades. There was no artist’s name on the bottom.

She got to her feet and exited the room with two paperweights in her hands. Cormac was out back smoking. The room was so sterile and frumpy, something solid,
something smooth and bright would help. She put a few paperweights on the coffee table, and a few more in the windowsill that looked out on the backyard. Cormac saw her placing them, and she smiled at him.

A few minutes later, Rhetta’s cell phone rang, and she talked for a few minutes with Yvonne from the library, confirming her future employment, desired work hours, et cetera. “It’s only part-time, I hope that’s okay,” she said, and Rhetta assured her that was perfect. She felt she shouldn’t be gone from the house all the time. Not that she felt needed quite yet, but when that time came, even if it took years, she wanted to be ready.

Around six they got in Cormac’s truck to go to Bill’s, Cormac lumbering into the driver’s seat and clumsily putting the key into the ignition. Rhetta sat pensively. Maybe someday they would start talking normally. A week or two was not enough time to achieve normalcy, and she knew this. Nor reason to be obstinate.

He pulled out of the driveway haphazardly, the car rocking in and out of the holes and stones like a sailboat on a turbulent sea, then they hit the gravel road and pulled away at high speed towards Poplar Avenue.

“You should put on your seatbelt, Dad,” Rhetta said, clinging to hers.

“We’re only going a mile and a half,” he said, glancing at her sideways, but his voice was soft. He cranked down his window. “Could you light a cigarette for me, please?”

The politeness surprised her. She wondered if he was ashamed of smoking. She lit it for him, the motion unlocking physical memories in her. How many hundred times had she done this herself in high school and college? She’d smoked socially, to try and
achieve interaction with others, despite her abhorrence for drugs. She rarely even drank now for the sensation it opened up inside her.

Bill and his wife, Darla, lived in a small craftsman-style house that looked like it needed some exterior refurbishing, but had a beautiful flower garden out front. A plume of smoke was rising from the backyard, thick with the smell of meat and hickory wood.

Darla greeted them at the door, hugging Rhetta by way of introduction. She was a small, kind-looking older woman with blonde hair that had faded into gray. Rhetta learned that she worked at the grocery store as a manager and had been there for the last thirty-odd years. They had two children, a son and daughter, both older than Rhetta and long out of the house. Christina, their daughter, was expecting her first child.

“Well aren’t you just the cutest thing,” she said, taking in Rhetta from head to toe. “You look so much like your dad it about kills me.”

Cormac was already out of earshot, headed to the backyard with Bill. “Do I?” Rhetta asked.

“Oh absolutely. You’ve got the same green eyes, lucky you. Same nose, too. Can’t believe no one’s ever told you that before, you might as well be his spittin’ image. Come on in, let me show you around.”

Rhetta followed her into the living room, which had 70s wood paneling up and down the walls. They had a massive stone fireplace with a taxidermy deer head mounted above it, along with several others along the back wall. There were a few pheasants and squirrels stuffed here and there, but they were altogether less spectacular than the deer. Rhetta looked into the black glass eyes of the one mounted above the fireplace, feeling a slight chill run down her spine.
Suddenly a hand was pressed against her shoulders. “You remember that one, huh?”

Rhetta looked to Bill, who had come inside, leaving Cormac outside to mind the meat. Rhetta shook her head.

“Come on, yes you do! Your dad shot that. Years ago, you were probably just five or six. He took you along on a hunting trip with him and your granddad, dead of winter. Not ringing any bells?”

“No,” breathed Rhetta. “I don’t remember that at all.”

Bill looked disappointed. He ran a big hand through his beard. “Well, don’t tell your dad that. He remembers it like it was yesterday. He gave me that as a gift for my forty-fifth. Our kids are a bit older than you, so I was a bit too busy with them to go hunting myself, and work, of course.”

Rhetta nodded and smiled. She looked at the deer’s eyes again for a moment too long, the long trunk of its neck—then the back door opened and Cormac came inside.

“Brisket’s looking good,” he said. Darla called for Rhetta to join her in the small kitchen. The cabinets were dark green, the counters linoleum and pale yellow, but clean. There were several affirmation boards hanging around that read “Live Laugh Love” and the like, as well as some art of roosters.

“So how do you like being home?” she asked Rhetta with a big smile as she retrieved coleslaw from the fridge. “It must be kind of strange, huh.”

“A little,” Rhetta admitted. “But I’m getting used to it. I’ll be working soon, I think that’ll help.”
“Oh that’s great!” said Darla. “That’s good. Hovering would kill Mack. He’s got an independent spirit, always has.”

“I gathered that,” Rhetta said, chuckling a little.

Darla clicked her tongue. “You know when he had to go to the hospital a few weeks ago, it was my Bill he called at the butt crack of dawn, of course. And you know what he said? ‘Could you get over here and help me when you got a minute.’ A minute! He’d nearly cut his jugular and couldn’t even pretend he was dying. It’s a wonder he’s doing alright, I swear.”

Rhetta shuddered. She couldn’t fathom that much blood coming from a person. It made her worry about everything he did. An accident like that wasn’t one in a million. Even if he pretended to be fine, he still shook, sometimes violently. And they both knew things would only get worse.

Rhetta helped set the table as Bill got the meat off the smoker, and they eventually all got settled in the dining room. Bill served Rhetta a piece of meat that was about the size of her forearm, and she worried that she wouldn’t even be able to eat half of it.

“So what’d you used to do for work?” Darla asked after they said a prayer.

Rhetta took a long sip of her water. “I worked for a start-up.”

“What kind?”

“Environmentalist.” Cormac glanced at her. “I was doing mostly clerical work, but we lobbied for clean energy reform.”

“Well that’s noble,” Darla said. The men ate.

“And I worked part-time at a flower shop,” she continued. “To help make ends meet.”
“Lilian didn’t do anything for you?” Cormac asked. “With all her money?”

Rhetta shook her head. “It was at my insistence. I didn’t want to depend on her after college. I’d already put them back enough with tuition and all that.”

“Where’d you go?” Darla asked.

Rhetta flushed even deeper in shame. Her ears must have been the color of a firetruck. “Columbia.”

“That’s impressive!” Darla cried, genuinely happy for her. She obviously enjoyed having another young woman around to mother, or maybe that was just natural kindness, Rhetta didn’t know. “You oughta be proud of that. Mack, you never told us!”

Cormac shrugged. Rhetta forced herself to smile and asked what Darla’s children did for a living, because she didn’t like to talk about college. Columbia was the only Ivy League she got accepted to, anyways, even with her mother being a Yale alumna, and it still made her feel like a failure, six years later.

The rest of dinner passed uneventfully, and around eight p.m. they said their goodbyes and headed back to the house. Cormac offered to let Rhetta drive, and she politely refused again. He buckled his seatbelt.

Halfway home, Rhetta said, “I don’t remember that hunting trip.”

Cormac let out a breath he must have been holding for the whole night. “I know. I figured.”

“I don’t remember almost anything from back then,” she continued. “Just little things, here and there. I don’t even remember what your parents looked like. Or what their names were.” Dozens of ramshackle shotgun houses streaked past outside, and the
stars were already visible against the ethereal dusk. It was beautiful, Rhetta couldn’t help but realize again. “I’m really sorry.”

“Not your fault,” Cormac said, making a relaxed left turn. “You were a kid, you couldn’t help it.”

“Please tell me about them sometime,” Rhetta said, turning to look at him. His profile was strong, almost like a roman bust, and his eyes, she suddenly noticed, were unbelievably green, greener than should have been possible. He’d hardly let her meet his eyes before and that might have been why.

Cormac clenched his fist a few times in his lap, something he seemed to like to do to feel in control of his body. He said, “We’ll see.”

“Please, Dad,” she said again.

They pulled into the driveway, and he turned the car off. “Don’t beg. If you have to beg for it, you probably don’t deserve it.” He went inside, and she was alone again.
Chapter 3

*How to Care*

Old china, books of Mississippi River folklore, cookbooks, magazine cut-outs, wood carvings, records, photos—

A mother and father in their best clothes, standing before the house on Carroll Boulevard, sun shining too brightly, their squinting eyes looking dark and beady, smiles slight but challenging. Two boys, spindly and bow-legged in church clothes, a splatter of shadows across their faces from the old birch tree out front. One boy with a hard look to his face, chin tilted against his collarbone, hands in tight fists. No photographer, no date.

The other boy hadn’t even crossed her mind last time she saw a family photo, but Rhetta looked at him now. He bore little resemblance to the young Cormac, he was all cheeks and smiles and sparkly eyes, while Cormac, even then, seemed so serious. The brother was the only one in the photo smiling. She slipped the photo into her pocket, to ask him about later, though it occurred to her that asking was not the wisest plan of action with her father.

The early morning sun streamed in through the blinds, and the ancient cardboard boxes painted a strange shadow into the carpet, almost castle-like. It had been about a week since Rhetta started going through the boxes and had made fast progress. Most things she had taken straight into the basement as Cormac asked, but a few things, like the photos and paperweights, Rhetta kept out for herself. In another two or three days, she would be done, and it would be nearly October.

For now she stopped. Cormac was already at work, and she needed to leave soon as well. Her walk to the library, despite her insistence that it was no trouble, did take her
forty-five minutes. Sooner rather than later she would have to admit to her father that she
didn’t know how to drive, and that conversation only became more menacing as time
grew. Other adjustments were on the horizon. Rhetta was looking at different coffee
makers they could buy. Anymore gravel boiled over the stove and she’d get an ulcer. And
Cormac would need to stop smoking. He coughed constantly, and anytime Rhetta asked
if he was okay, he just waved her off, “no big deal.” Every time she had insisted he take
better care of himself, he’d lashed out, and so that conversation she would keep for later.

She closed up the bedroom behind her and went into the kitchen to pack her lunch
for work. She opened a can of black olives and ate a few of them before putting a handful
into a little Tupperware container. The dog came up to her, begging for scraps off the
counter, and so Rhetta gave her a baby carrot. It made Rhetta smile. “Do you like that?”
she asked Stinky, scratching behind her ears. “Are you a happy girl?” Stinky didn’t
answer, but she sort of smiled and cocked her head to the side, and Rhetta counted that as
a yes.

The work was easy, right now, but rewarding. She got to talk to new people
sometimes, though mostly it was just her and Yvonne. There was a high school student,
Kato, who came in on the weekends to shelve, who seemed very taken with Rhetta
whenever they had an overlapping shift. And from all her time passed with Yvonne,
Rhetta determined that Yvonne was indeed in love with her father, or something akin to
love.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” Yvonne had told Rhetta in a hushed voice the other day,
immediately following a strained confession from Rhetta that she didn’t know how to just
talk to her father. “I had the biggest crush on him in high school. He was older, but he
was still popular at that time.”

“Why didn’t anything come of it?” Rhetta had asked her.

Yvonne had just shrugged. “Circumstance. Other things. It’s in the past now. But
wouldn’t you believe what a hot commodity he used to be. He was so handsome.”

Rhetta didn’t know how to feel about that. She was a poor judge of beauty. She
had to believe, at least a little, that he must be handsome if he had been so popular, and if
Lilian had been willing to marry him (because Rhetta loved her mother, but Lilian would
not have been able to bear an unattractive man). She didn’t know what that said for
herself, either, if she was indeed his spitting image, as Darla had said.

All this crossed Rhetta’s mind as she shelved books during her shift, along with
the titles of the books. She got the most enjoyment out of almost anything in their
potentialities. Imagining who potentially had selected and read the book she was holding
in her hands made her feel profoundly close to others, to the town, though it was still so
new to her.

There were some beautiful women in this town, though, that Rhetta could say for
sure. It was easier for her to determine if a woman was beautiful because they felt closer
to her heart, in a way. Even a strange-looking woman with a pointy chin and mean eyes
would enrapture Rhetta for days, send her into reveries of philosophy and amazement
with the world, with God and his creations, as her mother maybe would have said once
upon a time. She always found herself drawn to weird-looking girls, like Sara Jean,
though thinking about her now was frustrating, and she tried not to do it.
Rhetta picked up a few books of her own when her shift was done, one on caring for a sick loved one and the other an attractive-looking novel. She needed something else to fill her time soon.

Cormac wasn’t back yet when she returned, but she started again with the box of photographs, carding through them idly. Rhetta’s mother was one to photograph everything, and it seemed that Cormac’s mother was much the same, though their focuses were evidently different. Lilian liked to arrange her family in a certain way, wanted a beautiful-looking home no matter what. Cormac’s mother seemed to have a commitment to realism. Pictures of the house and yard and family, at their best and worst. Pre- and post-wallpaper, new roof, painted kitchen cabinets, dining room table, all of it.

She continued to flip through the photos, smiling to herself. His mother and father, his grandparents, photos so old they looked like sketch portraits, the edges becoming jaundiced. A school portrait for a yearbook, and then a photo of Cormac in his mining helmet. On the back was written in pencil “First Day of Work, 1960” in fine cursive. His grandparents’ house on an endless prairie. Then, a polaroid of a small waterfall marked “a mile off Matchbook Trail.” Rhetta put that one in the center of her library book.

And then a woman. Rhetta dropped the other photos to the side and withdrew a small, uncaptioned polaroid, maybe forty years old. A woman lying in gray sheets, her breasts exposed but the rest of her covered below the navel. Her black hair was splayed artistically across the pillow, her eyes were partially open, looking up dollishly, daringly at the camera.

“Rhetta, where—”
Rhetta choked and whipped around. Her father stood in the doorway with his hand on the knob and surveyed the room, eyes finally landing on the photo. His face metamorphized, and he stomped forward in his heavy work boots, snatched the photo out of her hand, shut the box, pushed it aside, bore above her.

“You had no right to look in there.”

Her mouth hung open.

Cormac looked around the room, frantic, and kicked the box further away. “I don’t want you rootin’ through anymore of my stuff, you understand?” he snapped. His whole arms were trembling. “It’s private. Just throw it in the basement and let it be.”

“I’m sorry,” Rhetta said, craning her neck up to better look him in the eyes.

“You keep changing stuff around willy-nilly and I’m gonna have to change it all back once you leave—I don’t wanna have to do all that work.” He spat a little as he barked at her. Did Rhetta spit when she got mad? Did she *get* mad?

“I can’t clean the room out without figuring out what’s in here—”

He took a sharp, violent intake of breath, then steadied himself. Measuredly, he said, “Just put it in the basement.”

The unjust silence made the dog whine from the living room. “If you insist,” conceded Rhetta. Satisfied, Cormac strode out of the room and sat back down at the small breakfast table.

It was the first time he’d really looked her in the eyes, and it had been with rage. Rhetta could accept that, maybe, some small kernel of progress. But in that moment, cognizant in disobeying him, she hadn’t felt a bit of fear, not even when being chastised. She just felt shame, as he obviously had as well, clutching that old photograph like his
life depended on it. Shame bubbling into—something else—and the other old photos burning holes in her, Rhetta felt suddenly uninhibited with the afternoon sun slicing her through the blinds. She followed him out. “I mean to stay for a while,” she said. “Longer than you anticipated, I think.”

“Why?”

Rhetta rolled her eyes. She took her father for the kind of man who wanted to be found dead mowing his lawn. His life had a differing vision. “For when your disease gets worse and you need someone to take care of you.”

Silence. Cormac’s eyes seemed to sink deep within him. In front of her he hardened into a cocoon, furious.

“Do you know why the hospital called me? They didn’t have any other names, Dad. I’m the only one left to help you. Doesn’t that scare you at all?”

Stinky barked and bumped her nose against Rhetta’s leg. Rhetta grabbed the dog’s leash and asked if she could take that morning’s paper with her. Cormac pushed it towards her and stared off into the corner. Rhetta folded it under her arm and left with Stinky in tow.

On the north side of town there was a small spot she’d found that looked out over the strip mine. She sat with Stinky and fed her half a Slim Jim, waiting until the sun set purple and orange over the decimated landscape, like an infection.

She wondered why Cormac hadn’t been rehired after the layoffs when she was a child, what he’d done in all those years. In the spare room she’d found some of his certificates: a high school diploma, a few different apprenticeship certifications, but the photos stopped not long after he started work in mine, back in the sixties. He had been
forty when Rhetta was born. Was he beautiful for so long, so much so that Lilian could stand to love him? Even for just a few years?

At nightfall Rhetta returned home with the intention to apologize, but the living room was empty. The light was on under the door, and she could hear his unsteady footsteps, softer now, as if he had removed his shoes. Rhetta couldn’t imagine him without his work boots, they were as much a part of him as anything.

She knocked on the door, and the movement stopped. She could hear his breathing.

“Dad?” No response. “Can you forgive me?”

A pause. Then his footsteps approaching, and the door opened to a crack. “We’ll talk in the morning,” he said. He closed the door again and a few seconds later the light went out.

Rhetta padded back to the mother-in-law’s quarters. She got ready for bed, brushed her teeth and washed her face in the second bathroom that had become sort of a haven for her despite its aggressive florals, pulled out the sofa bed, and got settled. But after a few minutes she got right back up and went back into the bedroom, pulling out the box of photographs again, just to look at him again on his first day of work. Eighteen, younger than she was, grinning, eyes sparkling with pride.

She stared at the photo until her eyes were watery with exhaustion. No wonder a woman could be in love with him her whole life with a smile like that.

She opened the box of his important papers, the diploma from 1960, things that needed to be kept in a file like tax returns (how little he’d made back then). And then at
the bottom, she found a small book. A collection of poetry by Ezra Pound, whose work
Rhetta wasn’t familiar with, though she knew the name.

Never would she have believed her father to be a lover of poetry (in fact Lilian
had said he didn’t understand it). Rhetta flipped through the book in search of a name,
and found inscribed on the front cover the initials S.H. She couldn’t conjure anyone in
town she’d met with those initials. But something about it seemed familiar, and so she
put it in the stack with her library books and the photos she’d kept—the family, the
waterfall. How to care for a sick loved one.
Chapter 4

As you lay there in your blood I said to you, “Live!”

Though the Aspen, Illinois branch was rather small, the Saline County public library system had special access to the Southern Illinois University online library and archives enabled, which Yvonne had taught Rhetta how to access while she was at work one day. Rhetta had thanked her, written down the access code, and slipped it into her pocket for later.

The bedroom was now mostly empty—Rhetta was worrying about it less, spending less time in there. A stench had been permeating, and so she took the opportunity to focus on other things. One day in early October after a four-hour morning shift, Rhetta took her laptop to the bagel deli down the road from the library, sure that Cormac was still at work, bought lunch, connected her computer to the wi-fi, and began to do some minor digging. It was nothing she would tell her father about, it likely didn’t even concern him anymore, but her curiosity was stabbing her constantly, and she had to scratch the itch.

Finding anything anywhere about Matchbook Trail took her some time. She’d looked first to see if it was in the Shawnee National Forest, but quickly that became a dead end. She chewed on a bagel with sprouts and cream cheese and cucumber while reading through an old document about people going missing while hiking in Southern Illinois. It wasn’t really what she was looking for.

Eventually she found a newspaper article from 1976 talking about a nature trail west of town where a couple had taken wedding photos before encountering a bear, despite there not having been almost any bears in Illinois for decades. According to the
article, the trail had been nicknamed “Matchbook” because it was where love sparked. Rhetta thought it was kind of silly, but she marked it on her map. If there were a waterfall within a mile radius, it wouldn’t be too difficult to find. But the trail was itself miles away, so walking was out of the question. Rhetta felt the pang of shame again.

She held the three photos she’d swiped: her smiling father, the waterfall, and the family. The other little boy, not Cormac, was haunting her. She had so many questions, and she knew full well now, better than anything else, that asking Cormac would only spark rage in him.

*****

“Thought I heard you say you don’t drink.”

Rhetta shrugged. “Not during the day. Do you have iced tea?” Stinky sat at her feet, curled around the bar stool. She wasn’t supposed to be allowed in, but since the owner was gone, Reggie, the bartender, allowed it. At around 10:30, the Haw was just opening its jaws to the outside world, preparing for the flood of men stomping in with their steel-toed boots to drink and eat on their hour-long lunch break. And despite the bar’s general appearance of decay, when it was quiet, Rhetta found it almost charming.

Reggie was in his seventies. He was large and grayed, old and sturdy in tandem, a state her father would not enjoy. Rhetta liked his mustache. He kindly gave her tea.

Bill Mumford appeared a few minutes later wearing a Harley Davidson jacket. His steps were unmeasured muscle memory, his gaze awake around the nearly-empty establishment. He saw Rhetta, she wondered if her presence was still novel. He sat next to her.
“You know your father hasn’t shut up about you this last whole month,” he said as way of greeting. He had a small mouth that stretched into an unexpectedly large smile. She smiled, confused. “That’s funny. He hasn’t talked much to me.”

“Ah, that’s just how he is.” He laughed. “Your dad and I went to school together. You’ve probably passed the old schoolhouse on the south side of town, just a little one-room thing with a red roof.”

“I’ve seen it.”

“That was it. That new high school they built is way better, but the kids don’t appreciate it. I took my kids by the old schoolhouse when they were young and thinkin’ about dropping out and they just looked at it like it was just any other building. No idea how lucky they are.” Rhetta opened her mouth to speak, but he anticipated her question. “I bet you’d like my son. He was like Mack said you were as a kid. Always climbing trees and playing in the dirt and shootin’ at birds with BB guns.”

Rhetta didn’t ever remember shooting at anything, but the image upset her. Playing in the dirt she remembered, but not happily, after developing something of a germaphobia living in near isolation during college.

“Did you know my dad’s family well?”

“Parents, sure. I was there when they died. His brother, not so much.”

“You met him?”

“When we were kids, you know,” he said, his demeanor becoming withdrawn and unsure. “But he died. He was only eighteen, your dad and I were working by then, so I never really saw him.”
Rhetta stroked the photo in her back pocket. Stinky whined at her feet. “Can I ask—”

Bill shook his head. “I wouldn’t. Your dad never talks about him. I haven’t heard him talk about Tony in forty years. I couldn’t tell you where he’s buried.”

Rhetta stared at him, silently begging for more information, for something else she could cling to, but he moved on. He started talking about Darla’s excitement to have a grandchild, about work. “When are you gonna drag your dad back to the doctor?” he asked.

“Soon,” Rhetta said. “Unfortunately, he only likes to do things when they’re his idea.”

“I hear you.” He took a sip of his beer, coughed, and reached to his shirt pocket for a cigarette. “I know he won’t say it, but he’s grateful you’re here. No one’s seen him so lively since—well, I don’t even know. But it’s good you’re staying.”

Rhetta nodded. In truth it worried her more than it put her at ease. She roused the dog and they left.

*****

The last of the boxes sat dutifully in the corner. Rhetta would soon move in her furniture: a bed, a clothes rack, and a desk and chair. She was pulled back again because she was thinking about her father, but soon the space would be hers, he would be dissipated throughout the house and the town, like ashes scattered to the wind.

She was alone but the dog. She stood in the hallway in front of Cormac’s room. Around the corner in the bathroom, just a few weeks ago, he’d nearly killed himself
shaving, bled all over the sink and the floor, laid there for twenty minutes soaked in his own damaged masculinity. Shaking. Then trouble walking. Then trouble remembering. Then trouble being alive.

She stared at the corner of the hallway. It could have been any hallway. In the blink of an eye, she could be back in New York, or in California, across the planet. She still had time, it wasn’t too late just yet. When she moved in the bed, her fate was sealed.

The boxes she cleared today must have been packed nearly twenty years ago. All were smelly with disintegrating cardboard. Despite Cormac’s warning persistent in her mind, she still opened every box.

Dust plumed around the room like a first snow at dawn. She found a box labeled “LILY”.

She nearly dropped it. It was light and noisy. Lilian hadn’t shown up in any of the photos she found, but Rhetta didn’t remember any family photos, didn’t remember anything but yelling and crying and her father’s bare feet for the first time—

And God, if her father saw her open this—

Cassette tapes and a Walkman.

She sighed and sank to the ground, flipping through her mother’s old tapes. *Sentimentalists.*

Half an hour later, Rhetta lifted the final box to take it into the basement and found the source of the stench of the last few days.

A small orange and black bird, dead for a week, maybe. Broken wing. Crushed. The smell traveled into all her orifices, her nose, eyes, ears, pores—

She looked to the ceiling to keep from retching.
How unfair, she thought to herself. What else had come to die in this room?

She was burying the bird in the backyard when Cormac came home. Stinky was inside—Rhetta didn’t trust her enough to think she wouldn’t try to eat the bird.

He walked around back and put his hands on his hips. She noticed, suddenly, that he hadn’t shaved in a while, and the scar under his chin was covered by hair.

“What happened?”

“Found a dead bird. I figured it wouldn’t be good for the dog.”

“Could’ve just thrown it away.”

She looked up. “A dead animal deserves a proper burial. It’s only fair.”

“What a thing to get hung up on,” he said in a mean tone, like he thought something was truly wrong with her. Rhetta didn’t understand how Bill could say her presence was so good for Cormac while it inspired him to treat her so unkindly.

She stamped the point of the shovel into the ground and turned to face him. “What can I do?” she asked. “What am I not doing? Or what am I doing wrong? You need to tell me straight, because all this evasiveness and meanness isn’t going to accomplish anything.”

He took a deep breath and shook his head. “I just wish you wouldn’t poke your nose places. Just ask me what you want to know.”

“I’ve asked you,” she said. “You wouldn’t tell me.”

“Because you were asking for the wrong reasons.”

“What are the right reasons?” Rhetta asked, exasperated. “I’m not going to worship you, if that’s what your expecting. I’m sorry I looked through your stuff, but I
don’t have any other options when all you do is reject me. You don’t even seem to like me.”

“Oh for Pete’s sake,” he sighed, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

“You don’t act like you give a damn either. How am I supposed to like you when I barely see you? You just sneak around all day, disobeying me, and then apologize like a doormat. It’s goddamn maddening.”

Rhetta bit her tongue. She was getting red in the face with frustration. “I just—”

“I swear—you turned out to be the darnedest woman.” His voice faltered a little, like cracked glass. He was staring at the ground. Rhetta felt her stomach twisting.

“Dad—”

The phone started ringing inside. He stomped off, and Rhetta finished burying the bird. She stared down for too long at the spot where it lay, and thought about how pretty and bright it was, and if that mattered at all.

When she came back inside, the landline was dangling on its cord and there was blood on the kitchen floor.

Rhetta called out for her father, but he didn’t say anything at first. The trail of blood led to his bedroom, splattered on the carpet, and into the bathroom. How had she not heard him?

“Dad?” she said in quiet panic as she came upon him. He was clutching his wrist, trembling all over. Rhetta’s vision started to blur.

“For fuck’s sake,” he murmured. He was sputtering in pain, saliva foaming out of the corners of his mouth.
Rhetta grabbed a hand towel and squeezed around his wrist. It was pouring out of him like a faucet. What was that old joke she’d heard, years ago? *Kids these days can’t even kill themselves right—it’s down the river not across the street!*

“Where’s the nearest urgent care?” Rhetta asked, squeezing as hard as she could.

“It’s a ten-minute drive.”

“I’ll call Bill, he can drive us.”

“He’s in Champagne today.”

“Fuck!” cried Rhetta. Tears were in her eyes already.

Cormac was stunned. “I can drive with one arm—don’t squeeze so hard, your hurting me even more.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ll call Yvonne.” She dialed Yvonne’s number on her cell phone with one hand.

“Just take the sedan, it isn’t shift.”

Rhetta bit her lip. “I don’t know how to drive.”

“What?”

Rhetta got Yvonne on the phone, and she said she’d come immediately. After she hung up, Rhetta said, “I’m so sorry.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I could’ve been teaching you this whole time!”

Rhetta saw the splotch get bigger with her inattention and lurched forward to cover it with her hands. She had no idea how he was being so calm.

Yvonne showed up a minute later in her Honda Civic (she was the only person Rhetta knew in town with a Japanese car), and she drove them carefully to the hospital, speaking kindly and scarcely, giving Cormac well-wishes and smiles that didn’t seem to
penetrate his soul like she wanted them to. She dropped them off and parked off to the side where her car could still be seen.

The interior of the urgent care was white and dimensionless, like the inside of a tooth. Nurses took her father immediately away to stitch him up, and Rhetta followed.

White hallway.

She hovered outside as the nurses cleaned the wound and stitched him up, listening through the threshold to the sound of her father’s voice saying the word Parkinson’s out loud for the first time within earshot. He had grabbed the knife and dropped it on accident. He wasn’t intentionally trying to kill himself, honest to God, and Rhetta tried to believe it. She wondered, though, if he didn’t do it on purpose and then change his mind. Indecisiveness ran in the family. They wrapped his arm and Rhetta realized that she’d been standing stock still for nearly twenty minutes.

A male nurse exited the room and approached Rhetta tentatively. After confirming she was family, he asked her, “Has your father ever shown suicidal tendencies before?”

“I have no idea,” she said. She hadn’t been around long enough to know.

He handed her a few pamphlets, for family members of loved ones with depression, suicidal ideation, personality disorders. “Depression is a common side effect of diseases like Parkinson’s. Is he on any meds?”

“Not yet, I don’t think.”

“He needs to be,” said the nurse, obviously trying to withhold judgment. “If you talk with a doctor here they can recommend a proper neurologist.” He put a kind hand on Rhetta’s shoulder. “Take care.” It felt like an order.
Rhetta’s stomach felt like it was folding over on itself again. Cormac appeared a moment later with his hands bashfully in his pockets, and said, “Good to go.”

He walked slowly and unsteadily, and Rhetta stayed near to him in case he felt the need to lean on her. They returned to Yvonne’s car and they rode in silence back to Carroll Boulevard.

Rhetta cleaned the blood off the kitchen floor while Cormac watched, sinking exhaustedly into his breakfast nook chair.

“I’m sorry to put you through all this,” he said.

“What happened?” Rhetta asked. “Who was on the phone?”

“Nobody important,” he said. “Old neighbor.”

“An old neighbor called and so you cut yourself?”

He breathed in sharply through his nose. That seemed to be his warning. “It was an accident.”

“Why did you grab a knife?” Rhetta asked, sitting up to her knees. She tried to find his gaze, but he was looking off into the middle-distance again. Maybe she was judging him. “Dad,” she said, softer now. “Please look at me.”

He did. He looked hurt, maybe guilt-ridden. Something was brewing just underneath the surface, but he couldn’t let Rhetta be privy to it yet. Time, she realized, was all that would open him.

Rhetta got to her feet and sat across from him, tossing the bloody rag to the side.

“You don’t have to tell me right now,” she said. “But please don’t do this again. If something happens, or if you’re angry or hurting—”

“Rhetta.”
“Just don’t lash out,” she begged. She’d had these conversations before. “Please. Don’t go… grabbing knives.”

He nodded. That had to be enough for now.

“**I’ll handle the knives from now on, fair?”** she asked.

“**Fine.**”

Rhetta went into the bathroom to mop up the blood there. The carpet would need to be shampooed, blood didn’t come out of fabric easily, she knew.

“**My mother—**”

His voice from the kitchen was so faint Rhetta barely heard it. She ran out to him—he was looking at the kitchen windowsill where a little vase with flower sat.

“**My mother, you know,”** he continued, absently. “**She could make bleeding stop by doing nothing at all. No one had ever seen anything like it. I once got hit in the face playing baseball and my eye started to bleed—I was bleeding so much we thought I was gonna die. And she just had me lay my head down in her lap, and it stopped, just like that.**”

Rhetta felt tears sting her eyes. After only being here a month, look at what she had wrought. She hadn’t been able to stop it. But he didn’t sound mad at her, not anymore.

She stood up, prepared to just put a hand on his shoulder. But instead, she walked to his side of the table, wrapped her arms around his neck, and pressed her chin into the top of his head, just for a moment, as if to say: *We can make this work, or I didn’t want to leave you when I was six, or Please don’t scare me like that again.*
[This was supposed to be paradise—someone said it would be paradise, when I was very small.]

But she didn’t say any of those things. Instead, she said, “Holler if you need me,” squeezed his shoulder once, and went into the empty bedroom to reach for the box of tapes.
II.

To the fingertips

“Understanding is but the sum of our misunderstandings. Just between us, that’s my way of comprehending the world. In a nutshell.”

Haruki Murakami
“So that there’s the transmission.”

“There?”

“No, to the left a bit.”

“Oh—okay.”

“And that’s where the transmission oil goes, and then the windshield wiper fluid.”

“Okay, I get that part.”

“If you need to jump your car, you connect your jumper cables here and here, and then to the same bolts in another person’s car.”

“Okay.”

“And that’s the battery back there.”

“Got it.”

Rhetta’s father looked at her. “Are you thinking about what I’m sayin’ or are you just nodding along?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Bah.” He stepped back from the hood of the Chrysler and put his hands on his hips in that fatherly chastising way he sometimes assumed without much cause or experience. “If you’re stranded on a dirt road alone with nothin’ but your wits and a broken-down car, you’re gonna have to know what all this is.”

“I don’t think I’ll be in that situation anytime soon, Dad. My commute takes ten minutes.”
He sighed and made Rhetta take pause and wait for him to start up again, his voice low and steady. “If you ever need to drive up to Champagne, or go to St. Louis, or anything—it doesn’t matter why, if you’re buyin’ clothes or goin’ with friends or something—”

“Of course, yeah, clothes are the only thing I could conceive of buying.”

“Rhetta.”

“Sorry. Just kind of a dated standard, Dad.”

“It’s not dated—” and he articulated this very precisely, “—or sexist to say that women like to buy clothes. I swear, you get up in arms about every little thing I say.”

“Not everything,” Rhetta said, feeling half-guilty. “Just the less-creative things.”

They were, it should be mentioned, in a parking lot in town where Rhetta had driven as practice. Her driving lessons had been set back because of the harsh winter that carried over much later into spring than anyone would have liked, and Rhetta was adamant about her fears of trying to drive on ice, not knowing how to handle the car, and killing both herself and her father prematurely.

Heads turned here and there as they bickered, but neither paid any mind to onlookers. They had had worse arguments and had quickly learned how to engage in public combat without drawing excess attention. One day it was Mexican immigrants, another day it was girls wearing revealing clothes, another it was men leering at Rhetta and whether cat calling was complimentary or insulting, and then was black on black crime not the source of the community’s problems, not white people just living their lives?—the list went on.
“You’ll probably have to replace the battery soon; it’s been a long time since I’ve done it. And one other thing—” her father began, tipping forward too quickly and nearly losing his balance before Rhetta steadied him. He cleared his throat. “I forgot to tell you, but I put a gauge in the center console, so you can check the tire pressure.”

“Oh, thank you.” That was something Rhetta had retained from their last lesson. Every time her father tried to teach her something about cars, she became inexplicably drowsy. “Do you need anything while we’re out?”

“Nope, don’t think so,” he said, walking back around to the passenger’s side. “We can head on home.”

Rhetta obliged to shut the hood and slide back into the front seat.

“You can sit further back from the wheel.”

“I’m comfortable.”

“If you get in a wreck you bet your ass the airbag will hurt, being too close’ll make it even worse.”

“That’s really what I want to be thinking about right now, Dad, you’re right.”

He rolled his eyes and looked out the window. After Rhetta was sure he wasn’t paying attention, she slid her seat back a few centimeters.

*****

A shirt came up in the laundry that Rhetta hadn’t seen in nineteen years or so. A standard men’s shirt with a pentagonal pocket and vertical gray stripes, but it was a business shirt, something to wear to white collar work, something her father had never done.
“Did you wear this recently?” she asked her father as he sipped his coffee. “I didn’t notice it.”

He shook his head. “Just found it lookin’ through some old stuff.”

Rhetta held it up. “It’s nice,” she said. “I think it has a little hole in it, though. Here, see?”

Cormac squinted at it and fumbled for his readers. Rhetta picked them up and handed them to him. He didn’t thank her verbally, but he nodded a little, which counted in Rhetta’s mind. “Nnn. Well, toss it, I guess.”

“Can I have it? You can’t see it if it’s tucked in.”

He shrugged and sipped his coffee and said, “I don’t see why not.”

“Thank you.”

“Mmm.”

Rhetta finished the laundry, the dog, Stinky, living up to her name yet refusing to leave Rhetta alone. She gave the dog a bath, took her on a walk to dry her off, and came back to get the mail. She set the mail down for her father—the only one of them who got any mail (Rhetta’s old magazine subscriptions were still, assumedly, going to her old apartment in New York) and went off to finish the laundry.

Rhetta hung her father’s shirt at the very end of the clothes rack in her room, sat on her bed, and stared at it.

Her father, his hair still mostly dark, wearing this shirt, Wrangler jeans, and brown loafers. Sitting in the breakfast nook and reading a book of poems under his breath to no one in particular. Mother was gone by that point, in Kentucky falling in love with the rich software engineer, plotting to steal her daughter back from the grasp of the dirty,
jobless, former miner. The dirty, jobless, former miner dressed like a professor on his day off, whispering to himself, “…on a wet, black bough,” over and over again. It was the only phrase Rhetta could remember.

And now her father was about 80% gray, wrinkled and infirm. Less than a year since her arrival and her father had already developed balance issues, and she’d had to save him from falling more than once. They let him weld still, but he sat and worked on auxiliary projects. It was pittance, and Rhetta assumed he realized it to be so.

*****

With spring came more lovely weather, and Rhetta’s desire to get out of the house only increased. Most of the time she sufficed herself to long walks or spending her evening on the back porch reading a book, sitting next to Cormac in silence as he smoked a few cigarettes. The smoking would have to be a conversation soon. That, and the drinking. He was growing softer on her every day, maybe soon he would listen to her.

But Rhetta planned, finally, on her weekend to head into the forest west of town and find that waterfall a mile off Matchbook Trail. With her newfound driving capabilities and conditional ownership of the sedan, she had the means, finally, to investigate. In private, of course. For Cormac to know would undo much of the progress they’d made over the past few months. Even though one nor the other had changed supremely, Rhetta saw they both felt more comfortable with the other, and that must not be jeopardized.

She told Cormac she was going to drive over to Carbondale to shop around a bit and see a play at the university (they were putting on A Streetcar Named Desire, which
she’d seen half a dozen times already and could lie convincingly about if he asked her, not that he cared), and instead mapped out her route to the trail, and the radius around it where she could potentially find that waterfall. She wanted to know why it was so precious to him.

Early Sunday morning, she packed a backpack with snacks, a wrapped sandwich, a rain jacket, her tennis shoes (which weren’t made for hiking but she didn’t have better options), two water bottles, the maps she’d printed at the library, and her wallet, though she didn’t imagine needing anything. Truthfully, she was overpacked, especially for only a day, but Rhetta had never done anything like this before. The extent of her nature exposure in her youth, at least the youth she could remember, had been the concrete jungle, which presented its own unique problems.

After driving for nearly an hour she arrived at the entrance to the woods, within which she would find the trail. Two other cars sat in the large lot already. She parked, changed shoes, and wandered for a few minutes, looking for the entrance to the trail, until she eventually found it. For some reason, Rhetta had expected the trail to be more clearly defined, wider and more open, but looked like it had been carved years ago and hardly kept up. Two people could hardly walk shoulder to shoulder. Camping was permitted, but she hadn’t the slightest idea who would want to camp in a place like this, with no defined site, just forest. Or maybe that was the appeal. Alienation. She entered the woods.

The trees seemed to curl down just a few inches above her head. She’d forgotten bug spray (the last time she’d seen so many bugs was in an actual insectarium for high school biology), and so was constantly twitching and fanning herself with her trail maps.
Her pulse increased drastically as soon as the entrance to the woods was out of sight behind her. It felt like she was being truly swallowed up.

What about this place deserved documentation? Was it just a place to sneak away to smoke weed? Who the hell would drive forty-five minutes just to smoke weed? What a waste of time.

Rhetta had to justify this to herself in some way that amused her, at least remotely, because she was trembling all over with fear. Wandering alone around a city was somehow so much less terrifying than wandering through the woods. In a city at least there were other people—good or bad, regardless, others existed. But someplace so remote like this was frightening because Rhetta had rarely been this alone in her whole life. Even in the moments when she’d felt most alone, people had always been within arm’s reach.

She walked for about fifteen minutes in mostly a circle until she realized that she should have departed from the trail by now, but she had no idea where to begin. “Off” the trail didn’t give her enough guidance. She stopped, drank some water, checked her watch. It was barely nine in the morning and she already felt like giving up and going home. What a child.

Something moved in the woods off in the distance and she let out a small cry that she muffled under her hand. Her face was red and hot, her whole body felt like a livewire. Surely it was just a squirrel, but the fear had excited her so, she hardly knew what to do with herself anymore. Stay? Go home before she became lost? Her vision was unsteady around the edges, rocking back and forth on its axis. She was lost in something already. She rubbed her hands on her thighs.
The wind sang through the trees with a sweet, high moan. Birds chirped and flitted from branch to branch, cicadas buzzed continually. The sound spun around Rhetta, enveloping her completely in its foreignness. It was like she was visiting a country where she didn’t speak the language, an island whose fruit she had never eaten. There was little to be afraid of. Headily, she stepped off the trail and into the untamed woods.

With glassy eyes, watery from the intense rays of the sun, Rhetta wandered aimlessly through the woods for a few minutes, feeling a strange kind of high having broken off the beaten path. She had her pepper spray with her, potential bears or sasquatches or serial killers be damned. They had all those in New York, she knew how to take care of herself.

She wondered when could have been the last time her father had come through these woods. Surely decades had passed. A waterfall this far off the beaten path was something of a marvel, Rhetta thought, and the trail was known for being romantic. She wondered if he’d come here with a lover. Or with her mom.

Suddenly she heard sounds from a few feet ahead of her, obscured by the thick foliage. She stopped dead, another shock going through her body, but she fought the fear and pressed forward, inch by inch as silently as she could.

Twenty feet ahead of her, she suddenly saw a bright orange tent and the figure of a person standing erect, hair shining in the morning light. Rhetta walked as quietly as she could, all the while not taking her eyes off the person—a man, Rhetta guessed—, his broad shoulders, strong forearms.

And then she saw that he was looking at a deer.
There were only ten feet or so between the two. Some food was sitting out at the small campsite, which must have attracted it. The deer’s eyes were massive and glassy, ears small and twitching arrhythmically to shoo away flies and mosquitoes. Its antlers were only just beginning to grow in for the year.

The man was holding something out to the deer, trying to commiserate with it. But Rhetta, lost in the trance of curiosity, was careless with her footing and stepped squarely on a twig, snapping it loudly in half.

The deer’s ears perked up, and in a few huge leaps it turned and bounded off, disappearing back into the woods.

The man turned back around, following the sound of Rhetta’s feet, and Rhetta realized that she had been totally mistaken. The camper was a woman. She was wearing a short-sleeved button-down shirt completely open, exposing enough of her chest. Her face was pointy and pale-ish, eyes bright blue and hypnotizing.

“Oh,” said the woman, reaching somewhat frantically to close her shirt. She had a low, resonant voice. Her smile was naturally crooked. “Sorry about that. Hope I didn’t scare you.”

Rhetta’s body shook violently from the center like an earthquake, and then settled. She suppressed any physical aftershocks, but her head felt like it was buzzing with a confused swarm. Something seemed to puncture her wrist and slip into her vein, a feeling of—she didn’t know. She turned around and started back towards the trail. The woman called after her, but she didn’t listen. She didn’t listen to anything until she made it back to the parking lot.
Back inside her car, Rhetta took a moment to catch her breath again and reconcile with the feelings at war within her. She had never seen a deer that up close before. It had made her think of the taxidermy head in Bill and Darla’s living room, the one she felt partially responsible for killing. It almost sickened her to think about it.

And the stranger. There was now only one other car in the parking lot, a Subaru covered in a coat of leaves. It must have been sitting there for a few days. Illinois license plate. A woman, surely. Rhetta took a few steadying breaths, pulled out of the parking lot, and left.

She did, in fact, go to Carbondale for a few hours, to do some shopping and have lunch alone in a small diner, poking at the scrambled eggs absent-mindedly. A group of old ladies sat near her talking about an event at their church and marveled out the window as hundreds of white puffs floated around, as they always did. It always looked like it was snowing here, even in spring. What tree did those come from?

She was a veritable failure now, at least in her first attempt at finding the waterfall. Who knew how many more chances she would have to sneak away? Especially when she shouldn’t be sneaking at all. Her father’s health was on the line, after all.

As she prepared to leave town, it took a few revs to get the car engine going, which nearly sent her into another conniption. But the car got going, and so she drove on. It was much later in the afternoon than she’d anticipated—the whole Sunday was gone and she’d accomplished nothing. She’d had so many days like this before she moved, just wasting time, shopping, eating, staring out the window. The physical memory of those times scorched through her painfully. She needed to get home. She needed a hobby. Maybe she’d take up gardening.
Fifteen miles outside of Aspen, the headlights went off and her car began to sputter and slow as she passed by a motorcycle club brimming with people. Just as she got away from them, she pulled off to the side and the beast died right there on highway 13.

Rhetta sat in the car for a few minutes and cried. Quietly, subtly, just wiping mascara from under the cusps of her eyes as individual tears fell. Sometimes, cruelly, she wondered how on earth she got to be in the middle of absolute nowhere like this. And how come Illinois sometimes looked mountainous and vibrant and green and other times, times like this, it looked desolate and gray? The inconsistencies were so close to each other that they seemed bizarre—not complete opposites, like city and country or wasteland and estuary, just caddy-corner. Uncanny.

She tried again to start it a few times to no avail. Finally, she got out of her car, popped the hood, and looked underneath, trying to wrack her brain for any of the instructions her father had given her. If she had to make the idiot’s guess, her battery was dead, which meant she would have to jump it. She would never have had to do this in New York—but, she needed to stop being nostalgic about her old life, though who knew when it would become her world again. She needed to stop being morbid about her current life, too.

The sound of rushing air and a car came up from behind her, and she turned around to see headlights coming from a small blue SUV, which slowed to a crawl as it neared her. The window rolled down, and within Rhetta could see a shiny blonde head.

“Need a jump?”
Mortified, Rhetta nodded. She went around to the trunk of her car to get the jumper cables while the woman made a skillful U-turn to allow their cars to face each other chin to chin.

She was very tall, Rhetta saw now, up close, and wore big square glasses with a thin wire frame. She was lanky but evidently strong. Rhetta could see the defined tendons of her neck against the dimming red sun.

“Thank you,” Rhetta said quietly, looking at her shoes.

“Hey, no problem,” said the woman. “Ladies gotta help each other out. What’s your name?”

Her voice was too confident. It bothered Rhetta. “It’s impolite to ask someone’s name without introducing yourself first.”

“What, you wanna talk about politeness when I’m saving you? Out of the goodness of my heart?” She chuckled, and her grin was slick. She extended her hand. “I’m Josephine.”

Rhetta bit the inside of her cheek. “Rhetta.”

“Pleasure,” Josephine said, holding Rhetta’s gaze as they shook hands. Josephine popped the hood of her car and got to work connecting the cables. “That was you in the woods, right? I apologize about earlier,” she said as she worked. “I like to go camping when I have some time off work, rare as that is. That deer scared the shit out of me. I haven’t been that close to any animal other than a dog since I went to the petting zoo when I was eleven.”

Rhetta laughed quietly, then mentally kicked herself for it.

“Where’re you headed?” Josephine asked.
“Aspen,” Rhetta replied hoarsely.

“Fancy that.”

It took her a moment to catch the meaning.

“You must be new around here. I’ve never seen you before and I’ve lived in this shitty town my whole life, you know.” Josephine got in her car and cranked the engine.

“You wanna give it a shot?”

Rhetta nodded again and revved the engine a few times until the car croaked to life. Josephine gave her a thumbs-up from the window of her car, then got out to detach the cables.

“You’ll probably wanna get a new battery, sooner rather than later,” she said.

Rhetta got out of the car to retrieve the cables. “I plan to. It’s not my car, it’s my dad’s, so…”

“Well—” Josephine leaned against the hood of Rhetta’s car, the sunset making a spectacle of her collarbones. They were standing a little close. Rhetta felt her eyes widen, though it wasn’t a conscious choice. Nothing was. “If you ever need a boost give me a holler, Rhetta.” She winked, then, and sauntered back into her own car, idling there until Rhetta drove off and put some distance between them.

*****

Cormac was chain smoking and tapping his foot worriedly when she burst through the front door.

“Where the hell were you?” he asked.
She dropped the jumper cables next to the front door. “I need a new fucking battery,” she said, went to her room, and slammed the door.

A moment later, shockingly, Cormac knocked. “Yo’ alright?” he asked. “Something happen?”

Rhetta took a deep, long breath, then let it out. She opened the door a crack and told him that she was just fine and that there was nothing to worry about, she was just frustrated. He said, “Guess you really didn’t like that play, huh,” and Rhetta laughed.

The door was open. It was comfortable.

*****

Despite the proliferation of autobody shops around Aspen, the battery for her car had to be special ordered, so it took a few days for it to arrive. It didn’t bother Rhetta supremely, after all it was spring and beautiful, and walking to work first thing in the morning would get her endorphins going, boost her mood.

Yvonne, pleased with Rhetta’s consistency at work, had decided to share the responsibility of weekly story time with her. Alternating gave them more time to choose and prepare books, and Rhetta had found that she enjoyed reading to children. They seemed to like her, more or less. “All the little boys think you’re so pretty,” Yvonne had cooed one day. “According to the moms, you’re all they talk about!” Rhetta had half-smiled. She wished they would pay attention to the book.

Yvonne’s single admonition at Rhetta regarding her story time performance had been somewhat humiliating: the day after Rhetta’s second reading, Yvonne had come by to shower Cormac with baked gifts, which he, as always, accepted with a grunted thanks.
and slight wave of the hand. The two women were talking in the kitchen while Cormac sat and read the paper, when Yvonne reached out and put her hand on Rhetta’s shoulder, saying, “Now honey, you’re what, a D? Double-D? You need to cover up, when you’re reading at least. Sherry Blackwell complained to me yesterday, said she didn’t want Tommy seeing that, yadda yadda. If you ask me, I think she’s neurotic, but I had to mention it. But not at work, I didn’t want to embarrass you.”

As if in the presence of her father was any less embarrassing. Rhetta had not smiled. But she obeyed nonetheless.

Tuesday, donning her only shirt that didn’t offer too much cleavage (and thus the ugliest thing she owned), Rhetta was in the middle of story time, reading an old Eric Carle picture book to a crowd of about ten five-year-old children when the door opened and Josephine entered the library. They locked eyes, and for a split second, Rhetta lost track of her place in the book, but she rallied herself back into the present and resumed reading. But as she read, she noticed Josephine hovering nearby or watching her through the stacks, curious and maybe amused.

After story time ended, Rhetta returned to her position behind the counter, tapping a pencil and watching Josephine. She had already collected a formidable stack, though Rhetta couldn’t see what she was getting from far away. A few of the story time moms came to talk to her, about what would be next and when new picture books would be coming in, et cetera. Rhetta deferred them all to Yvonne, watching Josephine as she pushed the moms out of the way so that was clear.

“Rhetta, was it?” Josephine said as she approached, shooting finger guns and setting her books on the counter.
Rhetta glanced down at the nametag on her shirt and rolled her eyes. “Hi Josephine.”

“I didn’t know you worked here. I come in all the time. It’s a good fit for you.”

“You know nothing about me,” Rhetta said.

“No, I mean you just look very cozy in here. It’s a good visual fit. Harmonious.”

“Thank you?” Rhetta looked horrible and frumpy, and she couldn’t tell if she was being insulted or complimented.

“I should have guessed from the horn-rimmed glasses. Aren’t they visual shorthand for librarian?”

“Do you have a library card?”

“Oh yeah, hold on.” She dug into her back pocket for her men’s wallet, from which she withdrew the library card. Rhetta noticed a large D-clip with a few noisy keys clasped around the belt loop of her green chinos. “So how long have you lived in Little Egypt?”

“A little less than a year,” Rhetta said. “I’m taking care of my father.”

“He’s sick?”

“Parkinson’s.”

“Oof. That’s gotta be tough.”

Rhetta shrugged. “He’s okay right now. But it is exhausting sometimes.” She saw Yvonne eyeing her from the other side of the building and scanned Josephine’s library card. “You have three dollars in overdue fees.”
“Woops,” Josephine said, and pulled a five out of her wallet. “So, uh.” She put her elbows on the counter and leaned forward a little bit. “Do you have a phone number?”

Rhetta dropped the scanner on the counter, making a loud clattering noise and drawing the eyes of just about everybody to her. She cleared her throat and made change for Josephine’s fees. “First of all, I’m at work, second of all, I was just talking about my sick father.”

“I dunno, I thought I could—” Rhetta gave her a mean glare and Josephine lowered her voice, “I thought I could take you out, help you let loose, or whatever.”

“Uh-huh.” Rhetta started scanning the books. “You could have approached that much more delicately.”

“Funny that you don’t sound uninterested.”

Rhetta bit her lips into the thin line between frustrated and coy. “You’re not my type.”

“C’mon, we have a good thing going! What’s your type? Are you not into ladies? I’m sorry, I just kind of got a vibe that you were. You did have some wandering eyes the other day.” She cocked her eyebrow.

“Is there no limit to your skeeviness?”

Josephine barked a laugh. “Are you always this mean? I thought it was boys who were mean to girls they actually liked.”

“That’s a myth. It’s harmful to socialize girls to believe that boys abusing them is emblematic of affection. It perpetuates that violence is intrinsic in masculinity and submissiveness and bearing harassment is natural in womanhood.”
“My bad.”

Rhetta reached under the desk for a pen as the receipt printed. “Plus, isn’t it a little hypocritical for you to call me boyish?”

“What, are you making fun of me for being butch? If you find another dyke in this fucking town let me know, I’ve been carrying this torch by myself for years.”

“I was kidding.”

“Oh.”

“And please don’t swear, there are children present.” She smiled a little mischievously for a brief second, then swallowed it back down, her cheeks burning.

“Your books are due three weeks from today,” Rhetta said, snapping the receipt free and setting it on the counter. She circled the due date. “You can drop them off in the return slot outside or bring them up to turn in. If you want to renew for an additional two weeks, you can bring them in or do so over the phone. Library phone number is on the bottom of your receipt here.” She scrawled a bit more, folded the receipt longways, and handed it to Josephine. “Thanks again for helping with my car the other day and have a nice afternoon.”

A smirk bled onto Josephine’s face. “You do the same.”

*****

When Rhetta got home later Cormac was already back from work, much earlier than usual, and he was playing a record.
Rhetta was a little shocked. Months ago, she’d set out his turntable and records to subliminally encourage him to reconsider setting it up, but he’d just taken it to his room. Evidently, he’d become inspired.

He was sitting on the couch drinking a glass of Rhetta’s orange juice and humming along quietly, looking happier than she’d seen him almost since she arrived.

“What’s playing?” she asked as she put her bag away.

“Crosby Stills and Nash,” he called.

“And Young?”

“Not yet, this is their first one.”

“What song is this?”

“‘Guinevere,’” he said. “My mother loved this one. She liked peacock feathers. She’d buy ‘em at flea markets or whatever, use ‘em in flower arrangements.” He let out a sigh. Rhetta watched the record spin on the turntable, falling into a reverie with him. The guitar sounded like how it felt to drive on the county roads here, vast and lush, empty and yet brimming with life. Were they feeling the same thing?

The song quickly ended. She’d come home too late.

He cleared his throat. “By the way,” Cormac began, like he’d been waiting for it, “Bill and Darla are going to Champagne next week to have lunch with their daughter and invited us to come along.”

“Us?” Rhetta said. “Me included.”

“Yup.”

“That was sweet.”

“You workin’ Monday?”
“Nope.”

“I’ll let ‘em know. You want another driving lesson? We can use the truck.”

“I don’t think I have the energy for manual.”

“What’d you used to do with your free time?” he asked, slowly lowering himself back into his usual seat in the breakfast nook. His cane, which he refused to use almost constantly within the house, was propped against the edge of the table. “Back in New York.”

Rhetta shrugged in lieu of thinking through a response. “Not much. Read, went to movies, did yoga sometimes. I was busy though, I didn’t have much free time.”

“I just got to thinkin’—you don’t work that much, you seem kind of listless.”

“I do a lot of work around here.”

“Yeah but you’re not makin’ money doing that.”

“I’m saving you money. You don’t have to do all the work here yourself or hire a cleaning service, so you have more time to work and do other stuff. I’m a net gain.”

He scoffed. “Tell that to the grocery bills.”

“Who buys the groceries?”

“Whose money buys the groceries?”

Rhetta bit back shame and put a mug of water in the microwave for instant coffee. “Whatever. I’ve got enough going on right now.”

“You sit alone in your room half the day. Are you, I dunno, talking to people on the internet?” It seemed to take him a lot of effort to express that idea, like he didn’t quite understand what it meant.

“No. I read blogs sometimes.”
“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “Yvonne has a bridge club, she said she’d be happy if you joined them.”

Rhetta glared at him. “I’m probably not going to join my boss’s club. How long have you been shopping me around?”

“And Zeb and the other young guys play darts at the Haw on Fridays.”

“I’m not interested in spending time with men. I already live with you, that’s plenty.”

“Now, Rhetta—”

She took a deep breath. *It begins.*

“I don’t know where you get this bitterness from, if it’s from your mother or your private school or what, but there’s a lotta men out there who you’re rejecting, and you shouldn’t just brush ‘em all aside because you’re used to intellectual pretty boys.”

“I was partially joking, you know.”

“Well you say stuff like that enough that it bugs me. Now, if you mean to stay out here for the long haul like you say, you need to know what’s out there before they all get taken.”

“Are you talking about *marriage*? I thought we were talking about hobbies.” She stirred the instant coffee into her mug and spilled some on the counter by accident.

“I think you’re judgmental of the men out here.”

“What am I judging?”

“Some of the men workin’ the mine didn’t even finish high school.”

Rhetta shook her head. “How does that affect me? I don’t even know them.”

“That’s what I’m saying. Why don’t you know them?”
“Because I don’t want to.”

“And why don’t you want to?”

“Not because I went to an Ivy League school and have a superiority complex, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

He sighed and massaged his temples. “I’m saying that you should go to the Haw and get to know them. And stop being sexist against men.”

“You know what,” Rhetta said, clapping her hands together. “I’m not even going to begin to unpack this right now because there’s a stranger in a chatroom waiting to ask to look at my breasts, so I have to attend to him.”

“What?”

“It was a joke, Dad. I’m just gonna read.” She sipped her coffee, added a little more sugar, and walked off to her room, calling affectionately behind her, “Holler if you need me!”

She closed the door behind her, set down her coffee, and collapsed backwards on to her bed, staring up at the ceiling and the vague shadow of the ceiling fan as it spun, the noon sun outside doing nothing but desaturating everything it touched. She sat back up and looked at her father’s shirt hanging on the clothes rack and unbuttoned it the rest of the way. She slid it on over her t-shirt, the whole thing baggy and awkward, making her feel like when she was a child and would try on her mother’s clothes. Distantly, she remembered stealing her father’s clothes and doing the same thing, but she was so young then.

She slid the shirt off and examined the hole in the back. On the left-hand seam, written in marker on the tag that described washing instructions, was the name TONY.
“Tony,” Rhetta mumbled to herself. That was the name of Cormac’s late brother. She wondered if he realized he’d given her something of his. If it was important to him, she should return it, but mentioning Tony seemed to be off-limits. Besides, she didn’t want to disrupt the symbiosis they had just finally achieved, and so she kept the shirt for herself.

*****

The call came the next day, which Rhetta took on the second ring, standing in the backyard by the tree while playing fetch with Stinky. She kept it short and sweet—though the window was closed due to the bout of spring chill which had settled over the land along with a fat, inconsiderate cloudbank, her father could see her take the call. And even if he wasn’t watching, she didn’t want Josephine getting any bright ideas. The conversation lasted thirty seconds, and stupidly, Rhetta closed with, “It’s a date.”

She groaned and picked up the stick that Stinky had faithfully dropped at her feet. “A date,” she growled to herself, “stupid.” She squeezed the stick and wound up so far back that it hurt, like someone was trying to tear her arm off, pulled back, back, and then she chucked the stick into a neighbor’s yard.

*****

Friday, Rhetta observed her father’s impatience as she tended to this and that, peeling apples and making applesauce and mopping the kitchen and cleaning the grout and dusting the living room and her father’s bedroom and cleaning both bathrooms and reading half a novel in two hours and checking her watch every five minutes. He was
desperate to ask her if she was going to the Haw like he suggested, and she would have to tell him that no, she wasn’t. He would ask her why not, and she would have to tell him, “Well, Dad, because against everything you assume about me, I’m going out on a date with a woman. And yes, I am doing it just to get back at you for how you treated me as a child, because why else would I be an attractive twenty-five-year-old woman possibly doomed to celibacy until your death unless this date goes well?” She Windexed everything in the house.

At six o’clock she vanished into her room and changed and wanted to shoot herself because she didn’t know what to wear on a date and would rather die than show up looking slightly over or under dressed. She tried on five different outfits, smacked herself on the back of the head, and re-dressed. Asking her sixty-five-year-old, out of touch father what to wear on a date seemed about as pleasant as being drawn and quartered.

She approached him regardless: “Do you know Lou’s Eatery?”

“Mmhmm. Been there once. Why?”

“I’m meeting someone there tonight. Is it fancy?”

“Do I know him?”

“No. Should I wear a dress or is that too much?”

“What’s his name?”

“Joe.”

“Where’d you meet him?”

“Library. Dad, please, is it fancy?”

“Oh I don’t remember.”
She groaned and returned to her room to dress and do makeup. When was the last time she’d done serious makeup? She hoped, if nothing else, Josephine looked butch enough for strangers to assume that they were a man and a woman out on a date, nothing more. Or just friends having dinner. Just friends.

She decided on a green wrap dress that made her boobs look good and brought out her eyes, one that she’d worn enough to know she was comfortable in it. It had little gold dots stitched in that looked like stars. She emerged a few minutes later carrying her shoes and strode purposefully into the kitchen. “My number is on speed dial if you need anything. And Yvonne’s and Bill and Darla’s, but you know those already. I don’t know when I’ll be back, but I’ll come in my door so that I don’t wake you.”

“Is he coming in?”

“You don’t have a gun on you, do you?” She knew he had at least three.

“I just wanna meet the guy for Christ’s sake.”

Rhetta sighed and wiped her forehead. “Sorry. I’ll introduce you later if it goes well. Please don’t forget to use the cane to stand up. I know you don’t need it to walk, but it helps with the first few steps when you’re trying to keep your balance—”

“I know, I know.”

“I’ll go to the Haw at some point,” Rhetta said, looking at the clock. Five minutes to seven. “I promise, I haven’t forgotten.”

He nodded. “Take him with you.”

“That might defeat the point of all the boys fighting each other for my attention.”

“You watch too many of those silly romance shows.”
“Probably.” She had been watching *Sex and the City* reruns recently to sate her New York City nostalgia. She put on her shoes, looked out the front window, and saw Josephine’s Subaru pull out front. “I’m off,” she said, giving Cormac’s shoulder a quick squeeze and slipping out the front door.

Rhetta checked to see if anyone she recognized was outside, then she slid into the passenger’s seat.

“Are you being followed?” asked Josephine.

“Hope not.”

“I’ve got bullet-proof glass, you’re safe.”

Rhetta laughed as Josephine pulled away. “Thank you for driving. My car’s still waiting on a battery, and I’m still learning.”

“You’re learning now?”

“Didn’t need to drive before I moved here.”

“You’re from New York, right? I guess you wouldn’t.” Josephine stopped at a red light and took the free moment to examine Rhetta. “That a New York dress?”

“Yeah.” Unconsciously, Rhetta squirmed against the seat. She wasn’t used to being looked at.

“It’s pretty. You look—” she coughed and started to drive again as the light changed, “—really good.”

Rhetta flushed and bit her lips together, though she shouldn’t do that if she didn’t want to ruin her lipstick. “Thank you,” she muttered. She wanted to confidently return the compliment—Josephine did look nice, in a fitted blouse and linen trousers—but the sentiment got caught in her throat.
They pulled into the restaurant and Josephine got their table, which she’d evidently reserved under the last name Haas. Despite her coolness, Rhetta understood that Josephine was more thoughtful (and maybe neurotic) than she let on. As they sat at their corner booth, Rhetta surveyed the restaurant through the soft pink light. The walls were an ivory stucco and the wood was dark, warm cherry.

“You are so antsy,” Josephine chuckled, unfolding her menu. “No one’s gonna hang you in the public square.”

“Sorry,” Rhetta said. “It’s been a while since I’ve been out.”

“On a date?”

“Just in general, other than grocery shopping.”

“Come on,” Josephine said teasingly. “No one else? I’m sure the boys around here are falling all over you.”

“That’s what I hear, but truthfully I couldn’t care less,” she said. “Unfortunately, the compliments of men have stopped counting for much. I used to appreciate them even if they were ultimately meaningless, but now they just wear on my patience. Now I just get praise from middle-aged librarians.”

“Hey, your boss lady is a catch. Tell her I said so.”

Rhetta laughed and opened her menu. “How do you…” she considered her words carefully. “How do you get away with being so—”

“What, brash?”

“Kinder than how I would have put it.”

She laughed. “I mean people don’t really mind. I work in IT, which is a fucking sausage fest, so I end up being one of the boys.”
“But what if they’re being misogynist? Not to assume ill of your coworkers.”

“No, assume all you want.” Josephine sighed wistfully. “Against my best efforts they are my friends, but we don’t talk about things we know we would disagree about. I mean, we’re coworkers first. We have to work together, so there has to be a line. I don’t get beers with them more than twice a year.”

“I think that’s a good balance,” Rhetta said. “It’s been different, living here. Back when I lived in New York, everything was political all the time. If someone supported the War in Afghanistan and wouldn’t begin to think critically about it, I would just delete their number, never talk to them again. It was so easy.”

“Doesn’t work so well here.”

“No, unfortunately not.” Their waiter came for drink orders. Rhetta ordered water and coffee, and Josephine did the same.

“You don’t want wine?”

“I’m not much of a drinker,” Rhetta said, feeling a little uncomfortable at the scrutiny.

It must have been obvious, because Josephine backpedaled. “My bad. I won’t prod too much more.”

“No—” Rhetta insisted. “You can. I mean, that’s the point, isn’t it?” She took a deep breath and leaned back in her seat, making an effort to make herself look beautiful. It was a date, after all. Bird’s eye view, she’d been asked on a date by a tall, charismatic butch. Nineteen-year-old Rhetta would have fainted at the thought. “What’s burning to be asked?”
Josephine bit her lips, and stared somewhere below Rhetta’s chin for a moment, maybe at the little gold chain that fell just below her collar bone. They both jumped when the waiter dropped off their drinks and they had to order food. Rhetta fumbled for the second-cheapest entrée while Josephine chose something vegetarian.

They sipped their coffees (Josephine’s with cream and no sugar, Rhetta’s the opposite), when Josephine finally decided: “What were you doing off the path the other day? When you found my campsite.”

Rhetta was foolishly surprised. She considered lying for a split second but didn’t see the value in it. Josephine wouldn’t go gossiping to her father. “I was looking for a waterfall,” she said. “Off the trail. Do you know about it?”

“Half-Moon Waterfall?”

“I don’t know,” Rhetta said. “I found a photograph of it with my father’s stuff, it was just labeled as a mile off Matchbook Trail.”

“You were going in about the right direction,” Josephine said. “It’s well-hidden because it’s so small and not technically part of the Shawnee. Not many people know about it.”

“I assumed it was a place for high schoolers to sneak away to and smoke.”

Josephine giggled, unbridled. It was very charming. “God no. That long of a drive? They just do it in their backyard or basement or whatever. No one’s calling the cops for weed. For God’s sake I’m pretty sure my neighbor does meth, like, all the time, and has for years, but no one’s done anything about it. That’s a different problem. Regardless, it’s sort of a regional secret. Not named after a president or vaguely important person in Illinois history.”

“Because the trees curl down around it in a perfect semi-circle. It kind of evokes that bridge Monet painted, with the lilies. That perfect serenity and symmetry. I think some people don’t believe in it because it’s just so beautiful.”

“You make it sound sacred.”

“It is.” Josephine took another sip of her coffee and undid her top button.

“Because it’s for lovers, of course.” Her foot brushed Rhetta’s ankle under the table.

Their food arrived a few minutes later, and they ate and chatted. Rhetta asked Josephine about her job, her schooling, what she liked to read, her parents—her mother a cook, her father also a miner. They were still married, but no longer lived together and refused to get a divorce. Baptists, Josephine explained, to which Rhetta added, “A loveless marriage is more honorable than a broken marriage,” with a bit of ironic amusement.

“Is your dad,” Rhetta began, but then started to stumble over her thoughts. “Does he—”

“Know I’m gay? Oh yeah. Poor bastard. Still tries to set me up with men from time to time.”

“That’s awful.”

“No it’s not,” she said. “Truthfully, it used to be way worse. He’s come around, all things considered. I have a lot of family in town, it would’ve been more of a nightmare to try and hide it.”

“Did you ever think about leaving?”

“Sure,” she said, pushing her plate to the side. “I left for college.”
“But you came back.”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Do you hate it here that much?”

“No,” Rhetta said, embarrassed. “Not at all. I like the quiet life a lot. The city got to be suffocating, I felt so insignificant all the time. And I do here, too, but a little less. And here it’s easier to be at peace with.”

“Well there you have it.”

Rhetta finished eating under Josephine’s gaze. Some of her lipstick had rubbed off on the rim of her water glass, and she wondered if she looked bad. The weight of being watched felt like an atom bomb.

“Do you…” Josephine cracked her knuckles under the table. “Do you want to come to my house?”

“Right now?”

“Yeah,” she said.

Rhetta’s whole body caught fire. The waiter came by to drop off the bill and Rhetta was too distracted to ask to split it. Josephine just slid her card in without checking the price and handed it right back to him.

She watched Josephine with steady eyes. What else could she desire? Was it possible she desired nothing but Rhetta? That it was true, and safe? Something she had never experienced before? What was so wrong with that? Could she not have that? Who was she afraid of?
She pinched her thigh. There was nothing but paranoia. She didn’t recognize a person in the restaurant. She was free—as free as she wanted.

“Yeah,” said Rhetta. “I do.”

Josephine opened the door for Rhetta as they left. When they got in the car, Rhetta thanked Josephine profusely for paying for her food, to which Josephine replied, “Who would I be if I let a lady pay for a meal?”

They drove in painful silence, and Rhetta announced she needed to call her father. It was only 9:30—he would be going to sleep soon, surely.

“Yup?” he answered gruffly.

“Hi, Dad. I’m gonna be out a while longer, don’t wait up.”

“Going well?”

“Yeah, he’s really nice.” Josephine glanced at her. “Everything okay?”

“I’m fine. You didn’t need to call.”

“Sorry.” They shared typical goodbyes and hung up a moment later. “Sorry about that,” she said this time to Josephine.

“It’s not a problem.”

Josephine lived in a well-kept shotgun house with a small upstairs loft she used for storage. Despite her good and longstanding position and the wealth she’d acquired over the few years, she lived sparsely, evidently indulging mostly in computers and books. Her television and kitchen appliances were all from 1997, but her computer was brand new.

It was also untidy—Josephine likely hadn’t thought through having a guest over and what one was typically expected to do. She started muttering swears and cleaning up
books and pieces of paper in the walkway. In all, the house was only a bit smaller than Rhetta’s, without the addition of the mother-in-law’s quarters or basement. First the living room, then the kitchen, and through the back to the bedroom, door half open. Rhetta tried to peer into it but couldn’t see much with the dim lighting. Clothes on the bed, dresser drawers half-open.

“Glass of water?”

“Sure, thank you.”

Josephine gestured grandly to the living room. “Make yourself at home.”

Rhetta sat on the couch and watched Josephine unbutton the next button of her blouse and fuss around the kitchen for drinks. Rhetta’s arms felt heavy, and the air seemed tight and alive, like it was trying to get out through the ceiling and cracks under the doors. She was scared to waste it.

“You alright?” Josephine asked.

Rhetta smiled and nodded and took the water. “It’s been a while since I’ve been to the house of someone who isn’t in their fifties.”

“How old are you anyways?”

“Twenty-five.”

“About what I guessed.” She sipped the wine she’d poured herself and sat down next to Rhetta. “Another reason to stay out here—this house is cheap as hell.”

“Do you get lonely here?” Rhetta asked. “Living by yourself.”

“Only sometimes. I work so much that I usually forget to dwell on it.” She let out a sigh and relaxed into the couch. “Well—I don’t know. It depends. Have you ever heard of ‘Barn Burning’?”
Rhetta sipped. “What do you mean?”

“It’s a short story,” Josephine said. “I read it in college, I had an English major friend who had about a thousand copies of the New Yorker, most of which he hadn’t cracked, but we got high one day and I just pulled one out on impulse and this story was in it. It’s about this normal dude who meets this girl and her boyfriend, and the boyfriend confesses to burning abandoned barns, and then the girl disappears. That’s the metaphor of course, but literally, if you drive around the country here there’s so many. Abandoned old barn houses that no one uses. I’d never really noticed them before, or rather I had but I just hadn’t questioned it, you know. That’s when I get lonely.”

“That’s normal,” Rhetta said. “No one questions what they’re raised to believe on their own. Something else has to happen. Especially somewhere like here, and even then, the stubbornness…”

Josephine laughed. “It’s got its charm, you’ve gotta admit.”

“Everything in moderation,” said Rhetta. “I noticed the barns right away. I mean, I noticed so much in coming here that I eventually had to look away, I couldn’t take looking at it anymore. It was like a sensory overload, but not of actual things happening, just of emptiness.” She took a deep breath and curled her legs onto the couch. “It’s so strange, having lived somewhere for so long that’s all noise and excitement and other people and then being overwhelmed by silence and absence. I’m still not used to it. I don’t know what it’ll take.”

“Time,” Josephine said. “You’ll be happy here eventually. It happens to everyone, even against their will. No matter where you are that happens, I bet.”

“Nope,” Rhetta said.
“Really?”

She took a long drink of her water. “I was never happy with New York. I’m starting to wonder if I could ever go back there or if it wouldn’t kill me to. I don’t know if I could stay here forever, but I can’t go back to New York now.”

Josephine studied her, her face smooth as marble and soft in the ambient light. Rhetta couldn’t believe still how blue her eyes were. “Did you leave anybody behind? Other than family.”

Rhetta shrugged. “Mainly coworkers. A few college friends. No one significant.”

“You didn’t have a girlfriend? Or boyfriend?”

“No,” she said. “I’ve only ever dated one person, back in high school.”

“Guy or girl?”

“Guy. You?”

“Dating pool around here is pretty small. Two serious relationships for me, but I’ve had a bit more time. I’m surprised though.”

“Why?”

Josephine shrugged. “I dunno. Big city, endless potential, millions of people. And you’re so pretty.”

“Without my glasses?”

“You’re pretty with them, too. Don’t put words in my mouth.” She chuckled, throaty, so pretty.

“You know, you really shouldn’t have asked me out at work,” Rhetta said.

Josephine sighed and set her wine aside. “I’m not proud of it but I didn’t know when I’d see you again. I’m sorry.”
“No, I forgive you. You shouldn’t have done it, but I’m glad you did.” She giggled. “You got lucky. I wouldn’t try it out on any other librarians.”

“Who says I’m looking for any other librarians?” Josephine said, and she leaned forward and pressed their lips together. Gently, at first. Rhetta tried not to move. When was the last time? It felt too long ago to think about—she didn’t want to think about anything else. She didn’t even want to think about this. Let it be like falling asleep, she told herself. Close your eyes, let go. Let the body respond how it knows.

Josephine wrapped her arms around Rhetta’s waist, and Rhetta eventually ended up on her back. Josephine’s glasses slid off the bridge of her nose and onto Rhetta’s face, and they both stopped to laugh. Josephine took the opportunity to kiss her neck, behind her ear, nip at her earlobe. Rhetta gasped, felt her body responding, her legs shaking, opening, letting Josephine in. She ran her hand through Josephine’s hair. It was smoother than her mother’s.

She looked up at the ceiling, and suddenly couldn’t close her eyes again. Josephine moved down to Rhetta’s windpipe, and collarbone. There was a small hole in the ceiling beyond Josephine’s head. Rhetta stared into it. It exploded into a massive cloud of tiny holes, like eyes staring down at her. Like a wraith. She’d dreamt of it before. She’d dreamt…

Josephine bit in the center of her chest and Rhetta let out a moan of surprise. She put her hand against Josephine’s shoulder. “Stop—”

Josephine sat up. “What’s wrong? Too much too fast?”

“I’m sorry.” Rhetta got up from the sofa. “I… I need to go.”
“Oh. Okay,” Josephine said, and Rhetta heard the hurt in her voice. She could still feel the black cloud hanging above her. “I can drive you back.”

“No, that’s okay.” She straightened her dress out. “I’ll walk, I’m not far.”

“It’s dark out, and pretty cold.”

Rhetta took a deep breath and put on her coat. “I’ll let you know when I get back.”

“Rhetta, hold on, please,” Josephine took her wrist gently. “Did I—”

“No.” They stared at each other for a tender moment. Rhetta nearly changed her mind, but she was dizzy with panic, her heartbeat was so loud it was amazing the whole neighborhood couldn’t hear it. She destroyed it all, pulled her hand away. “I’ll call you later. I promise.” And she fled into the night, a dark cloud chasing her all the way home.
Chapter 6

The Apparition Of

Rhetta had always been good at stealing cigarettes.

What a sensation it was, to sneak into her father’s stash and snag a few from the carton, roll them delicately between her fingers, trembling all the while. It had been so long since she’d done this.

Back in high school this used to put her in the mood. It used to relax her, placate her when she felt lonely. She opened the window in her bedroom and sat on the shabby bed she’d bought off Craig’s List, and lit up her first cigarette in years with the kitchen lighter.

Her intention was to calm down, or possibly masturbate, which she hadn’t done in a while. She texted Josephine to let her know she’d made it home alright and rested her head against her pillow, smoking up towards the ceiling.

She coughed a little at first, but her body remembered what was happening, it was one step ahead of her, falling back in time (backsliding) to the person Rhetta used to be (had evolved beyond). To the person who dated Bradley. Who thought about Sara Jean long into the night. [Pollen.] Who scorned her mother constantly, ignoring her, arguing with her, almost hating her, and after everything had come to a head her senior year of high school, she had been the person who hadn’t fallen back into her mother’s arms. She’d just sat on the roof and looked up at the black, black sky.

She didn’t masturbate. She smoked through all the cigarettes and then flushed them down the toilet. Her eyes drifted to her father’s old shirt, hanging on her clothes rack. She got up and slipped it on over her pajama shirt, and then reached under the bed
for her mother’s Walkman and played the tape that was in there. The black hole was pressing like a tumor between her brain and a skull. When the tape got to the end, she rewound it and played it again. She didn’t remember falling asleep.

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On Monday Rhetta drove herself and Cormac up to Champagne to meet the Mumfords and their daughter for lunch. The highway driving gave her the most anxiety, but she managed fine despite her father’s chastising about her only going the speed limit. She didn’t understand why Midwesterners felt the need to drive fifteen miles faster than the law no matter where they were. But what did she know? Maybe everybody was rushing to get an emergency c-section.

“What’s their daughter’s name?”

“Christina. Her husband is Brad.”

“What does she do?”

“She’s a teacher. On maternal leave right now.”

“When’s she due?”

“Another month or so, I think.”

“Pregnancy sounds awful,” Rhetta said, getting passed by a semi.

“Your mom had an okay time with you. Next exit. You’ll probably have an easy time of it.”

“I’m not planning on getting pregnant.”

He glanced at her. “Sure you are.”

“I don’t think so.”
“Why not?”

She shook her head and merged into the exit. “Just doesn’t appeal to me. I don’t think I’d be a good mother. I’m not going to raise a child if I won’t be a good mom.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Okay, then I don’t want to be a mom.”

“Left here. You don’t mean that.”

“I do. Why’s that so hard to believe?”

He sighed, rolled down the window, and lit a cigarette. “I don’t see what you think is so wrong with it.”

“I mean nothing’s wrong with it,” she said. “Obviously not. I just don’t think I’m cut out for that kind of life. Having someone depend on me so much is scary. Being responsible for another creature not dying is scary. I barely have any friends, any people in my life anyways. It seems so lonely raising a kid. I mean, you have them, then they love you, and then they hate you, and then they leave, right? That’s what I did to Mom. How unfair is that? I feel like I would just die.”

Cormac looked upset. He was clenching his jaw and staring out the front windshield. He wasn’t mad enough to look totally away from her, he still needed to have Rhetta in his periphery to be able to believe in what he’d just heard.

She looked at her lap in shame. The restaurant appeared on the right and she pulled into the parking lot. “Well,” she said matter-of-factly, “the world’s already overpopulated anyways. If I was going to raise a kid then I’d just adopt.” It didn’t do anything to comfort him.
She found Bill and Darla’s car and pulled in next to them. Immediately after turning off the car, she jumped out and handed her father his cane, which made him growl a low, “Bah,” but he used it anyways.

They met Bill, Darla, Christina, and Brad inside the restaurant, a tacky bar and grille with a beach theme and lots of decorum of bodacious mermaids. The walls were painted blue and purple and there was an impressive collection of Mardi Gras beads hanging above the bar area. Mounted on the wall next to their booth was a Styrofoam deer head covered in black and pink glitter.

They all ordered drinks (beer for Cormac, which Rhetta didn’t have the heart to harp on right now) iced tea for basically everybody else. Christina was extremely pregnant and had her hands folded atop her baby bump as a default resting position. Brad seemed nice. Nondescript. Like a background actor in a soap opera, placid smile and average handsomeness. Rhetta couldn’t get a solid read on him.

“We’re still between a few names,” Christina told Rhetta. “I like Lynn and Jodie, but Brad hates Jodie, he thinks that’s an old lady name. He says that his grandmother was named Jodie and so he can’t imagine a baby named Jodie, which I think is just silly because of course you have old baby pictures of your grandma somewhere. I also like Mary, keep it really traditional, classical, you know. You can’t go wrong with a Mary. I don’t want a name that’ll end up sounding trashy. Like Brandi. You ever met a lawyer or teacher named Brandi? I don’t think it’s anything about them inherently, it’s their parents. If we give our kid a trashy name, then what will people think of us? But Rhetta’s an interesting name. Where did that come from?”

“I’m not really sure,” Rhetta confessed, dizzy. “I think Lynn is nice, too.”
“I—” began Brad.

“We both—oh, I’m sorry, honey. Go on ahead.”

“I like Lynn, too. I think that’s the best one.”

Christina giggled to herself. Her arms were so thin, she seemed too weak to be pregnant. Bill regarded her with admiration and pride, and Darla seemed satisfied. “I interrupt too much. I can’t help it. I’m working on it. And my moods are crazy. Brad’s really been a saint. Last week I barely slept two hours a night, and my cravings were all over the place.”

Rhetta smiled at her. She was nice, but Rhetta doubted they would ever be veritable friends. The food came quickly, and off to the side Bill and Cormac talked about the recent Bears game. Brad seemed to want to join in but was timid in the presence of his father-in-law.

Christina put her hand on the table and said to Rhetta, “Now, are you married?”

“Nope,” Rhetta said. “Happily single.” She felt very tired.

“Oh Rhetta,” said Darla slyly. “No use lying—I heard you had a date Friday.”

“Jeff,” Cormac said.

“Joe,” said Rhetta.

“Right.”

Rhetta was surprised Cormac had mentioned it to them, or maybe she wasn’t. She couldn’t imagine his private conversations with Bill, who he was rumored to be so honest with. He hadn’t even asked her about the date over the weekend. What a petty man.

“It was just a date,” Rhetta said. “I’m not in a hurry, I have enough going on right now, I think.”
“I don’t know a Joe,” Darla said. “Not one under fifty, that is. What’s his last name?”

Rhetta licked her lips and shook her head in mock thought. “I can’t remember. We just met at the library, I hardly know him.”

“Well, you should bring him by the Haw,” said Bill.

“That’s what I said,” said Cormac.

“You two still go to that run-down trailer?” Christina cried.

“Every day,” said her father.

“Good lord, y’all are helpless. You’ll waste away in there.”

As they spoke, Cormac’s attention was drawn across the small restaurant, where he saw two men seated together at a small table holding hands. The smallest, tenderest act of public intimacy. Bill followed Cormac’s gaze and made a small huff. “Don’t understand it,” he said to Cormac.

Suddenly her father stood, too fast, and he seemed to lose balance—Rhetta grabbed his hand and rose to steady him. “Dad,” she said in a warning tone.

“I’m going to the bathroom.” He left the cane at the table.

She stayed on her feet until he had paced nonviolently past the couple, who watched him warily as he passed. Rhetta wanted them to look back at her and see her, see the look on her face and find something there, but they didn’t. They released hands. Rhetta sat down.

Rhetta felt the existential dread sitting in her stomach bloom and begin to absorb her from the inside. It wasn’t bad, she reminded herself. Even Baptists could come around, she reminded herself. Look at Josephine.
“I wish you’d shut your damn mouth,” Darla snapped at her husband. “Riling him up.”

Rhetta broached the subject.

Darla sighed. “His brother, Tony, you know, who killed himself some forty years ago—”

“He committed suicide?”

“He was,” Bill began in a loud voice, but then dampened himself, “he was a fag.”

“You could use a nicer word, Dad,” Christina chided.

“Was he kicked out?” Rhetta asked.

“Don’t know,” Darla said. “They kept it very hush-hush. Your grandparents, they were real private people. They wouldn’t have wanted a soul to know. Word just gets around.”

“Was he—” Cormac reappeared, and she silenced herself. She was going to ask if Cormac and Tony were close.

Cormac sat down slowly. Christina carried on a conversation herself, trying to levy the situation, and it worked, somewhat. Cormac and Bill distracted themselves again, and Darla occasionally looked strangely at Rhetta, as if she registered her difference. Rhetta wondered if she had been too obvious. Brad’s look was heavy and confused. A glance from her father felt like a gunshot.

They left quieter than they’d came, thanking the Mumfords for their invite, and Rhetta got them back onto the highway. The void in her stomach felt like it was growing still. If she vomited while driving, it was possible she’d run them off the road and kill them both. She swallowed and squeezed the wheel as hard as she could. She thought of
Josephine, her broad shoulders and blue eyes, and how soft she’d felt between Rhetta’s legs, even for the few minutes it had lasted. Bradley and Sara Jean.

“That shirt you gave me,” Rhetta said.

“Hn?”

“It had your brother’s name on the tag, so I figured I’d offer to return it to you.”

Her father hesitated. “Damn Bill,” he muttered to himself and lit a cigarette. “If that’s the case then I don’t want it back.”

“You’ve worn it before,” Rhetta said. “I remember seeing it when I was younger. Reading a book of poetry.”

He furrowed his brow and rolled down the window to exhale. “What poetry?”

Rhetta shook her head. “...on a wet black bough.”

“Pound,” he said. Rhetta remembered having seen the book months ago when she’d unpacked the mother-in-law’s quarters. She knew exactly where she’d put it.

“You’re not going to say anything else?”

“I’ve got nothing to say.”

“There’s plenty to say, Dad. I don’t know anything about your family. I don’t know your parents’ names. I didn’t know you had a brother.”

“We can leave it that way, then.”

“Dad, please—”

“Keep the goddamn shirt, Rhetta, I don’t want it.”

She muttered under her breath with some self-righteous venom: “Why would you?”
“Now you watch it,” he snapped. “You don’t know a thing about it. What do you even care about my family? You don’t care a thing about family, you made that crystal clear.”

“Just because I want a different life from you doesn’t mean I don’t care about yours. How can you say after all this that I don’t care about family?”

“Watch your lane.”

“I don’t understand why everything has to be a secret with you.” She raised her voice to overcome the roar outside.

He huffed and chucked his used cigarette out the window and then lit another. A muscle in Rhetta yearned to take one herself. “Bill probably told you everything there is to know anyways.”

“He was gay and he killed himself. That’s not the whole story.”

“Yes, it is.”

“It can’t be.”

“What do you want from me, Rhetta?” he asked, his voice becoming strained, almost as if he were about to cry. “Do you want somebody to be evil? Do you want it to be someone else’s fault?”

“I just want to know why,” she said. “Did someone leave him? Did your parents—”

“You’re just a dumb kid sometimes, you know what. Nothing’s that simple. You couldn’t know what we were going through.”

“I want to understand!”
“No you don’t, you want some fairytale answer. You want someone to be the crook and for Tony to be the wronged homosexual. Well it’s not that simple. You don’t know how ashamed my folks were with the whole thing. And you don’t know a fucking thing about Anthony, not one thing. No one did. I don’t want you talkin’ about him anymore. I don’t want to hear it, I can’t stand it.”

*****

In true Jubera fashion, Rhetta and Cormac didn’t breathe a word about the argument, or anything else, until Tuesday, when it was time for Rhetta to go to the grocery store, and Cormac said he wanted to go with her and pick out the beef cuts this time. Neither of them had much liked the ribeye that Rhetta had picked out last week, and so Cormac would pick out the meat to teach her to cook it right. To resolve the conflict, they left the untouchable alone and moved on with their lives irresponsibly.

Rhetta separated from her father at the meat isle. She went to the preserves to get some canned cherries to snack on. When she was despondent, she took to sweet foods. It would have been a wonder she’d stayed under 140 pounds most of her adult life, were it not for her other habit in despondency, which was not eating at all. She stretched up towards the shelf, a little bit out of reach, wondering what her father was thinking about.

“Need a hand with that?”

Rhetta turned around and saw Josephine. “Josephine. Hi.”

Josephine approached Rhetta and reached up, retrieving the cherries for her easily. “You know, I feel like I should be more frustrated with you, but I can’t help it
when I see a lady in a pinch.” Her heart wasn’t in it. The circles under her eyes were deep and ashy, she looked shrunken and tired.

“I’m sorry I haven’t called,” said Rhetta in a low, ashamed voice. Seemed like she was ashamed of everything these days. How many messages had Josephine sent her? She hadn’t responded to any of them. “And I’m sorry I freaked out.”

“It’s okay. Really, I get it.”

“I—” Rhetta choked and looked at her penny loafers. She thought she could hear her father’s cane. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

Josephine furrowed her brow. “Do what?”

“See you.”

Her eyes widened. “We can just be friends. What, are you scared of me?”

“No, it’s not you.”

“Creative. You know what, it was one date, Rhetta. Not a big deal.”

Rhetta’s whole face became hot. “It’s not?”

“You don’t want to see me, so that’s that.”

“That’s that?” Rhetta repeated, like a child. Something was pulling from under her wrist. A thread?

“That’s what you want, right?”

Another voice: “Rhetta?”

[What an awful thing, the sound of that name became. Was there no other way to exist but being called like a dog? Could one not float, unidentified, like mist through the aisles, between people’s fingers, the strands of their hair? Could eyes not see the expanse of the horizon, could one not be forced to blink?]
Rhetta whipped around to face her father, leaning on his cane and carrying the basket. Rhetta turned back to Josephine, said quietly and professionally, “Excuse me,” took the basket from her father, and walked off with him.

He looked at her as if she were strange and asked, “Who was that?” Rhetta didn’t answer. She squeezed the handles of the basket, trying to dispel the image of Josephine standing there in the isle, watching her with simultaneous shock and disappointment. One date. It didn’t matter.
Chapter 7

_Spirits_

What did her father care for a train station? He’d lived here this long, wasn’t his lust for a different life either nonexistent or thoroughly trampled upon? Had he once wanted to leave? Had he once wanted faces to appear to him like that, like paint smudges, not like people?

She wrote her mother an email and asked if she had left a book of Ezra Pound poems here. Another person’s initials meant it could have been a used copy she’d picked up at some point. Lilian had wanted to be a poet for a good part of her life, so it was likely, but she replied within ten minutes saying no and asking Rhetta couple dozen more questions. Rhetta didn’t have the energy to answer.

And so it was her father’s after all. He had really been that man all those years ago. She remembered so little.

She had swiped another cigarette and tried masturbating in the middle of the week. The results weren’t bad. After orgasming for the first time in months—albeit weakly—Rhetta stared at the ceiling, at the black cloud, back again. She’d kept her eyes open the whole time. Who knew what she would have pictured had she closed them.

She didn’t call Josephine.

*****

Sunday morning Cormac knocked on her door at six, a half-hour before she usually got up on a weekend. She’d taken to sleeping in Tony’s shirt, and when she answered the door Cormac looked frustrated. “We’re going somewhere, get ready.”
He was dressed well already, in brown trousers and a blue button-down she’d never seen him wear before. She’d never seen him in anything but his work clothes. It shocked her into complete awareness, and in fifteen minutes, styling her hair and putting on a nice new blouse and dress pants, she was ready.

He was making breakfast when she came out. “What’s going on?”

“Easter,” he said.

Rhetta let out a deeply held breath. “That’s all?”

Cormac didn’t even look at her. He clenched harder around the whisk. This was all so strange. “Is there a problem?”

“No, sorry,” Rhetta said, rubbing her eyes and pouring herself some coffee. “I was worried there’d been an emergency. I haven’t been to church in a long time, I’d hardly thought about it.”

“You didn’t ever go with your mother?”

“No. Jared’s family is Jewish, but he’s not religious personally. We just never went.”

“Hm.”

“You really want me to come?” she asked. “I don’t know what to expect.”

“I always make a point to go on Easter. It’s pretty easy.”

Rhetta sat at the breakfast table as he served grits and sunny side up eggs for both of them. Rhetta had never had grits before. Everyone she’d ever spoken to had called them some synonym of disgusting, but with enough butter and salt they were tolerable.

“You don’t go on Christmas?” Rhetta asked. “Just Easter?”

“Tradition,” was all he said. They ate in silence.
Rhetta tried not to imagine him living out this tradition all by himself for eighteen years. Fancy breakfast, nice clothes. It obviously mattered to him. Of course his being alone wasn’t inherently pathetic, but she couldn’t shake the belief that he needed someone around. The prospect of him having been alone for so long worried her more than she could stand. They hadn’t talked about the cut at all since last October.

When they got into the sedan, he instructed her to head south of town. Rhetta remembered, growing up, having gone to Sunday school at a church just down the road, somewhere she and Cormac had walked to together on hot summer mornings. She remembered the same frilly yellow dress she wore every week—it had been the only nice thing she’d owned.

Heading south on 145 they quickly got out of town and into the middle of nowhere, the type of territory Rhetta had hardly encountered other than her failed trip to the waterfall. It was lusher and greener than she had first given credit. Something about the huge squares of beige farmland had made her think of the whole place as flat and empty, but it had evolved in her mind over the months. It now looked much more alive than almost anywhere she’d ever been.

They turned left and drove another ten miles without a sign for anything, hardly a building around but a single dilapidated gas station and some abandoned old barns. She thought of Josephine again.

In the middle of nothing, a sign for a Baptist church came up on their left and Cormac told her to turn. They went down a gravel road for about half a mile before coming upon the small church, a pristine and white building with an enormous spire Rhetta was amazed she hadn’t seen from the road. There were maybe a baker’s dozen
other cars parked outside, most of them old, and most of their drivers of about the same era as her father, maybe a bit older.

When Rhetta reached for the handle, Cormac put a hand on her wrist. “Please be respectful.”

“I—” Rhetta was about to argue she was always respectful in public, and what did she have to disrespect here? But she realized that others weren’t the issue with Cormac, as was usually the case. Others were her problem. She said, “Okay,” and they headed in together.

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Personnages Principaux:

RHETTA JERI A. WOLFF

CORMAC LEE JUBERA

PASTOR JOHN BRANDT, in his late seventies or early eighties, longtime pastor of this church, has a frail, leafy voice and gray eyes

PAUL BRANDT, homely and earnest man in his late thirties, an apprentice pastor, son of JOHN

THE UNIDENTIFIED SPIRIT, unseen to all but CORMAC

THE BLACK CLOUD, unseen to all but RHETTA

CHURCHGOERS

(CHURCH) CHORUS, comprised of three middle-aged ladies in pale blue shift dresses
Scene: An early twentieth century church with high ceilings and splintering exposed wood beams. The paint on the walls is chipping, the pews are old and have large scars from people sitting in the same spots for likely decades. There are approximately twenty other churchgoers, a pianist, and three singers who make up the CHORUS. FATHER BRANDT is standing alone in the pulpit, wringing his hands together and pacing back and forth.

RHETTA, grabbing a church newsletter on their way in: [to CORMAC] Have you come to this church before?

CORMAC shakes his head.

RHETTA, reading from the pamphlet: Pastor Brandt has been ministering here since 1955. Over half a century ago. Do you recognize anybody here?

CORMAC: No.

RHETTA: Was that the goal?

CORMAC doesn’t respond.

An elderly CHURCHGOER approaches RHETTA and CORMAC.

CHURCHGOER 1: Pardon me, but I see that you two are new here.

RHETTA: Yes, we are.

CHURCHGOER 1: I’d love to invite you two to our Easter potluck after the service if you’re interested. We meet at the covered picnic area two miles down the road.

CORMAC: Thank you, but we’ll have to go. We’re visiting family south of here afterwards. [He hobbles over to an open pew and sits down.]

CHORUS: (in a stage whisper) Liar!
RHETTA: Thank you, that’s very kind. [She follows her father.] Sinning in a church is dangerous, Dad.

CORMAC: Leave it.

PASTOR BRANDT approaches the pulpit and the pianist begins to play the opening strains of “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” The CHORUS sings along in three-part harmony. They do not have microphones. CHURCHGOERS filter into their seats, singing or humming along. In total there are three large groups of people that cluster together, likely with their families, some of them apparently three generations.

RHETTA: (to herself) Shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves?

PASTOR BRANDT: (in a quiet, strangely somber tone) Brothers and sisters, let us pray.

All CHURCHGOERS lower their heads. CORMAC closes his eyes. RHETTA stares at the pulpit.

PASTOR BRANDT: Lord God in this moment, help me that I can speak to them Your word, and help us all to do Your word. We pray in the name of Your son, the savior, crucified and resurrected three days later. We pray to You, God, for guidance, amen.

ALL: Amen.

PASTOR BRANDT: Brothers and sisters, the church has said many things over the course of the last thousand years, some things harmonious, others dissonant. The wealth of scripture gifted to us as Christians, thousands of verses that tell us the story of our lord Jesus Christ, render the task of distilling a core thematic of the Bible...challenging.

Today being Easter, though, I thought that task would be simpler. (he wrings his hands more) The term “gospel,” as it were, means “good news.” It is taken to mean the good word of our lord and savior Jesus Christ, as his life’s teachings, as pure, vibrant truth. The
gospel of Jesus Christ is about eternal love, and about rebirth. Jesus died for our sins, and today we celebrate His resurrection. *(he takes a deep breath)* Friends, I…

**CHORUS:** *(mists)* Torment!

**PASTOR BRANDT:** Friends, we cannot be joyful today. God does not bring us comfort today, doesn’t relieve our sorrows. You see… You see…

**THE BLACK CLOUD appears in the pew to the left of RHETTA. She feels it press up against her but doesn’t look at it but through her periphery. Her gaze is fixed forward.**

**PASTOR BRANDT:** There is an absence in our company today. We have recently lost a member of our community. Ashley Madison was seventeen years old. She… she was unhappy, or so we understood. Her parents, too, are not here, they are home. Usually we would remind ourselves that she is in the arms of Jesus, that she is at peace in heaven with God, that she is no longer unhappy, no longer in pain. B-but it is ha-ard for me to…

**PAUL BRANDT [sitting in the front pew, he rises and approaches the pulpit]:** Dad…

**PASTOR BRANDT:** *(with desperation to continue)* It has been a month now, longer than three days. Ashley was a d-dear, dear friend to us, you see. To see her suffer so, to lose her, despite the love—

**CHORUS:** *(mists)* Failure!

**RHETTA looks towards CORMAC. He is staring somewhere behind FATHER BRANDT’S head at something RHETTA cannot see, THE UNIDENTIFIED SPIRIT, which appears to CORMAC as two blue eyes. **THE BLACK CLOUD reaches out and turns RHETTA’S face towards the pulpit.

**PAUL BRANDT has risen and takes his father into his arms.**
PAUL: Dad, please, let me. I’ll do it.

PASTOR BRANDT: No, I need her to know, that we’re sorry that we couldn’t help her.
PAUL: She knows. I’m sure she knows. There was nothing for us to do. Accidents are out of our hands.

CHORUS: (mouhs) Suicide!

CHURCHGOERS around RHETTA and CORMAC stir quietly, some clutching their programs and hymnals to their chests, others clenching their fists.

CHURCHGOER 1: [to CHURCHGOER 2] They don’t call him Paul the Suffering for nothing.

CHURCHGOER 2: (clicks her tongue sympathetically) Poor man.

PAUL: (whispering) There’s still a chance she’s saved. She could be in the arms of the creator right now. She could be here with us right now, with Jesus. Jesus is always with us, at our lowest points as well as our highest. (he squeezes his father’s shoulders) You taught me that.

PASTOR BRANDT sighs and lets his head fall forward, slack. THE BLACK CLOUD tickles at RHETTA’S upper arms, and she tries to brush it away but fails. CORMAC grips her wrist.

PASTOR BRANDT: We are failures.

PAUL: No, we’re not. We are wrapped in God’s golden embrace, he is here, his love is in this room, protecting us, protecting Ashley.

PASTOR BRANDT stares into his son’s determined, twinkling eyes. He concedes, unconvinced, and sits in the front pew. THE BLACK CLOUD vanishes, THE
UNIDENTIFIED SPIRIT does not. A family of CHURCHGOERS in the fourth row of pews stifles tears.

PAUL: My brothers and sisters, we all share in my father’s suffering. But this day reminds us of the omniscience of God’s love for all His creatures. The power of love, the power of Jesus Christ, the power of forgiveness, fuel us today. We mourn the loss of Ashley Madison in a terrible car accident last month, but we know, we are sure, we must be sure, that she is in a better place. Let us sing for her.

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As they left, Rhetta donated twenty dollars to the church fund. Cormac walked in front of her like a marionette.

When they got back into the car, Rhetta said, “How awful.” Paul Brandt had managed to turn it around after his father’s breakdown, but the unease that had settled in her heart would not let her go. And Cormac, he looked miserable. He was silent, still. She suffered for him. A day like Easter should have given him a sense of joy and hope. It seemed to have given him nothing but despair. They headed back the way they came.

His face was void. It looked like he was looking at something else, someone else. That middle-distance stare he fell into so often, but this time his eyes were glimmering with attention, confusion, anger, peace, all cancelling each other out and leaving him with just nothing.

She thought now he might give her one of those rare kernels of memory, something about his past, about his mother. How had she come to stop other people’s bleeding? Had it been Tony he’d been playing baseball with that day? What on earth was he looking at?

“Dad are you okay?” Rhetta asked insistently, flying down 34 at 65 miles per hour. “Please talk to me.” She looked for saliva in the corners of his mouth, or shaking, or something indicating a seizure or stroke. Twitching, coughing, difficulty breathing, involuntary gesticulations, choking, eyes rolling back. How far were they from a hospital? How negligent had she been these past few months? How could she claim to have taken care of him when she’d done nothing? Just because he’d resisted medical help didn’t mean she should have let him win. But just because he was sick that didn’t mean he was going to die. He wasn’t going to die yet. Someday, but not yet.

“Dad!” she snapped at him, and he still didn’t respond.

Suddenly the car ran over something. Rhetta hadn’t been watching the road. She gasped and Cormac jumped back into reality. “What the hell was that?” he slurred, dragging himself out of the daze.

Rhetta looked in the rearview mirror and saw what appeared to be shards of wood or mulch and some fleshy form, until she realized she had run over a turtle.

“A turtle,” she said.

“Why weren’t you watching the road?”


Cormac stayed firmly planted in reality after that. They drove the rest of the way home in silence.
When they got back, Cormac said he wanted to take the dog for a walk, and so Rhetta stayed behind to get started on lunch. She’d picked up an audiobook at the library about a week ago and had been listening to it in Cormac’s CD player while she was alone, just to help keep her company. The house unsettled her sometimes when she was alone in it these days. Sometimes she would pass through a square foot of area that was freezing cold. Her friends in high school had been into ghost stories and occult stuff. One of Sara Jean’s biggest flaws had been her fixation on gruesome murder stories, stories about girls dying, about evil men. Rhetta understood where the fascination came from, but she wasn’t sure with whom Sara Jean had identified, which scared her.

As she prepared lunch and listened to her book and lived the way she’d decided to live these days, the phone rang. She paused the story to answer, asking quietly, “Hello?”

The voice of an unfamiliar man came through the line: “Is Cormac Jubera there?” he asked.

“No,” Rhetta said somewhat dubiously. “He’s out right now. I’m his daughter. Can I help you?”

The man let out a sigh and seemed to consider what he would say. “Oh well, you might be the better person to ask anyways. I’ve called a few times, but your father has hung up on me every time, as it were.”

“Who are you?” Rhetta asked.

“Pardon me, my name is Horace Pomeroy, I live on St. Victoria Street by the post office.”

Rhetta knew exactly where he was talking about. St. Victoria Street was a brick-paved road where one would find beautiful old houses, some of them built in the early
1900s. She’d never met anybody who lived there, but had walked up and down the street in some of her early days of living in Aspen, just to appreciate the architecture: two-story balconies, massive front doors, cobblestone sidewalks, bright white columns. Many had massive rose bushes or rhododendron trees out front and fancy brick mailboxes. Rhetta though this man had to be at least decently wealthy.

“How can I help you?” she asked, still feeling cold.

“... ah...” he let out another wary sigh. He sounded extremely elderly. “A few months ago, I discovered I had a few of Tony Jubera’s possessions at my house, things he had left with me years ago. I was hoping to return them to his brother.”

Rhetta nearly dropped the telephone. To hear someone else utter Tony’s name—not with shame or guilt, but with affection, like rain droplets on blades of grass—it made her feel... “I’ll come get them,” she said. “When can I come get them?”

He seemed surprised by her insistence. “Oh, well in a few days I suppose, my niece and her husband are coming over for Easter dinner.”

“Okay,” Rhetta said. “Yes. Whenever.” They arranged she would go on Friday, when she wasn’t working and Cormac was, and she got his address and phone number before hanging up. When saying goodbye, she didn’t quite know how to say thank-you in a way that sounded unselfish.

She’d never heard of Horace Pomeroy, from anyone in town, and suddenly she feared what would happen if she asked anybody about him. Would people gawk? Would Cormac cut himself again?

She finished cooking lunch in silence and took her food to her room, making a note to her dad that she wasn’t feeling well and would stay in the rest of the day. She laid
down in her bed and pulled out her mom’s tapes again—it seemed she always drifted back to thoughts of her mother. Her happy mother. Her difficult mother, but happy mother. What had it taken for her mother to be happy? Leaving Cormac? Or was it something else? What had her parents thought of her? Her beloved miner father, who she’d married, and then left in disgust.

Rhetta couldn’t do the same thing. She couldn’t repeat the same mistakes of either of her parents: violent, selfish denial or violent, selfish rejection. She wondered about Tony.

Rhetta had two middle names. She hadn’t known that until middle school, when a teacher had mistakenly called her Antonia Wolff in roll call. It had confused Rhetta beyond belief—she’d only ever known her middle name to be Jeri, but she’d checked her birth certificate and discovered both of them were there. Her mother had once said Jeri had been her middle name because Cormac wouldn’t accept it as her first name.

So had Antonia been her father’s choice? Had he given her that middle name so that she was always a reminder of his brother, whose death he constantly ignored? Why would he make Rhetta the way she was just to hurt him? Was she doomed to bring him misery, by his own design?

That apartment in New York, that she’d never left but for work—she didn’t understand. People didn’t have to be lonely. She had to believe that.

It had suddenly become evening. Rhetta felt like a different woman, remolded, made of iron instead of blown glass. She looked towards her door to the outside. The black wraith appeared to her, standing in her way. She got up and walked right through it.
Trembling branch, woodpecker wings, long eyelashes, pearl lodged in the esophagus; dancing shoes, walk to church, purple sunsets, clouds that looked like mountains, wrestling on the living room television; yellow hair, yellow arms, kingdom phylum class, a hand on a breast, a man with a top hat and cane tipped onto his side, please baby please; green indoors, gray everywhere else, that black empty sky, remembering the Fourth of July shared with her father on the water lifetimes ago, the spirit of a friend who’d said to her I’m so lost, I don’t feel real anymore. this goes away, doesn’t it? please tell me this goes away.

Josephine answered after the second set of knocks. “Rhetta?”

The shame was fighting to overpower her, but Rhetta swallowed it down. She’d made it this far, after all. “Can I talk to you?”

For an awful moment, Josephine hesitated, standing half-obstructed by the door. She glanced at the street and saw Rhetta’s car parked down the block, then opened the door wider. Rhetta stepped inside and watched as Josephine closed the door and turned the padlock. She didn’t offer Rhetta a seat. She stood with her arms crossed and leaned against the wall. Her hair was tousled and so soft looking, she was dressed in her pajamas, which were a tight ribbed tank top and men’s sweatpants. Rhetta didn’t let herself ogle.

“I didn’t wake you up, did I?” she asked.

“No, I don’t usually go to bed at nine p.m., believe it or not,” Josephine said.

“What do you want?”
Rhetta shuddered. It would only be worse if she seemed at all unsure, and
suddenly, for the first time in God knew how long, she wasn’t afraid or unsure. “I owe
you an apology,” she said. “Obviously. For everything. I’m sorry for how I treated you.
I’m sorry for ignoring you and being so cold and resistant when I really did want to spend
time with you. And I’m sorry for running away when I got scared.”

“Is it because you’re not out?”

“I’ve never had sex,” Rhetta said. “I’ve never been—*intimate* with anybody, ever.
I never had time to confront my fears before. And my dad…”

Josephine stared at her. She looked a little softened, maybe.

“I know it was just one date so it was nothing, and I waited too long to say
anything, but I really am sorry. We can be friends, if you still want something like that
with someone like me.”

“It wasn’t nothing, Rhetta,” Josephine said. “Which is strange, too. I feel like I
know you better than I do. I keep thinking about that deer. How the hell does that
happen? Do you see what I’m getting at?”

She did. She understood completely. She felt a strange pulling in her veins,
drawing them together. Not just the guilt. Rhetta realized she had maybe never felt a
desire that didn’t want to cannibalize her until now. Her legs were trembling.

“I don’t know if I want to just be friends with you,” Josephine said. “I feel like I’d
go crazy. I’d just keep thinking about what I’d missed out on.”

Rhetta nodded. She rubbed her arms. “But I don’t know how public I could be.
We’d have to be really disciplined. That doesn’t sound very fun. This doesn’t sound like
a good basis for a relationship. Jesus Christ, this is crazy.”
Josephine laughed. “Maybe that stuff’s true, but we can make compromises. I’d rather compromise for you than compromise for other people.” She stood up straight and took a step towards Rhetta. “Come on, Rhetta, how many times in your life have you done something that seemed crazy and it all turned out alright in the end? That’s always been the case for me. The universe is kind to dumb confidence.”

“The universe isn’t kind to lesbians.”

“Then we just won’t tell them,” Josephine said with a dirty grin. “Or if the universe bites, we bite back.” She took another step closer, only a few inches between their chests now. “Have you ever bitten back?”

Rhetta swallowed. “I don’t want you to waste your time on me if it’s going to end up badly.”

“The likelihood of it ending up badly is only increased by you and your self-fulfilling prophecies,” Josephine said teasingly. She put her finger under Rhetta’s chin and angled her eyes up. “Come on. It was your idea. Don’t talk yourself out of it.”

Rhetta’s lip trembled. She put her hands on Josephine’s waist, rubbed up and down, gently, carefully. She’d never gotten to touch before. She could see Josephine’s hip bones peeking out from the hem of her pants. She wanted to put her tongue there. Everywhere. Josephine gasped quietly and grabbed Rhetta’s shoulders.

The black cloud appeared in the corner. She didn’t even look at it.

She put her lips against Josephine’s throat. “Do you have work tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too,” Rhetta said, and she smiled. “Let’s be late.”
III.

On Another Star

“...The flame
is shaking blue, my last pleasure of the night: to watch
with my face sideways on your breast, your skin calm
as wet dirt under me, to go to sleep before the candle goes out.”

Minnie Bruce Pratt
Chapter 8

Illumination

She hadn’t been prepared. Not for the sensations, not for the sounds, not for the fascination with a syllable on her tongue against her teeth: Josephine. Josephine. Jo-o-osephine. Like wind singing through flower petals.

She hadn’t been prepared for the alertness, not for hearing a mourning dove call and her mind mistaking it for a love-drunk moan, not for bumping her thigh against a bookshelf and remembering teeth there, not for staring into every blonde head like it was the sun, like she wanted to be blinded. Giddy paranoia.

She hadn’t been prepared to realize that, even though there would always be some subatomic space between things, that nothing ever really touched, her brain could trick itself into forgetting that as she’d sucked Josephine’s skin purple. What were mere atoms when she could hurt someone and watch them writhe in ecstasy? Was there anything closer than tasting someone?

And she hadn’t been prepared for the leaving—opening her eyes to the tangerine dawn, Josephine’s face at peace, some drool on the pillow, her button-down so soft on Rhetta’s skin. It hadn’t been an intentional lie: she was willing to be late to work, but not to her father.

She’d awoken Josephine and said as much. Josephine—naked but quickly alert, had asked, “So is that how it’s gonna be from now on?”

“Sometimes,” Rhetta replied. “It’ll have to be. But I’ll be back.”

“You know, I still don’t quite trust you as far as I can throw you,” Josephine said.

“Considering your forearms, I’m guessing that’d be pretty far.”
Josephine had laughed and kissed Rhetta, deeply, meanly, taking Rhetta’s bottom lip between her thumb and forefinger as she pulled away. “When are you off work today?”

So they’d fucked again that same afternoon, the sun so bright that Rhetta could see with vicious clarity as four fingers went inside her almost too easily—(another thing she hadn’t expected: her body’s plasticity)—and the way the light had shimmered against Josephine’s sweaty breasts as she’d squirmed, her voice rising…

Rhetta cleared her throat. Her father was eyeing her suspiciously over his ham sandwich.

Well, so it was. Tuesday. A day apart now. By this time Thursday she would have a sexually explicit email in her inbox, and by Saturday night they will have come together again, and by then it would be so, so different already.

What Rhetta knew were the consequences of carelessness. If she let herself feel too overwhelmed, let herself be deeply washed in honey, it would surely rise over her nose and she would drown in the distraction, unchanging.

Ah, that was the eternal problem. She was waxing philosophical to herself, humming and whistling, walking with a bounce in her step, sleeping well. Even the fears were tinted pink. Why hadn’t she done this before?

But as soon as the thought passed through her head, she felt silly. Of course she hadn’t done so earlier. Who had she been before now? Her ephemeral high school boyfriend, Bradley—she couldn’t have begun to imagine having sex with him. Or even another woman. Imagine, Rhetta, a spindly high schooler, having sex with a girl behind her mother’s back. She would have died of guilt twenty-four hours later.
She didn’t love her father in the same way she loved her mother. Lying to him was as easy as blinking. And what did she owe him anyways? What would she gain from telling him anything? He would only hurt if he knew, and he never would. No one would.

It didn’t matter too much. She was glad she’d waited, even if twenty-five was somewhat old. Celibacy hadn’t been unkind to her, it had just exacerbated other outstanding issues. The Rhetta of one, three, five, seven years ago couldn’t see the future, couldn’t imagine what she would look like at forty. She hadn’t watched her face and body age and evolve enough to picture anything beyond nineteen. Rhetta had seen her body change more in the last two days than it had in four years. She could see herself, see the future as it grew like a lemon tree, vibrant and immense.

“Would you quit humming?” Cormac asked her, exasperated.

“Sorry,” she murmured, unhurt.

“Driving me nuts.” He spooned some sauerkraut into his mouth. Any other dinner Rhetta would ask him how the hell he could stand to eat the stuff, but her mood was too high for it.

“Can’t help it, Dad,” she said, getting up to make another mug of tea. “Spring is my season. Early sunrises, leaves budding, balmy afternoons. Like the whole world is trying to compliment the undertones in my skin.”

He looked at her over his shoulder. “What the hell is going on with you?”

“Nothing!” she chirped.

“Christ, it’s like you’re a teenager.”

Maybe so. It would wear off. But if years of misery had taught Rhetta anything, it was to never take highs for granted, and so she wouldn’t let this moment corrupt itself
with anxiety. Never let an opportunity pass you by! Go forth hence! Seize the day by her hips and kiss her until she’s dizzy with it! God, she was capable, finally she knew. If that wasn’t why she was put on this earth, then what could her purpose be?

*****

It had taken many collective hours of patiently waiting on hold, but Rhetta was able to make her father an appointment for the neurologist set for that Wednesday, though she’d nearly forgotten about it in the meantime. The appointment was for 10 AM, both of them had taken off work for it, the drive to St. Louis would take two hours.

Rhetta hadn’t prepared herself at all for this, medical jargon and insurance cards and social security numbers and questions about symptoms. Had she been attentive enough? What if he’d gotten markedly worse over the past few months and she just hadn’t noticed? She hadn’t even taken the time to research what medication they might prescribe him, other than antidepressants. She didn’t know how he would react to the suggestion, if it came up. Horribly, she imagined.

He was still distracted. He hadn’t been the same these last few days. Something must have happened to him during that Easter sermon. He just stared out the window the whole drive, didn’t commentate, didn’t smoke, didn’t gripe when Rhetta changed the station away from talk radio. It was like he was a totally different person. Sunken.

“How do you feel?” Rhetta asked him.

“Mm,” he sighed. Rhetta guessed it was one of his unhappier sighs.

“It’s okay with you that I’m in the room, right?”

“I s’pose.”
“Do you not want me there? I think I have to be.”

“Doesn’t make a difference.”

Rhetta took a deep breath. “You’re okay, right Dad? You’ve been kind of spacy these last few days.”

“I’m fine,” he snapped. “Just haven’t been sleeping well.”

Rhetta wondered if he’d noticed she was gone all Sunday night. “Is it like bad dreams, or insomnia? I bet we can set up a sleep study while we’re here.”

He didn’t answer.

If Rhetta offered some well-meaning rejoinder about being there for him it would surely be an insult. He had other people to talk to anyways. She wasn’t his mother, though it was beginning to feel like it sometimes. They made the rest of the commute in silence.

Rhetta had never much liked hospitals. The few times in New York she’d ever had to go to one, the pristineness had nauseated her, much more so than any of the actual human afflictions around her. The hospital where her father’s neurologist worked was much less shiny and white. It was an older, smaller building, a little out of the way, with old linoleum floors and faux wood paneling on some of the walls to make it look warmer. Vases of yellow wildflowers sat on nearly every corner of the waiting room for the neurologist’s office. The television was playing HGTV at too-high a volume so that the nurses had to raise their voices inordinately high to be heard when calling out patients’ names.

The waiting room was arranged more like a classroom than a common space, so Rhetta could only analyze backs of heads, but much of what she saw were people
significantly older than her. There were one or two younger people there, though Rhetta guessed they didn’t have the same affliction as her father. It was also suspiciously busy. She wondered how far some of these people had traveled for their appointments. Potentially much further than two hours away.

When Cormac’s name was finally called, Rhetta shot to her feet immediately to help him up. The nurse eyed her kindly as she followed her father, held his shoes as they measured his height and weight, watched with hawk-like focus as he seemed to anchor a little more to the cane as he walked. She knew he would hate a walker, but she hated to watch him struggle.

In the room, he sat down on one of the chairs rather than the examination table that the nurse had instructed, and they had a bit of a back-and-forth about it that almost got ugly as Cormac refused to sit there. “It’ll hurt my back to get up there,” he told her. “What if I fall?” To which she replied, “I’m here to take care of you, you won’t fall,” to which he growled, “Doesn’t matter, I’m not gettin’ up on no goddamn invalid’s bed,” and the poor nurse surrendered.

Their doctor was named Melanie Qin, a graceful, tall woman in her mid-forties who wore lots of rings for a doctor, Rhetta thought. She came in promptly, shook both of their hands firmly, a gesture that seemed to reassure Cormac. They ran through some simple tests together, clenching and unclenching his fists, holding his arms out and keeping them steady, and drawing a spiral on a sheet of paper. He didn’t seem to pass any of them.

“So, Mr. Jubera,” she said, and Rhetta recoiled at the honorific. “Seems like you’ve been having a tough time of it haven’t you?”
He shrugged.

“Have you been having any symptoms that are particularly inconvenient? Things that are making your life worse, aside from the tremors.”

He grunted something.

Dr. Qin finally looked to Rhetta, and so she volunteered: “He’s had some balance troubles, and evidently he hasn’t been sleeping well recently.”

“Is it insomnia?” asked the doctor. “That’s very common, we can usually help it with medication.”

Rhetta looked to her father. He was staring at Dr. Qin’s shoes. “Dad?”

He sighed and sat forward in his chair and put his head between his knees. “It’s not… insomnia,” he began quietly, clenching his hands together. His voice was more fragile than Rhetta had ever heard it, and bent forward and shaking so, he looked almost like a child, or maybe a monk kneeling before an altar. He looked like he was waiting to be flogged. “I have dreams, or visions, when I go to sleep, and they’re still there when I wake up sometimes.”

“Visions of what?” asked Dr. Qin.

He didn’t respond.

After a long silence, the doctor cleared her throat and scratched a few things on her clipboard. “Are you able to move right away when you wake up?”

He shook his head.

“I see. How long has this been going on?”

He shrugged. “I dunno, three or four years, maybe.”

“And you never got checked out for it?”
He shook his head.

“And what about the tremors,” she asked, her tone faltering a little. “How long?”

“About the same.”

“And the stiffness in your spine and shoulders?”

“Longer. Six years, maybe seven.”

“Have you experienced any other times where you’ve seen things that weren’t there?” she asked.

He hesitated. He was horribly still. Rhetta couldn’t tell he was breathing. “Once or twice.”

Dr. Qin made several notes on her clipboard, then went over to the cupboard to retrieve a stethoscope. She pulled a stool in front of Cormac and Rhetta and said,

“Unbutton your shirt, please.”

Cormac’s face twisted in disgust. “Can’t you do it over?”

“No, I can’t,” she said. “Please unbutton your shirt.”

His lip was trembling. He reached for the little white buttons in his old brown shirt, undoing them all frantically and clumsily under Dr. Qin’s sharp watch. She put the stethoscope against various parts of his back, having him take deep breaths. His chin was nearly rested against her shoulder, but he looked up into the bright, recessed lighting to keep from touching her too much. A little drool dripped from the corner of his mouth unconsciously. From far away you would have thought they were embracing like lovers.

Dr. Qin eventually pulled away, and Cormac buttoned his shirt back up immediately. “I’m going to write you a few prescriptions, one for the motor functions and one for the sleep paralysis. It’s an antidepressant, which I would prescribe you anyways,
but I’ll keep the dosage pretty low for right now. I would implore you to stop smoking and limit your alcohol intake as much as possible. And prepare to purchase a walker—it’ll likely be necessary soon.” She sighed and scrawled out a few sheets for the medications and handed them directly to Rhetta. “I’d like to see you every two months, if that’s possible.”

Cormac nodded. He was staring at the floor.

“Miss Jubera, may I speak to you in the hallway for a moment?” Dr. Qin asked. Rhetta got up, squeezed her father’s shoulder instinctively, and followed him out.

Dr. Qin ran a hand through her hair and let out a deep, weighty sigh. “How long have you been taking care of your father?”

“Less than a year,” Rhetta said.

“I see. Well, it’s going to get worse. He’ll eventually need more attention, so I would recommend hiring a caretaking service for when you can’t be home. They’re expensive, but I think it’ll be necessary.”

Rhetta felt a pang of guilt. “He’s still mostly taking care of himself these days. It took some arm twisting to get him to start using that cane and he’s still working. I don’t think he’s ready to be… isolated at home all the time.”

“He’s working? Full-time?”

“Part-time.”

“Has he ever seen a therapist?”

Rhetta scoffed. “I doubt it. I’m shocked he didn’t object to the antidepressants.”

“Do you think he should see a therapist?”
“I…” Rhetta squeezed her hands together. Therapy didn’t bring back pleasant memories for her. “I think so. He had a family member commit suicide when he was younger, and his parents are gone. He’s… cut himself before. Only once that I know of, it might have happened before, or maybe it was just a one-time thing. I have no idea. I’m sure he’s unhappy, but I don’t think he’s the type of person therapy would work on.”

“It’s something you should seriously consider,” Dr. Qin said. “If he’s experienced suicidal thoughts, we need to get him talking to someone. I know that especially with people of a certain age it’s hard to get him to change their ways, but I strongly encourage you to talk with him about it. And try to get him to quit smoking. His lungs aren’t in good shape.”

“Okay,” Rhetta said, feeling defeated. They went back inside where Cormac was sitting hunched over like in prayer. He didn’t register they’d entered until Rhetta put a hand on his back and he shot up straight as an arrow. He didn’t shake Dr. Qin’s hand again when they left.

In the car, Rhetta ruminated over saying something profound or caring or just keeping her mouth shut, when her father said suddenly, “I’m not taking antidepressants.”

Rhetta sighed and cranked the car to life. “Then go to therapy. One or the other.”

“Neither.”

“No, Dad.” She turned the car off. “Not neither. This doesn’t get to be the same thing where you do nothing and pray everything turns out fine, because it won’t. It’s an ultimatum. Either you take antidepressants, or you go to therapy. Ideally you do both, but I know you and know that realistically, that would never happen. You need to get sleep,
and you need to be happy. If you’re unhappy, why not take steps to be happier? What’s so awful about that to you?”

He said nothing.

“You deserve to be happy, Dad.”

Nothing. He stared out the window the whole way home.

*****

There was a house fire that week in Equality, Illinois, and the want for poetics was lost on no one. The newscast said that it was a basement fire, implying of course that it was a result of people cooking meth, but several community members came forward and spoke up for the character of the people living in that home—they would never do such a thing, they were good, infallible people, and this is a terrible tragedy (and it was as if had they been cooking meth it wouldn’t have been a terrible tragedy—people deserve misfortune if they have vices of course, but it’s only the meth heads who have misfortune bestowed upon them—they deserved to lose their house, God wouldn’t have taken their house away were they not cooking meth! Or, if they weren’t cooking meth, then someone must have done this to them, some vengeful and hedonistic outsiders who wanted to see Equality burn, as if God burning a meth house wasn’t vengeful and hedonistic). Neither here nor there, the community put together a fund to help the family, the Houndstoths, accumulate funds to move to a new house. But the night after the house burned down, the oldest daughter, Vivian, disappeared into the yellow wildflowers in the backyard. A massive search party was put together to try and find her. Her father was interviewed for the television station, teary-eyed and frantic, obviously desperate to see her again. She
was fifteen. The other children, a brother, eleven, and sister, eight, had glassed-over eyes. Everyone thought that the elder daughter wouldn’t be missed—maybe she was unkind to her siblings, maybe there was something wrong with her. But then the other voices rose up: maybe someone took her, maybe someone manipulated her, guided her astray, maybe she hadn’t wanted to run away at all. They found her cellular phone in a trashcan ten miles away, behind the post office in Carrier Mills. She was headed west. Someone had tossed her phone away—but who? There were no fingerprints. Billboards went up, calls for help appeared over every local television station and during every commercial break.

The photo they shared was of her five months ago wearing a white dress and holding yellow and purple flowers. More angelic than human. Her eyes were cornflower blue—almost purple. Who was this girl? Vivian? Her siblings stared at the photo until it stopped being her anymore, just strands of color. That was all she had been these last few months: *strands*. Of a person, of a girl, of a sister, daughter, granddaughter (as if those relations mattered to her at all. As her mother had sobbed one night, “Why do you hate your family? We love you like no one else could ever love you.” Oh, oh how that had stung her.) And it had been Josephine Haas from Aspen, Illinois, who had found her yellow scarf in the woods that Friday afternoon, half a mile off Matchbook Trail where she had gone to wander around in thought, maybe find that waterfall Rhetta had been talking about (Her friend? Girlfriend? Lover? What good had labels ever done her anyways?), and by the stream she’d found bare footprints in the mud, as if Vivian had come here and waded into the stream like Ophelia (How did that cycle work? Something is written, and then it becomes a representation, and then it becomes reality again. Spontaneous occurrence, metaphor, occurrence inspired by the metaphor, not inspired by occurrence.
People out here, they want things to be real, nothing feels real like it does in the rest of the world. You hear about things but never see it for yourself. Josephine had never seen a barn burn to the ground, but God did she want to. Was she morbid? Of course she was. But it was justified, she was sure of it. This was the world they lived in. It would only get worse.) Josephine approached the waterfall fearfully, sure that Vivian’s immaculate corpse would be floating at the bottom in the rocks, red flowers blooming around her. Or maybe she would be there with her kidnapper. Or lover. But instead, in the pool at the bottom, there floated Vivian, alone, her white dress on the sand, a green apple in her teeth, the water pouring over her flaxen hair. She looked so happy. When had anyone looked so happy here? Happy to be alone? Josephine, petrified, had staggered away from the edge of the waterfall, left the scarf by the footprint, and went home. She told no one. She never forgot that white child and her white smile. (And Vivian was never seen in Illinois again. She hitchhiked all the way to Boulder by herself before finding a place to settle down—a women’s shelter, where she could live until she could support herself, get her GED, go to community college, work in a restaurant, then an auto parts store, then at a television station as the cinematographer, doing photography on the side; and she found a few boyfriends, settled down with one, let him move in with her, eventually married him, and when she was thirty-five and they had a child, she told him in the middle of the night on the Fourth of July how she had burned down her childhood home, how her grandfather had touched her—Molested? Her husband asked. He molested you?—since she was five until she couldn’t take it anymore, she couldn’t take it, she couldn’t take it. If that was life, she didn’t want anything to do with it. So she found the way out. Maybe it hadn’t been the only way, but it was the way she chose. And if I’d died in that fire, she
said, cradling her sleeping daughter in her lap, just three, so precious and fragile, *if I’d died in that fire, I would have been fine with it at the time, I think. But not now.*) The family found a new house and moved on with their lives. That was how it had to be.

*****

Friday afternoon, Rhetta parked her car on St. Victoria street and faced a massive, three-story brick house with extensive landscaping work and a cobblestone walkway up to the front door. The third story jutted out of the top of the house in a narrow strip, with a massive stained-glass window that glimmered in the afternoon light purple and green. It was so bright, it felt to Rhetta almost like a lighthouse. A beacon in the darkness of the beautiful blue sky. She approached the front door.

She rang the doorbell, and after a few moments of quiet, the door was haltingly dragged open by an ancient-looking man in an electric wheelchair. He had snow white hair, old, papery skin, and thick glasses with dainty wire frames.

“Rhetta—yes, you must be,” Mr. Pomeroy said. “I could have picked you out of a crowd of a thousand.”

He let her in and guided her into the regal living room, where someone had set two mugs of chamomile tea on the coffee table, one in front of a faded armchair with gold-painted wood and red upholstery, one in front of an empty space. The walls were lined with massive bookshelves, housing collections of encyclopedias, classics, and many dozens of spiralbound notebooks. He wheeled himself into an exact position, where tread marks had been worn into the purple Turkish rug from years of routine. He reached forward shakily towards the mug, and Rhetta got up and handed it to him.
“Thank you,” he said. “I’m sorry if I’m slow—my caretaker has just left for the afternoon. I asked her to leave early so that we could have some privacy. And the tea’s cold, I’m terribly sorry.”

“Please don’t apologize,” Rhetta said. “It’s alright.” She took a sip of it and was shocked by how sweet and light it was, even lukewarm.

“Ah, well.” He sighed and held the tea in his lap. He was skinny, dressed in a well-ironed shirt, tie, sweater vest, and checkered blazer. He had shoes on his feet but didn’t budge his legs at all. “I understand you are a librarian. Was that a dream of yours?”

“Not really,” Rhetta said, somewhat guilty.

“What do you want to do for a living, then?”

Rhetta shrugged. “I’m not sure. I never settled on anything. I went to school for environmental studies, but I always wanted to do a master’s in something. I’m still not sure what.”

“That’s lovely,” he said. “It’s good to be unsure. I was so sure as a boy what I wanted to be, and when I grew up and became, well, paralyzed as I am, the disappointment was… acute. Borderline unbearable.”

“What did you want to be?”

“I wanted to be a travel writer,” he said. His jaw twitched sometimes when he talked. “I visited Uzbekistan as a boy with my father, traveled around much of Asia the Middle East, and I wrote many journals while I was there. I always wanted to go back. Of course I could travel back with help, but it wouldn’t be what I wanted, even if I felt the same on the inside. I reread those writings sometimes, that I kept while I was there. Nothing I’ve ever written has been so good since then. Flattering myself is not my
intention, please let me assure you. I’m sure that’s happened to you—something you said or wrote when you were young strikes you now as so unwittingly beautiful. It makes you miss that person, even though they feel right there inside you, just between your lungs, yes?”

Rhetta didn’t know what to say. Had she ever said something beautiful? She’d been such a quiet child.

“Do you ever write, Rhetta?”

“I—I don’t know. Not really. Sometimes.”

“You read, yes?”

“A lot.”

He smiled sadly. “I’m sorry, I’m sure I’m troubling you.”

“No, you’re not. It’s fine.”

“Oh, I just—” he sighed and sipped his tea. “Well, we’re here to talk about Anthony, aren’t we? You never met him, of course, but you remind me terribly of him. It’s almost uncanny.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” he said. “I knew him for a long time. I taught his junior high English classes, and then when he was in high school, he spent many afternoons here, taking care of the house and garden and keeping me company. I’d stopped teaching then and was opening my law practice, but he and I had become something of good friends.”

“Were you married?” Rhetta asked.

“It got quite lonely, you know. No, I never married. I’ve had many friends, some family, that is all. My late brother has grandchildren. I have been happy leading a
bachelor’s life. Truthfully, ascetism was always a good fit for me, even when I was young and had the opportunity to be reckless, I felt no desire. It was my way of being good to myself, in a way.”

“May I ask…” Rhetta said tentatively. “About Tony.”

Mr. Pomeroy shook himself back into the conversation. He seemed to be on a satellite circling the earth, lining up to grasp hold of him was challenging. He seemed so grateful for company. “Of course. Ask away.”

Rhetta suddenly couldn’t form the words. She wanted to know every little thing about him, what he liked to eat, liked to read, if his eyes glistened a little when he smiled. She felt powerless. “What was he like?”

Mr. Pomeroy sighed. “Oh, he was very bright. Ebullient, magnetic. One of those rare people, sensitive, determined. Always reading and writing. I’ve met a few people like him in my life, but he meant more to me than any of the rest of them. And it was because, despite his fervor and that joyfulness he’d been blessed with, he was very quiet. He thrummed like a boiling kettle, you see, it was all under the surface. People didn’t understand him.”

“What was his relationship like with my father?”

A slight choke. He couldn’t speak for a moment. He sipped his tea. “Cormac loved him dearly,” Mr. Pomeroy said. “Tony always said that they were very close as boys. Inseparable, even. It was as they aged that they grew distant.”

“How do you know?” Rhetta asked. “Did he confide in you?”

“After he—” Mr. Pomeroy continued, looking somewhere else (was this the same kind of moment Cormac had? Seeing something no one else could spot, somewhere in
the middle of their brain, in between focuses?). “After he—he was only eighteen, you know, so young—your father, he was distraught, he was shattered.”

“Did you speak to him?” Rhetta insisted. “What happened?”

“And then Karen left, and it was such a shock Cormac didn’t follow his brother, that’s what everybody said—” his voice was trembling, jaw spasming. Rhetta got to her feet and took the tea from his hands so that it wouldn’t spill all over his legs. The hand on his must have shocked him because he gasped and swallowed. “Thank you, dear. When you’ve lived in one place long enough, it’s so easy to relive days there.” He reversed away from the coffee table and went through the dining room and into the kitchen. Rhetta followed. “I won’t keep you much longer, you’ve been very kind to indulge me.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, then swiped under his eye.

On the kitchen counter was a cardboard box, unmarked. Rhetta’s stomach flipped. She couldn’t bring herself to look within.

“I hope you’ll forgive me,” Mr. Pomeroy said. “I read the journal—years ago. I couldn’t help it. He was my friend.”

Rhetta’s hands went cold. She couldn’t make them reach for the box. Her body felt separate from the rest of her. She felt as if she’d floated out of herself and was staring at the back of a head, someone she didn’t recognize. She felt like her child self again, with dirty feet from playing in the yard on Carroll Boulevard, in that brief time of synchronicity in her childhood where everything she had seen made her happy, had been yellow and beautiful and there for her to touch and feel and remember, she could have touched almost everything. Her voice came out of her child-self, without her body willing it: “When I was younger, I wanted to be a pilot because I loved clouds so much, and I
wanted to get to the top of them, which I could only do by flying, though I think I pictured it as an activity more like mountain climbing, because I thought clouds were mountains. But then I explored the woods with my dad, and I wanted to be whatever kind of person lived in the woods for a living. And then I moved to New York and I wanted to be the person who cleaned the windows of skyscrapers. I think I thought skyscrapers weren’t too different from trees and I just wanted to be in the canopy, I wanted to look over everything. But after I was in school for long enough any notion of a dream started to crumble, I didn’t know how to articulate how I felt about things, how I felt about my future. I couldn’t picture it anymore, even in a fantastical way. I think I chose environmental studies because I wanted to find a way to stop the end of the world, so that the planet wouldn’t die too soon, you know. I heard all about it from my mother, she was frightened of the sun burning the world to a crisp. She’d take me to parks in the city and we’d look at the sky and instead of saying what the clouds looked like she’d talk about the ozone layer. I wanted to ensure a future because I couldn’t imagine it, and I knew that eventually I’d be forced to live it.”

The cherry cabinets seemed to be closing in on her. She was suddenly very dizzy. She felt she knew this kitchen. Had she seen this place before?

Mr. Pomeroy put his hand on her wrist. “I think you should go. Take care, dear.”

She took the box and offered a small bow as she left.

*****
Late in the night, the box sitting under her bed, Rhetta with her hand between her legs, rocking back and forth in her desk chair to _slip my fingers into your cunt and watch you open for me_ and other delectable promises from Josephine. _Cunt_. No one had ever called hers that. It was a nasty word usually, but Rhetta liked the way it made her feel. Riled up.

When she orgasmed, she shoved the heel of her hand against her teeth to muffle the cries. Cries. When had she been so loud on her own? It was delightful. Her thighs felt like jelly.

She licked her fingers clean and laid her forehead against her desk, shutting her laptop. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t make herself look in the box, least of all read the journal that Horace had mentioned. How could she do something so… And who was Karen? This tiny world was too big for her. She had nowhere to go. It was like she was facing a firing squad in the middle of a desert. Boundless and yet there she was, trapped, surrounded. Behind her sat a box of answers, but she carried lifetimes of questions, and who knew if any of them would be answered.

Did she write? She had written a journal for a few years of high school—the worst years, as it was. She’d written…

She could hardly think these things now. How cowardly. Alone for the night and she’d forgotten how to survive altogether. Surviving was facing the things that hurt you, fighting them, winning, moving onto the next. If she didn’t face it, she wasn’t surviving, she was comatose, dragged around by puppet strings with her eyes glazed over, jaw slack, waiting. A zombie.
Rhetta retrieved the box from under her bed, opened the ancient flaps gently, so gently, looked inside, swallowed what had been lodged in her throat.


Rhetta reached a trembling hand for the paperweight first. It was so heavy. It felt like an organ, alive and yet so cold. She nearly dropped it from trembling so. What it always came back to. Blue and purple flowers in anti-gravity. A frozen life.

She set that back in the box, then took the journal in her hands. Bite the hand, bite the bullet. She opened it to the center.

_and Mack’s gone all the time these days, with work and with Karen, I feel like I never see him anymore, though a week feels like a lifetime these days. Time passes so strangely, sometimes I fall asleep in the middle of the day and it feels like I’ve been gone for years, floating in space far from earth, somewhere between Venus and Mars_

Rhetta ripped her eyes away. She flipped forward a few dozen pages.

_Dad won’t talk to me anymore, won’t even look at me, said he had a dream where I was burning and he was holding the match. As if he hasn’t done worse already to_

Another few…
So that’s what it was like. It was just as they always said. A tundra.

Rhetta closed the journal. She wouldn’t open it again, ever possibly. She wouldn’t do it. She wouldn’t.

She packed the box up, covered the contents with a towel and stacked a few unwanted books and knickknacks on top to disguise it, slid it under her bed, closed her eyes, turned off the light, and stood in the darkness, erect. It was the right thing to do. If he was buried, she’d be buried with him.

[How proud is this moment! The self-restraint! Don’t make me look at this again, please, I can’t bear it.]

*****
The next night, Josephine greeted her as if she’d seen a ghost. Pale, sunken, a little shaky. When Rhetta asked what happened, Josephine just shook her head and brought Rhetta into her arms.

“I’m sorry,” Josephine said. “I don’t want to disappoint you tonight. I just don’t think I’m up for it.” She took a deep breath and sighed into Rhetta’s shoulder. Rhetta squeezed her tightly. “I always feel like I didn’t have a happy childhood, but there are so many people who hurt so badly. I hate to see it. I hate to think about it. How spoiled am I? But God, sometimes I’m so scared. Still, I’m scared like when I was a fucking kid and I saw the ocean for the first time and realized just how big everything is, how easily I could just disappear if I wanted to. What little difference one house makes in the grand scheme of things, but what happens when it’s gone? Soon enough we’re going to be old and I’m still going to feel this way deep down, I know it. It’s so scary.”

Rhetta cupped Josephine’s cheeks in her palms and kissed her lightly. Time seemed to move through a dense jungle, slow and then so quickly. It would have to be that way, Rhetta realized.

There was nothing Rhetta could say, and Josephine didn’t ask for anything, just pulled her back into the bedroom, where they laid down together, tangled, carrying each other. Rhetta put her lips against Josephine’s forehead. At some point in the night, or maybe early morning, she whispered, “People have each other for a reason.”

Josephine clung to her, kissed her neck. She’d never had this before. She was terrified. The world was so different than what she thought it would be. She worried she couldn’t save her suicidal father. She missed her mother who she had hurt so badly. She felt guilt for breaking things she’d never touched. But Josephine was holding her.
Her stomach floated up, her head tipped back a little. The night thrummed outside their window, unending. Her body wandered within itself, the child exploring the long limbs, developed organs, strong ribs, wrinkled brain. She was floating somewhere between Venus and Mars.
Chapter 9

*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*

Six months later, Cormac threw a flower vase at the wall. His arm curled like a tentacle, writhing, veins protruding in pain and feverish fury. Words tried to form at the corner of his lips, but his eyes were blackish, pupils wide, jaw loose. Water streamed down his chin. He crumpled to the ground in pain like a wounded buffalo, back like a landslide. Rhetta picked up the pieces tearfully in the middle of the night. The next day, Cormac was fine. Mild. Almost kind.

This was how it was. It was everything. Illinois was everything. Illinois was plains and it was mountains. It was specters of pioneers in the middle of fields, footsteps along the Trail of Tears washed away into the Ohio River. It was skyscrapers and trailer parks, forests and pirate caves, it was a man hiding the bodies of teenage boys under his porch for six years, it was Josephine’s finger tracing a spiral in the center of Rhetta’s naked back. It was deer grazing in the fields in the early morning before the sun had fully risen, and it was their kin baking on the hot tar, unmoving. It was golden flowers and golden fields of wheat and golden wind that just made you feel alive and it was the gold chain around Cormac’s neck with a little cross that hid just under his shirt collar.

She had to help him with his shirts sometimes. It hadn’t stopped being humiliating for either of them yet.

*****

“Hi honey, hope everything’s still going well out there. Must be kinda lonely, just you and an old man all day. That’s how Jared and I are back home. I still feel like I never
got used to being an empty nester. He’s saying we should get a dog and I say not in this apartment if he’s not the one vacuuming. You know him, he’s all concept first, he doesn’t think these things through. I do miss you, honey. It’s about time you came back for a visit, don’t you think? Three years is a long time to be away from home. Well anyways, call me back when you can. I’m sure you’re busy.”

*****

It was sneaking into her father’s bathroom after he left for work (another unadvised habit he couldn’t stand to break yet) and looking in his medicine cabinet, opening the little tangerine bottles and counting the pills, disappointed. Thirty Monday, thirty Tuesday, thirty Wednesday, so on and so on.

It was being awoken in the middle of the night another three months later to the sound of her father howling as he stared up at the ceiling with white eyes, body taught as a wire and thrashing as he looked into some phantasmagoric something that Rhetta could not see, until she shook him awake by the shoulders. She pressed their foreheads together and clung to his shoulders, feeling him shudder, his body burning like something was trying to erupt out.

What pain he was in! How the body betrays itself! How a person cannot move without thinking, but their body can commit treason so easily. And how powerful it is, everything like a landslide pouring through the limbs with a terrible, detached fury.

The body always exists a step ahead of the consciousness. The body creates and destroys itself, eats itself, scratches raw the dry skin and clotted blood, pulls out the patches of fallen hair, wipes away the pus of infection, creates new cells to overlay the
old and dead. Evolving, constantly, while the consciousness stays the same in essence. There was nothing about Cormac’s body that had been there since his soul’s inception. His body evolved into something tormented and unhappy. He floated above himself in the middle of the night and stared down at the body and recognize it not as himself, but as an other, with whom he felt kinship. Someone he would have a beer with, get to know, tell everything he couldn’t tell his wife or daughter—they wouldn’t understand. Or maybe his body was someone he would detest. His body falls apart, and so does everything else—at the fringes, like the continent being swallowed by the rising ocean, like Rhetta was so afraid of. Why had he named her after his father anyways? They bore no resemblance, but she did nothing to change him in Cormac’s mind. The association was arbitrary. In the night he heard whispers as the freight train passed by a half-mile away—he could hear the roar, approach and heighten, then fizzle out into a low, quiet nothingness. Sometimes it covered up the sound of Rhetta slipping out. Sometimes it didn’t, and he thought of that empty bedroom, where he’d slept until he was eighteen. The same person in a different body.

*****

“Hi dear, we’d love to hear from you. Jared got a promotion this week! He’s pretty tickled. We had a party for him, I made this lemon tart that was to die for, you would’ve loved it, you could’ve written a poem about it. We really miss you, you should come home for a visit. Your dad has had his turn, he can spare you for a few weeks.”

*****
Rhetta was getting sick of the wallpaper in her bedroom. She spent too much time at Josephine’s house, maybe, a place where one had full autonomy over the decorations. Life was boring when you spent every day with someone who had resigned himself selfishly with just waiting for death but never admitting defeat. That was what her thinking had become at least. Was it unkind? Morbid? What else was she supposed to do but become morbid? There was nothing else for her free time.

When she approached her father about changing the wallpaper, he’d said, “No way in hell.”

“No offence Dad,” Rhetta said, “but it’s ugly as sin.”

“You touch that wallpaper and you’re out of this house.”

She almost wanted to say so be it. Dare him to kick her out. But instead she bought a sheet and hung it up like a tapestry so that she didn’t have to stare at the moldy teal tigers and scrolls any longer. Really, she only went to Josephine’s on the weekends, but she couldn’t pass days in her bedroom anymore, because she needed to be with her father, and because it was a constant reminder of Tony’s diary.

She hadn’t opened it since. She didn’t think about it quite as much as she used to, mainly in the moments before she fell asleep, she would feel an impulse to crawl under her bed and be with him, open the diary and understand everything, because that was what it had the power to do. Instead she just fell asleep restless and dreamt of him, or what she imagined. She dreamt of him in the woods where she’d met Josephine, hair soft and feathery, skin smooth and creamy, eyes like a deer. She imagined him smiling to her and waving. She imagined he had dimples and crinkly, sparkly eyes. She imagined he was kind and profound. She imagined holding his small hand, hugging him close, feeling
as if they were the same, floating a foot behind her head, watching herself, feeling the pang of separation and desire. Guilt, too. She had been told they were similar, and so she imagined him when she looked in the mirror, her ego swirling through her bloodstream. 

[And to see him and think only of blood—how cruel.] Was this narcissism? Tangential relation to someone so important because she couldn’t be?

No, she knew what this was. It was backsliding.

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“Rhetta, darling, it feels a bit like I’m throwing messages in a bottle out to sea here. You should return your mother’s calls. We miss you a lot. The city is so lonely without you. Are you at least keeping busy out there? You always wanted a garden. We used to have the nicest yard, you used to run around with no shoes on and get mud everywhere. And your father would make an egg in a hole for you and the yolk would run down your face and shirt. You were so messy! Lord knows how you ended up the way you ended up. I don’t know what happened to you.”

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Another two months later, she was at Josephine’s house on a Saturday evening. They usually emailed during the week, met for lunch at the bagel deli. The relationship hadn’t quite become real to Rhetta yet, but it was getting there. The lines were too defined. She wanted to kneel on the ground and blow them away, watch the ashes dissipate into air like pollen. [Pollen.]
They were making dinner together, eggplant parmesan and salad, wine and cheese for after, ice cream for dessert. A rare occurrence. Rhetta had been able to slip away earlier than she normally allowed herself. Maybe in the morning they would wake up together later than six, have coffee and the banana muffins they would bake later. Rhetta had a good recipe that used molasses and allspice, she’d been dreaming about them all day. She didn’t know what had come over her. [Pollen.]

And then, suddenly, Josephine said, “I’d like you to meet my family soon, I think. If you want. It wouldn’t have to be formal or anything, but it would make me happy if they knew you.”

Rhetta tasted the sauce with a clean spoon. “Would you introduce me as your girlfriend?”

“Would you not want me to?”

Rhetta said nothing.

“T see.”

“I know the secrecy is… unhealthy,” Rhetta said. “I dislike it too. But I don’t think my dad is ready for something like that. I don’t know if he ever will be. There’s no guarantee he won’t find out if we start telling people.”

Josephine nodded and drained the pasta. Her jaw was clenched. “You’re never going to make any progress with him unless he knows. Even if you inch him that way telling him the truth will force him to change.”

“Or not.”

Josephine sighed.
“Isn’t that the thing with this town? Everyone is so proud of never changing their mind about anything.”

“Don’t be unfair. You’re dealing with a small pool of people. Besides, just because they’re old doesn’t mean they’re beyond hope.”

“Sure feels like it sometimes,” Rhetta muttered, beginning to plate their food.

“Did anyone ever tell you about Geraldine Tarleton?” Josephine asked.

Rhetta crinkled her nose. “No. Why?”

“It’s a local thing. I read about it a few years ago, when I was deciding what to do after college. Back in the sixties and seventies, my great-uncle started interviewing people around town and compiling stories about Aspen, its culture and such stuff. He had them printed and bound, but they were never actually published. He collected probably a hundred or so stories.”

“An anecdotal town history?”

“Exactly. So, there was this woman named Geraldine Tarleton who moved into town from Virginia with her family in 1924, when she was four or so years old. She had a giant family, something like seven or eight siblings. Her parents were working-class people, and they lived in this tiny little house with only three bedrooms for all of them. Geraldine was the middle child—in her interview, she said that she was always picked on and unhappy, you know how it is. But she could also barely read, and her teachers treated her horribly because she was a slow learner. They said she had nothing going for her, no brains, not pretty or ambitious. She was plenty God-fearing, which is I think what was deemed one of her only admirable qualities.
“But one day, her baby brother woke up with all these yellow sores in his mouth. He was barely a year old, and he was screaming and crying. He couldn’t talk, eat or drink, nothing, he was just a baby in terrible pain. And the whole family had no idea what to do—no one in town had any clue what was wrong with him. After he had been crying for hours and the town doctor said there was nothing to be done, Geraldine got up, picked up the baby, carried him into the other room for a minute, and when she came back, he was cured. He grew up fine and healthy, got married, moved to Kansas City, and still lives there now, though he’s in his eighties, of course.”

“What was it?” Rhetta asked.

Josephine shrugged. “Magic. That’s all I’ve got. She was a healer. It’s not the first time anyone’s heard of something like that, written it down. People were terrified of her at first, but they got used to it. I mean, she was essentially a witch, a literal witch, and no one did anything, tried to hurt her, nothing. People grow to accept things, is what I’m saying. They just have to be made known.”

“What else could she do?”

“Cure the flux, stop bleeding, make stuff. She did it all the time.”

*Stop bleeding.* Rhetta remembered a story her father had told her. “Do you actually believe it?” Rhetta asked.

“Why not?” Josephine said. “It doesn’t do any good to disbelieve. And she’s dead anyways, it doesn’t hurt to believe someone like that existed.” She stepped forward and kissed Rhetta’s forehead. “Towns don’t stay evil, babe. Not to be an optimist, but things are always changing.”

“You seem to like all this local lore,” Rhetta said. “Why didn’t you do history?”
Josephine set their plates on the little table. Her face became distant. “I wanted to be practical. And I like having a bit a separation there, between what I love and what I do for work.”

“So you love it?” Rhetta asked. “You really love it?”

Josephine took pause. “I… I guess so.” She got them each a glass of water.

“What’s with that weird look on your face. Are you mad?”

Rhetta shook her head. She hadn’t been conscious of making a face, but she forced her cheeks to relax and realized she must have looked really screwed-up. “No, not at all. I just never realized how much it mattered to you.”

“What’s ‘it’?”

“This town. And I just stand around and bash on it all the time.”

“Hey, some of it is justified,” Josephine said. “Besides, we had different childhoods. I grew up here, you didn’t.”

“But I did grow up here,” Rhetta said.

“But only for a little while. I was here for eighteen years before I ever left town for longer than two weeks. You didn’t go to school here. You had time to idealize it. I didn’t. I had to learn to love it for what it was. That’s what you’ve got to do, too, if you’re going to stay. If you accept it for what it is now, you’ll be able to understand what really needs to change. Besides, changing things from the position of an outsider is harder than as a member of the community.”

They started to eat, Rhetta privately savoring that a domestic partnership was a semi-consistent part of her life. She had never thought—well, she always thought that to
herself, that she never thought it would happen. It was happening now. Best to be present.

“I’ve never been much of a community person,” she said.

“I thought you did that sustainability club in college,” Josephine said.

“That felt more like a job. And I was always on the outside. Or at least I felt I was.”

“Were you on the outside because people shunned you or because you were afraid people would shun you?”

“Neither,” Rhetta said. “I was afraid, sure, but more of having friends than having people hate me. Being disliked didn’t seem that scary.” [Pollen, pollen, pollen.]

“Kinship is an awful prospect,” Josephine said. “Until you feel it.”

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“Rhetta honey, I’m getting worried. It’s my birthright to be worried, you know, I was built for it. You’ll understand someday, women are just made to hurt for others. I worry for you. I miss you so much. I know I didn’t call you enough when you were here, and now I’m feeling the consequences. God is it lonely when someone pretends you don’t exist. Please call—”

“Mom?”

The sudden shift in her voice was like rising air pressure causing a tornado.

“Rhetta! Honey!”

“Sorry, I was in the bathroom when the phone rang. What’s up?”
Her mother sounded like she wasn’t smiling as she talked. “I’ve been trying to get ahold of you for months,” she said. “And you haven’t once called back. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were avoiding me. Is everything okay?”

Rhetta sighed and collapsed backwards onto her bed. Thursday evenings were usually her loneliest. Her mother’s voice wasn’t the one she expected to be filling that void, and her conversation with Josephine from the previous weekend was still in the front of her mind. “Yeah, everything’s fine,” she said. “I’m sorry I haven’t called, I’ve been pretty preoccupied here.”

“Forgive me if that’s not enough of an excuse for me,” Lilian said. “You barely even answer my emails anymore. We haven’t talked in six months. Half a year! What could you possibly be doing that’s so important you can’t spare twenty minutes to call your mother so that she doesn’t worry you’re dead in a ditch somewhere?”

“I’m job hunting,” she said. “I think I’m done being a librarian. And caring for Dad is a lot of work.” She took a deep breath and stared at the wallpaper. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t just launch into complaining. How are you, Mom? What’s been going on? Is Jared’s promotion going well?”

Her mom took a long pause, likely to make Rhetta feel guilty. It felt like her body was at war with itself, a hot desire to be mean and the cool rationality of kindness. There was no reason to hate her mother—she didn’t hate her mother at all, but she was so difficult. Thoughts of her mother had always found her in the middle of the night, but that time was now taken up with Tony and Cormac.

*Disgraceful*, Rhetta scolded herself. As if the men in her family had any inherent supremacy over the woman. *Women.*
Her mother was doing fine. Her cheery lilt was sagging on the ground. The sorrow of being a childless mother was obviously deeply settled into her. Rhetta had been gone for a year and a half now. Though time seemed to be moving in larger chunks for both of them. A month felt like a week. Seasons vanished without letting anyone know they were on their way out. The sun was down before dinner was ready. It was like this now, in Illinois and in New York.

“Tell me about your father,” Lilian eventually asked, after describing all the social ups and downs of her working women’s group.

“He’s…” Rhetta hesitated. He was probably right outside the door, drinking. Though his hearing wasn’t always the best, maybe it was safe to whisper. “He’s okay. Walking with a cane. Shaky, but the meds seem to help him. Though mornings are better than evenings, generally. He sleeps a lot. Work’s getting hard. He’ll probably have to stop any day now.”

Her mother sighed. “It sounds difficult,” she said, and she seemed to genuinely mean it. “I know the man, I’m sure he’s stubborn about the meds.”

“I think he can come around,” Rhetta said.

“Do you really or are you just being defiant?”

Rhetta bit her lip. “I’m just being optimistic. It’s my right.”

“Well, good on you,” Lilian said. “I couldn’t do it. Ugh, it must be so lonely. I hope you’ve made friends. Are you seeing anyone?”

Rhetta considered lying. Lying to her mother was a delicate craft, one she’d perfected by college. But it didn’t taste the same on her tongue now. “Yeah, actually.”
Her mother actually gasped. “Praise be. God, when was the last time you had a boyfriend? High school? Oh, this is great news, I’m so happy for you!”

“A woman, Mom.”

A sticky silence. “I see,” she said. “So that never went away.”

“Nope.”

“Does Cormac know?”

“Of course not.” She got up and walked into the bathroom.

“Why not?”

“I just don’t want to tell him.” Oh, this was silly. She felt defensive of his homophobia.

“Have there…” Lilian sighed. “Have there been any men?”

“Never. If that’s the way this conversation is going to go, I’m not going to talk to you about it.”

“Well, forgive me for being surprised, Rhetta. I didn’t think this was going to be your coming-out phone call. I wasn’t prepared—how could I have been prepared?”

“You know what, it doesn’t matter,” Rhetta said. “Let’s drop it.”

“Stop that,” her mother snapped. “Don’t just shut down. This is serious, I need to know what’s going on in your life! And if this what’s going on then you need to tell me.”

“I need to?” Rhetta asked. “I’m obligated? By what contract?”

Her mother growled in frustration. “The contract of me being your mother. You don’t need to tell me everything, but I deserve to know something as big as this. So what, are you a lesbian?”

“Please stop, Mom. Please.”
“I’m trying to understand, Rhetta.”

“You’re yelling at me! This isn’t supposed to be a fight! Do you see why I don’t call home that much?”

“You’re the one who turned this into a fight,” Lilian said in a steadier voice. She was more powerful than Rhetta in that way. Rhetta needed time to reset herself. Lilian could just flip a switch. “Now. It doesn’t have to be a problem. It’s not a problem at all, in fact. I’m happy for you, I’m glad you have it figured out, and that you were able to find someone in such an… isolated place. I just wish I’d been informed sooner, that’s all.”

“I couldn’t have told you sooner,” Rhetta said. “It would have been worse. You wouldn’t have understood.”

“It was worse because you cheated on your boyfriend with a delinquent. Regardless of gender, you—”

Rhetta hung up the phone.

It all fizzed up in the front of her mind in a yellow haze—she pushed it away, she couldn’t stand it. She would rather be needlessly cruel to her mother, her bullying, cloying determination. Didn’t she have anything else going on in her life? Why not adopt another kid if she wanted to be a mother so badly? Rhetta didn’t need a mother anymore, certainly not one like that. She got to make mistakes—colossal ones—and Rhetta didn’t? One mistake and she was damned forever?

She stepped out into the living room. Her father was sitting on the couch, the dog’s curled at his feet. “Fight?”

She said nothing.
“Think you handled it well?”

“Not even a little.” Rhetta sat down next to him, a cushion between. “What was your mother’s name?” she asked.

He hesitated. “Why?”

“You know I could just walk to the cemetery and find her headstone. Or look through all those old tax forms and photos. I just wanted you to tell me.”

Cormac rubbed his knees. “Geraldine.”

“How did she learn how to stop bleeding?”

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, dull wallpaper green. “She didn’t learn,” he said. “She just knew. People just know those types of things.”

“Did people accept it?”

“People appreciated it,” he said. “I mean, there was no sign on the door, but she was a good sort. Good Christian. Helped people when they needed.”

The question hovered on her tongue: If she was so great, why hadn’t she loved Tony? Or had she?

Cormac took a sip of his water and sighed. “Tomorrow’s my last day,” he said. “I heard you talkin’ about me in there, figured I should tell you.”

“What are you going to do now?” Rhetta asked.

“Not work!” he said sardonically. “Sit around here, counting the hairs on the back of my hand and listening to talk radio. Ugh, hell, I have no idea.”

Rhetta pulled her legs in and shimmied a little closer to him. What was an older middle-aged man to do as a hobby now that he was retired? He certainly didn’t have the money for any exorbitant mid-life crisis purchases, like a boat or old car to repair, and

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anyways, repairing a car would likely hurt him more than the work he did now. Which reminded Rhetta that his truck needed desperately to be replaced.

“You could read,” Rhetta said. “You could write.”

He scoffed. “I couldn’t write.”

“Why not?”

“What the hell do I have to write about?”

Rhetta shrugged. “Whatever you want. Your life, things that make you mad, things that make you happy. I used to journal in school when I was really upset, and it helped me straighten my brain out.”

He glared at her. “I don’t want any therapy bullshit.”

“Hey, it was just a suggestion. Start a coin collection, watch wrestling, become an expert at something, volunteer at the Baptist church—”

He chuckled. “They won’t let me back in there.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not popular with the ministry.” Another sip of water. Maybe he was willing it to be alcohol. [Maybe it had been the gin from below the sink.]

“Let’s just play a game or two of backgammon every night until you figure something out,” Rhetta said.

“What would you do if I start collecting guns?” he asked.

Rhetta hiccupped in surprise. “What would I do? What do you mean?”

“You’re a gun-hater, aren’t you? What’d you if I started buyin’ a bunch? Or if I went hunting again, or kept Confederate memorabilia, or any of that stuff you hate so much, huh? What would you do then? You know you couldn’t do anything. I could
torture you with it, and you’d just stay here and watch me do it, and keep taking care of me because you can’t stand the idea of failing and crawling home to your mama. You’d look at me like I was some sad old man, all out of touch with the world, stuck in nineteen-seventy-five or whatever, like that was a bad thing and you’re not the delusional one. Doing something I wanna do instead of the sanitized, city-rich, socially acceptable bullshit you just rattled off. One of us is gonna have to fold first, kid, and I’ve got another ten years in me at least.”

So it was a game. He saw that now, and so did Rhetta. They were both going morbid. It was something they could do together, a father-daughter activity, take your child to work day. A couple of wasps chasing each other.

She stood up. “Let me get rid of the wallpaper and you can start collecting guns. Hell, I’ll help you.”

“Then choose something else. Something with a community, Dad. I hate the thought of you being alone all day.”

He stood up and grabbed one of the paperweights, holding it high enough that it would shatter if he dropped it. Rhetta’s heart lurched in her chest, and she tried to grab it, but he yanked it out of reach. Her nose was just under his jaw and she could smell the alcohol on him. “You don’t own me, Rhetta,” he said. “Remember that.”

He dropped the paperweight into her hand and disappeared into his bedroom on the cane. Rhetta went over to Josephine’s and said she would meet her family, and Josephine fucked her so hard she saw stars.
Chapter 10

Swallowing the Pearl

Personnages Principaux:

RHETTA JERI A. WOLFF

JOSEPHINE HAAS

ELWOOD HAAS, a spindly bald man of about sixty, father of JOSEPHINE

BEATRICE POMEROY HAAS, a strong, freckled woman in her late-fifties, mother of JOSEPHINE

HORACE POMEROY, uncle of BEATRICE

HORACE’s caretaker

LIND HORBELT, a handsome middle-aged pastor, grandson of the church’s founder

LOUISE McSPARIN, elderly churchgoer with white hair

MARIANNE COCHRAN, elderly churchgoer with blonde hair

FRED HARRIS, elderly churchgoer with big square glasses

(CHURCH) CHORUS

Scene: Late Sunday morning in early March. The community room in the basement of the First Baptist Church in Aspen, Illinois, on the corner of Jackson Street and Kansas City Road. The church has stood in this town since the early nineteen-twenties by its first pastor, Hiram Horbelt. It has consistently been regarded as one of the best and most consistent churches in town and has a membership of nearly three hundred, which, in competition with the local Catholic church’s four hundred-person membership, is an impressive feat, especially for such a small town. A service about the importance of being
pious and loving, foreshadowing the joyousness of Palm Sunday next weekend, has just concluded, and the members in attendance, today only around fifty, have all filed slowly downstairs for coffee and ginger cake.

RHETTA, dressed in a beige boatneck top, black pants, and brown tassel loafers, keeps close to JOSEPHINE, who is wearing a linen blazer, t-shirt, and green khakis. Most of the elderly women wear long skirts and hats and carry jackets despite the mild weather.

RHETTA: I’m disappointed we didn’t get fronds.

JOSEPHINE: Yeah, I got the weeks mixed up. I’ll bring you a frond next week.

RHETTA: Don’t put yourself through this again just for me.

JOSEPHINE: Oh come on, it wasn’t that bad.

RHETTA: No, of course not. I’m glad it wasn’t a Leviticus thing though—that would have been a little on the nose.

JOSEPHINE: Leviticus doesn’t even count anymore anyways. This is the joyous season, rebirth and all that. It’s the interim months when there are no holidays that people have to get morbid and talk about the death and hellfire parts.

RHETTA: Mid-summer?

JOSEPHINE: No, usually early fall. When the kids are back in school. Gotta warn the youth against the evil temptations of (whispers) sexual immorality.

RHETTA: Very dangerous.

Enter ELWOOD and BEATRICE together, a little distance between them. They have not touched the whole morning, BEATRICE favoring instead to stay near her uncle in his
wheelchair. Behind them are LOUISE, MARIANNE, and the CHORUS, entering in a clump, all talking amongst themselves. The members of the chorus all hold their books and a few of them have small instruments, but they do not disperse. There is a woman in the chorus who looks suspiciously like Rhetta, only older.

BEATRICE: (to RHETTA and JOSEPHINE) Well, I thought it was a lovely service. Pastor Lind has really come into his own these last few years. You know, Rhetta, I came to church here when I was a baby and his grandfather was still in charge!

RHETTA: What happened to the middle generation?

ELWOOD: Samuel? Dead.


RHETTA: In the middle of a field?

JOSEPHINE: I’ll get some coffee. (Exits)

A table away, lifelong friends LOUISE and MARIANNE sit with their coffees, both carrying heavy purses filled with their checkbooks and personal calendars and multiple copies of the church newsletter. LOUISE’s husband passed away years ago, and MARIANNE’s husband doesn’t like to attend church because he dislikes crowds.

LOUISE: (delicately eating a ginger cake) Now, did you hear about my neighbor? Ashley, she works at that Mexican gas station. Ashley Cooper. Blonde. Too many tattoos.

MARIANNE: Chubby?
LOUISE: A little. She’s the one who lives down off Carroll Boulevard, you know. Two kids, dropped out of school early. So—I was talking with Yvonne at the library, and evidently, she dropped out because (in a loud whisper) she seduced her teacher.

MARIANNE: Which teacher?

LOUISE: Mr. Sloan. Pre-calculus.

MARIANNE: Shameful. Too many girls like that these days, thinking without using their brain. Using their heart, or—whatever it is, you know.

CHORUS: (mouchers) Vagina!

MARIANNE: Did you hear about that demonstration in Chicago? With the—homosexuals? All together, in the streets?

LOUISE: Yes, yes! And the transvestites, too. Thank the lord there’s nothing like that here. I could only deal with so much social backsliding. Seems like more and more kids these days aren’t going off to college or making anything good of themselves—

Enter JOSEPHINE, carrying coffees for her parents and RHETTA.

JOSEPHINE: Rhetta, why do your eyes look blue?

RHETTA: What do you mean?

JOSEPHINE: Your eyes are green.

RHETTA: Yeah, they are.

JOSEPHINE: They’re blue right now.

BEATRICE: It’s probably just the light, dear, don’t be paranoid.
JOSEPHINE: *(aside)* I feel like if anyone would notice, it would be me. *(To her mother)*

Where’s uncle Horace?

BEATRICE: He’s in the restroom, with that caretaker of his, the Asian girl.

JOSEPHINE: Does she not have a name?

BEATRICE: Oh, I can’t remember dear. Ha-roo-ka or something like that.

ELWOOD: I thought it was Hi-car-ee.

CHORUS: *(mouths)* Homura!

BEATRICE: Rhetta I’m so glad Josephine brought you along. It’s so good she has female friends—it seems like she only sees those greasy men at her job these days.

RHETTA: Well, the feeling is mutual. She’s been my best friend since I moved here, it’s been great to have someone.

BEATRICE: Are your parents Baptists?

RHETTA: No, we weren’t really a church family.

ELWOOD: Why not?

BEATRICE: *(swats her husband)* Don’t be rude, Elwood, for Pete’s sake. *(In a sweet tone)* Why not?

RHETTA: Well, my mom is an atheist, and my stepfather is Jewish.

ELWOOD: There are Jews around here? There’s not a synagogue.

RHETTA: No, in New York.

ELWOOD: A New York Jew, then?

RHETTA: Well, he’s actually from Kentucky.

JOSEPHINE: I swear your eyes are sky blue right now Rhetta.

BEATRICE: Do you have a boyfriend?
JOSEPHINE: No, Mom, she doesn’t have a boyfriend.

BEATRICE: Let the girl speak for herself.

RHETTA: Nope. No boyfriend. Librarians aren’t really hot commodities.

(JOSEPHINE laughs, her parents do not.)

RHETTA: But I am looking into making a career change.

ELWOOD: You should work for O’Gara. One of our old secretaries is retiring, they need a young lady to fill her spot.

RHETTA: (scoffs) I’d rather not work for a coal company.

ELWOOD: (affronted) And why is that?

RHETTA: (haltingly) They laid off my father.

CHORUS: (mouths) Environmental destruction!

ELWOOD: Well who’s your father? Maybe there was a good reason.

LOUISE and MARIANNE have switched spots at the table and are drinking each other’s coffees.

MARIANNE: So over in Carbondale, there’s been this whole mess with a- (in a hushed voice) a rape allegation.

LOUISE: Oh mercy.

MARIANNE: This young lady claims that she was attacked in the stairwell of her apartment complex, and now she’s pregnant.

LOUISE: Lord have mercy.
MARIANNE: But the man was drunk, and so he’s trying to get off easy, and he’s got this big hotshot lawyer, and the young lady has just about nothing. No family or siblings, all tragedy. I was thinking that maybe I’d talk to Pastor Lind about putting together a fund for her or something, just a little something to be supportive.

LOUISE: I think that’s a lovely idea. Is she keeping the baby?

MARIANNE: I believe so. I hope so.

*Enter HORACE and his caretaker.*

BEATRICE: Oh, there he is. Uncle Horace!

BEATRICE gets up to meet him and the caretaker and guide them to the table.

JOSEPHINE: *(To Rhetta)* That’s my great-uncle, I’ll introduce you.

RHETTA: *(quietly)* We’ve met.

JOSEPHINE: What? When?

RHETTA: I’ll tell you later.

ELWOOD: Hey there Horace. *(They shake hands.)*

*(JOSEPHINE gets up to give him a hug.)*

JOSEPHINE: Uncle Horace, this is my friend, Rhetta.

HORACE: *(A spooked expression across his face)* W—well, yes, hello Rhetta. Very good t—to… yes, very good… *(He reaches out his hand, and she shakes it carefully).*

BEATRICE: Uncle Horace, are you alright? You sound a little strange.

HORACE: I—

BEATRICE: Is your blood sugar low? I can get you some orange juice.
HORACE: I—yes, thank you.

BEATRICE exits. The caretaker floats idly behind HORACE, looking here and there around the community room, but particularly enraptured with the CHORUS. She seems almost drawn to it.

ELWOOD: (loudly and close to HORACE’s ear) Did you like the sermon, Horace?
HORACE: I… yes, yes I did, I thought it was—it was very lovely.
ELWOOD: Yeah, the man gives a good speech, though I don’t know if he holds a handle to his granddad. You remember him well, don’t you?
HORACE: Yes… yes he was a wonderful.
ELWOOD: Lived to be about a hundred or so. That (he turns to RHETTA and JOSEPHINE) that’s grit right there, I’ll tell you that.

Enter BEATRICE with a glass of orange juice and a ginger cake, which she gives to HORACE.

BEATRICE: I just heard the saddest thing from Marianne and Louise, you will not believe. Elwood, you know Fred Harris, who works at the army-navy supply store. He used to coach the high school baseball team, way back when.
ELWOOD: Yeah, yeah, I know him.
BEATIRCE: I was just making sure.
ELWOOD: I had lunch with him a month ago for Pete’s sake.
BEATRICE: Well, how would I know that? That’s your business. Anyways, his poor wife, Susan, she’s in hospice.

ELWOOD: Hmm.

BEATRICE: *(Clicks her tongue)* So so sad.

ELWOOD: So what does your dad do now, Rhetta?

RHETTA: Nothing, he officially retired this week.

ELWOOD: How old is he?

RHETTA: Sixty-six.

ELWOOD: Kinda young.

RHETTA: He has a neurological disease.

HORACE: Josephine, dear, how’s work?

JOSEPHINE: Long hours, but I can’t complain.

HORACE: And you—you two…

RHETTA: Did you know the last pastor, Mr. Pomeroy?

HORACE: Hm?


HORACE: *(surprised)* I—I, yes, I knew him. We… we were close friends.

MARIANNE and LOUISE have switched back to their original spots and are on their second cup of coffee.

LOUISE: Did you hear what happened to Yvonne Carpenter the other week? She heard a gunshot outside of her house!

MARIANNE: Gracious.
LOUISE: She lives down where those black boys are, you know. They hang out in the school parking lot after hours.

MARIANNE: Oh, I know them alright. I hear they sell drugs. I once saw one of them in the street outside my house—John nearly called the police on them! If they were all the way over in our neighborhood they certainly couldn’t have been up to any good.

LOUISE: As if we need any other problems around this town.

*Enter FRED and PASTOR LIND, walking shoulder to shoulder towards the coffee counter.*

FRED: So you’ll come by tomorrow afternoon?

PASTOR LIND: Of course, Fred, I’ll be there.

FRED: Thank you, sir, thank you. It’ll mean a lot for Susan to see you again.

PASTOR LIND: My pleasure. It’s the least I could do. I have a few passages that I think will be…comforting for her.

BEATRICE: Oh, there’s the pastor. *(She waves to him.)* Pastor Lind!

ELWOOD: Don’t yell, Beatie.

PASTOR LIND *approaches the table, shaking hands with the men and smiling at the women.*

PASTOR LIND: Everybody having a good morning, I hope?

HORACE: It was a great service.
PASTOR LIND: Thank you, sir.

BEATRICE: Pastor Lind, this is Rhetta, Josephine’s special friend. She’s new here.

PASTOR LIND: I thought your face was new.

RHETTA: Pleasure to meet you. (She extends her hand, and he shakes it.) Pastor, do you do house calls?

PASTOR LIND: As often as I can. Do you know someone in need?

RHETTA: Well, my father is… struggling right now, I think, and I wonder if he wouldn’t want to talk through some of his problems and maybe get some guidance.

PASTOR LIND: Is he a member of the church?

RHETTA: I think he used to be. I’m sure his parents were. The Juberias? My father is Cormac.

A silence falls over the table.

CHORUS: (mouths) Outcast!

PASTOR LIND: (In a low voice.) Why don’t we speak privately?

RHETTA: (To JOSEPHINE) Will you come?

JOSEPHINE: (surprised) Yeah, of course.

JOSEPHINE, RHETTA, and PASTOR LIND retreat into the church office a few feet away. The room is small and dark, with low ceilings and dozens of books and notes stacked haphazardly around the desk. A few beer cans are on the ground under the window where someone missed the trashcan.

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PASTOR LIND: Are you sure you want Josephine hearing this? It’s sensitive family material.

RHETTA: Yes. What happened?

PASTOR LIND: *(He takes a deep, unconfident breath)* It’s an old conflict. I wasn’t there for it, I was barely born, and my father was—well, still with us for one thing, but he was pastor here at the time. Do you know about what happened to his brother?

RHETTA: Yes.

PASTOR LIND: Yes, well. After Anthony—died, as it were—

CHORUS: *(mouths)* Killed himself!

PASTOR LIND: Rhett and Geraldine—

JOSEPHINE: Rhett?

PASTOR LIND: Cormac’s father. They came and told my father about Anthony. They had already denounced him for being a homosexual, but my father wanted them to denounce Anthony for committing suicide. And they did so, but they felt Cormac should do the same.

RHETTA: Should denounce him?

PASTOR LIND: For both… offenses. But he refused to do so, and then by all accounts got into a terrible argument with my father, so he quit the church after that. He hasn’t returned since. I doubt that I would be allowed to let him back in, if I’m concerned at all with honoring my father’s legacy which—well… Truthfully, I am conflicted regarding my father’s actions. And he died himself only two weeks after Anthony.

RHETTA: Was it—
PASTOR LIND: Who knows? It’s hard to get hit by a train. Part of me thinks he was felt guilty for what he did. Everybody rejected Anthony. He was made an example of for a long time. And my father loved my mother—or I thought he did—but he was known to stray.

JOSEPHINE: Stray?

PASTOR LIND: *(Stares off into space for a moment, then re-centers himself.)* Well, it’s neither here nor there. I will contemplate making a house call on your father, Rhetta. And if I decide I should not, he’ll be in my prayers. *(Exits)*

JOSEPHINE: *(in an apparent state of shock)* How long have you known all this stuff? When were you going to tell me?

RHETTA: I don’t know. I’ve known about Tony for—a while, but your great uncle knew him. That’s how I met him. They were friends. Mr. Pomeroy gave me Tony’s diary.

JOSEPHINE: Have you read it?

RHETTA: No. *(She shudders.)* I can’t do it. I have dreams about him all the time. Nightmares. I don’t think I could bear it.

JOSEPHINE: *(Puts her hands on RHETTA’s shoulders)* I wish you told me.

RHETTA: I know. I’m sorry.

JOSEPHINE: I can’t believe everybody rejected him. My grandparents—my parents, they must have…

RHETTA: And Cormac didn’t. I don’t know how that’s possible.

JOSEPHINE: I don’t understand, I thought people could change, I thought— *(she looks suddenly aghast)*

RHETTA: What? What’s wrong?
JOSEPHINE: Your eyes are green again.

RHETTA: (tugs JOSEPHINE’s hand) We should get back out there.

JOSEPHINE: Can I have a minute, please?

RHETTA: Are you alright?

JOSEPHINE: I’m just not handling this as quickly as you are. I need some time. I… I’d always sort of suspected that Uncle Horace…

RHETTA: What, suspected what?

JOSEPHINE: (takes a deep breath) I always felt that we had a sort of affinity, though I couldn’t put my finger on it when I was a kid. I just wonder if he and your dad’s brother… saw something in each other. God, do my parents even know?

RHETTA: Jo…

JOSEPHINE: (sniffles) Fuck, they shouldn’t see us.

RHETTA: You said they don’t mind. You wanted—

JOSEPHINE: Yeah, but you hear the people here, they wouldn’t feel any different, especially not in a fucking church.

RHETTA: We can talk to them after, if you want. You said so yourself, you have to tell people if you want them to understand.

JOSEPHINE: Obviously not, after what happened to your uncle! They probably fucking rejected him too!

RHETTA: You don’t know that, they might have—

JOSEPHINE: Why are you defending them? I mean, I wanted to defend them before when it was me, but this is your family, Rhetta!
RHETTA: *(grabs JOSEPHINE’s shoulders)* So you can’t stand them hurting someone else, but you can accept them hurting you? Look at me. Please. Josephine, that’s not healthy, that’s not *right*, that’s not being a parent.

JOSEPHINE: *(breathing heavily, crying)* I have to know. I have to know for sure.

RHETTA: Josephine—

JOSEPHINE *runs out of the office and back to the table where her family is sitting.*

RHETTA *follows.*

BEATRICE: Is everything alright, honey? Did the pastor—

JOSEPHINE: *(slams her hands on the table)* Did you reject Anthony Jubera? Cast him out?

*The entire community room is washed in silence. LOUISE and MARIANNE look at each other with scandalized excitement. ELWOOD’s face twitches with anger. BEATRICE looks shocked and betrayed. HORACE says nothing.*

BEATRICE: Josie, please don’t do this—

JOSEPHINE: Don’t call me that.

BEATRICE: I was just a kid, I barely even knew him. You can’t know how terrible of a time it was, for all of us. The whole community, we all hurt so badly.

JOSEPHINE: Not badly enough to fucking kill yourself!
ELWOOD: Anthony was a disgrace. *(His eyes are cold and still, as his anger has escaped his body like mist.)* He never did anything good with himself. Thought he was better than everybody else. I’d do it again if I could.

JOSEPHINE swallows and wipes her cheeks. *She looks around at the churchgoers, who all look scandalized, embarrassed, ashamed.* PASTOR LIND sighs resignedly, FRED HARRIS fumbles with the buttons of his cardigan. JOSEPHINE looks finally at HORACE, whose face trembles with pain. His caretaker has joined the CHORUS.

JOSEPHINE looks back at RHETTA and extends her hand. RHETTA takes it, squeezes it, and they both Exit.

MARIANNE: Well, there it is. Speak your mind and they can’t take it.

CHORUS: *(mouths)* Hope! Despair! *[Despair!]*

*Exeunt.*
Chapter 11

*Are you living in the real world?*

He was polishing his hunting rifle when Rhetta pushed through the front door. It was familiar to Rhetta now that she was looking at it glisten in the yellow afternoon sun. And it was only March, but the cicadas had already come out and were screaming the sort of shriek of the end of the world, always getting closer and closer.

She wasn’t exhausted like she should have been. Like Josephine was. When she’d offered to come home with Josephine, take care of her, Josephine had pushed her away. “I don’t want to be around anybody,” she’d said. “I don’t want anybody to see me right now.” It hadn’t sounded especially genuine, but Rhetta did what Josephine asked. That’s what you did with someone you cared about. You tried to do what was best for them—eventually. Maybe not right away, but inevitably.

“Dad,” she said in a voice that was low and wary and anxious to hear what he would say because she was hoping it would elate her. She wanted to break through the ceiling with her love for him, taste his true kindness in the metal bite of their coffee, see it in his evergreen eyes. “About Tony—”

He cocked the gun and set it on the table. “Not this again, Rhetta, please. Don’t make me miserable with it.”

She sat across from him, disregarding the gun. “I went to church this morning with my—friend,” she said.

Cormac face bloomed in recognition—at once shocked and resigned. Not so cold and distant like the mountaintop he so often was. He looked ashamed. “Didn’t think you liked it,” he muttered.
“I talked to the pastor. He told me what happened after Tony—how you wouldn’t…distance yourself from him.” The air was eerily still and yellowish, wasps were buzzing outside the window, the dog was napping. So strange to live in a house where the life was so still and slow, like a windless field. “It was such a kind thing to do, to—"

“Don’t patronize me,” he said, picking the gun back up.

“I’m not,” Rhetta insisted. “It matters a lot. That you didn’t abandon him, like so many others seemed to.”

His face was dark. Eyes, too. He looked like a woodblock print. Still, faded, grainy.

“My friend,” Rhetta began carefully. “Josephine’s her name. Haas. Do you know her parents?”

“Elwood,” he said with a grimace.

“They didn’t—"

“I know what they did, Rhetta. I was there. I saw it all.”

“Was it awful?”

He looked at her, finally, maybe truly surprised for the first time by something Rhetta had said. Like she’d played a chord he’d never heard before. “Why do you care?”

“Because I care about you.”

“Like hell you do.”

“Dad…”

“You never met Tony and you never will. So stop chasing after him when it won’t make any difference.”
Rhetta recoiled and kneaded her hands together in her lap. He didn’t understand.

“I know I’ll never meet him,” she said quietly. Snapping at him only made them both angry, only worsened his despondency. “I just—I don’t know. I wish I had known him. I know he was my uncle, but I think of him like he was my brother. I was bad at growing up alone. Is that strange?”

Cormac stared into her, jaw twitching a little. He didn’t say anything after all, and proceeded to ask her for help browsing the internet for antique guns. And so he was who he was.

*****

He was closer to understanding her. It was not approval, but maybe she didn’t need that. His looks held less malice, less misery. She counted his pills once a week when he went to the Haw and was pleased.

Josephine entered a cloister through March and April, barely emerging in May, when the winds were strong and the sun oppressive and the bugs everywhere, bees in every backyard on every flower and weed all the same. Some elderly gentlemen put the fear of God into the hearts of the innocent black boys by means of a crowbar and so they no longer wandered in front of Marianne Cochran’s house. Rhetta was thinking about the upcoming parade in Chicago, if she and Josephine could slip away for the weekend. Getting out would do them good. Her mother said so in her many voicemails.

In the first week of May, Rhetta and Josephine met at the Rendezvous Diner, an old but well-kept joint they had declared their new lunchtime spot after the bagel deli closed down. It had exposed brick and high ceilings with exposed rafters. Like so many
buildings in Aspen, it cut straight back, long and narrow, like a corridor. There was no central HVAC, just various industrial fans blowing into the open kitchen and the dining area. Finding a table in the path of steady airflow was a tight and mean competition.

This afternoon, sticky and cloudless, they scored a table that got about four percent of the air from one of the fans. They both ordered the necessary 11 AM coffees, Rhetta got eggs and sausage and toast, Josephine got grits and a veggie omelet.

“Do you want to try them?” she offered Rhetta.

“Every time I’ve tried grits I’ve despised them.”

“You just haven’t had good grits.”

“That’s what you said last time we were here, babe.”

Josephine half smiled. Her eyes crinkled cutely but the dark bags under her eyes cut deep into her cheeks. She was nearly thirty. Rhetta had spent some nights imagining Josephine in her forties and fifties, dreaming about how beautiful and strong she would be. So tall and cool and wise, eyes blue and twinkly. It made her almost dizzy.

Rhetta tried the grits when they came. She still didn’t like them, even with shredded cheese. Josephine laughed as she cringed, but it wasn’t her usual perfect laugh. She seemed exhausted.

“So—” she began tentatively, taking a large bite of her omelet. “I’ve read through all of those interviews Uncle Horace did way back when. There were nearly two-hundred. It was amazing how many people he talked to. He even interviewed kids. With their parents present, of course, but still, he talked to this girl when she was seven years old.”

“I still don’t quite understand what he was trying to accomplish,” Rhetta said.
Josephine shrugged. “Well, I’ve read all of it, and I can’t say I understand him any better than I did before. Or anybody around here. Except the horrible people. So many people talked about Tony.”

“I thought my grandparents tried to keep it all a secret. That’s what Darla told me at least—they were private people.”

“Hate to say it, but they failed. Everybody knew but nobody talked openly about it.”

Rhetta chewed idly on her toast. “Why do you think your uncle cared so much about him? They were friends, sure, but you don’t think they could have been lovers, do you?”

“Unlikely,” Josephine said. “Or maybe they were. Or maybe they were just in love and nothing ever came of it. I have no idea. I just…” She sighed and put her head against the table. “I don’t know what to do anymore, Rhetta. This is all so scary. And fucking disheartening. I feel like an idiot for having cared about this place for so long.”

“Jo…” Rhetta said, running her fingers through Josephine’s hair. “Don’t say that. It wasn’t a waste, it’s good that you love it.”

“Not when it does to people what it did to Tony.”

Rhetta flinched. She took a bite of her eggs.

Josephine sat up and fixed her hair. “Sorry, I’m not being fair. I just hate to think I could’ve fucking left whenever I wanted and been happier somewhere else, somewhere friendlier.”

“Your parents would have missed you.”
“I know, but you know how it is. The gay thing is never gonna work for them, they’ll just ignore it. Your parents love you unconditionally until they don’t, you know.”

Rhetta said nothing. The waitress dropped off two checks and Rhetta asked that she combine them.

Josephine glared. “Come on. Don’t pay for me out of pity.”


Josephine’s face twisted into pained nostalgia. “Hey,” she said quietly. “Did you ever see something as a kid that you tried to forget? Something that scared you, or that you didn’t understand?” She took a long drink of her coffee. “I just keep thinking about my parents, my mom. She… she would…”

Rhetta grasped Josephine’s wrist. “Hey—” she said. “You don’t have to put yourself through it if it hurts.”

“I just hate that everything’s different,” she said. “And I can’t do anything about it. Nothing’s gonna change, there’s not gonna be any physical, visible evidence, you know? The whole world feels different.”

“I know,” Rhetta said. Her world felt different. She felt love, and fear. Love for Josephine—actual love, though she was afraid to say it, and for her father as well, despite him. Was this how people were supposed to feel? Whatever she had felt before that had resembled love had been so different, so painful and deconstructive. Her arms and legs had seemed to crumble to dust under someone else’s gaze, even worse under touch. She was ashamed for loving contentment, even though she and her father still clashed, even
though they would maybe never be on the same plane, like Josephine and her parents.
But she was better. She hadn’t cut herself in five months and thirteen days.

“Are you ever going to leave here?” Josephine asked. The waitress returned Rhetta’s change.

“Someday probably. Not yet.”

“Would you leave before your dad dies?”

“I—”

Josephine looked her straight on, grabbed her hand and squeezed it hard. “Can you stand it much longer?”

Rhetta’s eyes bulged. She felt her intestines twist. *One of us is gonna have to fold first. [Are you strong enough?]*

Rhetta clenched her hand. “I’m needed,” she said. “I go where I’m needed. I’m happy where I’m needed.”

Josephine kissed her hand. No one in the diner turned. She looked at the wood grain of the table. The conversation never finished because they had to go back to normal.

*****

On the first afternoon in May that got rain, Cormac got a postcard. Unsigned (Rhetta couldn’t help but read it—a postcard is all but public domain), written in an artful scrawl (chickenscratch would have been Cormac’s term), addressed to him from some national park in Georgia.
“Old friend?” she asked, setting it before him with the text down. He was eating an egg in a hole, which had evolved into his frequently requested meal or snack of choice. Now he was one of those boring old men who ate the same thing all day and night. He sucked on caramel hard candies often, and Rhetta needed to find a good opportunity to switch his supply out for the sugar-free version.

Cormac took the postcard in his trembling hand, turned it over, read the message, and stood up, straight as a board and angrier than she almost ever saw him. Pushing past her, he went to the kitchen sink, opened the cabinet below where they hid their trash can (on the right side even though her father was left-handed) and tossed it away.

“What’s wrong?” asked Rhetta.

“Can’t you leave anything alone?” he snapped, and made the fatal cut into the center of his egg in a hole, spilling yellow blood all over the old ivory china.

“You know, I used to get self-conscious when you said stuff like that, but it’s not as hurtful now. Someday you’ll get tired of the same four rejoinders and then we’ll have to get creative.” He just grumbled into his food.

The postcard had read [And I double-checked in the trashcan after he’d left the room]:

Hey Squeeze—

I’ve seen a lot of those purple sunsets over the water we loved to talk about.

Of course all we had were lakes. You should come out to the coast sometime,
or at least give an old friend a ring. XXX-XXX-XXXX, (I know you haven’t forgotten, I wouldn’t insult you). Isn’t it cruel that I always have to make the first move? Think of my health! We’re not getting any younger, but you already knew that.

Best, etc.

Rhetta thought about it while planting flowers in the back garden the next day (sunny again), in the same spot where she’d buried that dead bird almost two years ago. Strange to think of him as someone’s squeeze. Nothing about him was casual. He wore collared shirts and work boots every day—he was a real man, not to be seen under the surface, and certainly not to be someone’s off-and-on. Not that she’d thought about it that much, his relationships before that with Lilian, but she’d always assumed he’d been the wait-for-marriage, good Christian type. Not the casual type. Not the type to have photos of naked women, either.

Maybe he was a changed man. Reformed. Celibate, ascetic, bonded more with God than with any earthly being—perhaps other than the dog. Stinky was certainly profiting from Cormac’s retirement, in quality time and frequency of treats. She’d slept in Rhetta’s bed for a while, but had now moved to sleeping with her father.

The garden was a new project for her—not something she had lots of experience with, but there was passion regardless. The hunt for a job outside the slow, quiet library was still ongoing (behind Yvonne’s back, mind), but in the meantime she had borrowed some books on gardening from the stacks and gotten some good advice from neighbors. She was starting with marigolds and violets, flowers that were easy to identify and
hopefully low maintenance. There was something relaxing about preparing the soil for plants. No music, no words, barely even images passed through her mind. Just impressions, intangible feelings and colors, the blue of the violets she was looking forward to, surely vibrant and unreal but she didn’t have the wherewithal to be disappointed. They would be beautiful, she was sure. She would water them, and they would grow and be beautiful. She was wearing a tank top, secluded in the foliage of the backyard, but her shoulders met the sun for the first time in years. Going on a decade. Decade—she could say that now. She was nearly twenty-six. Her shoulders and upper arms were so pale they seemed to glow white, like a glass of milk—her mother had raised her on skim milk, she remembered sitting under the birch tree in this very backyard, shoeless and wild, drinking out of a sippy cup as her mother chastised her for being so messy. The lines in the sand were faint, like they’d hardly existed. It was a part of the past—this was a new place, a new body, evolved.

*****

“Do you think you’re really happy?” her mother asked her on the phone. “Do you think it’s real? Living in secrecy—Rhetta, that’s got to be torture.”

“It’s not,” she replied, grabbing a jar of cherries from the high-up shelf in the preserved foods isle at the food mart (the local term “food mart” had finally settled in and superseded “grocery store.” The place barely looked like a grocery store, anyways.) “I have a routine. I have things that I like. I’m gardening.”

“But what about your—significant other?”

“She’s fine with it.”
“Don’t fool yourself, Rhetta. You never know what someone else is feeling.”

“I know exactly what you’re feeling right now.” Canned tuna.

“What’s that?”

“Exasperation.”

“Do you think I’m only unkind? It’s concern, Rhetta. I’ve read stories—articles, books. You saw that movie, too. *Brokeback Mountain*?”

“For Christ’s sake, Mom. I won’t get murdered.”

“You have no control over that.”

“I’m safer here than I ever was in New York, you know that.” A jar of grape jelly, then to produce.

“A crime out there is meaner, though. You understand, I’m sure. More personal. There was an attempted shooting at my school, you know.”

She dropped the cucumber she’d picked up. “What the hell, Mom? No, I didn’t know that.”

“No one died, of course. This was seventy-two. October. He used a hunting rifle, came into a history class. Do you ever think about that, Rhetta? How one little thing can break your world? Do you think I ever looked at any of my friends, anyone in that town, the same ever again? I couldn’t accept it.”

“What was his reason?”

“Who knows,” Lilian said, but it wasn’t convincing. Rhetta selected some fresh squash. “His name was Jeffrey McSparin, I think. I wonder what he’s up to. You never forget a person like that, a face like that. Randomness here is scary, but it’s safer in a way, sometimes. Nothing’s personal.”
“Mom, that’s awful.”

“No it’s not,” she said. “Don’t say that to me, Rhetta. You don’t understand anything yet.”

“I don’t understand nothing,” she snapped. “You know what you were saying before? Well yes, it’s real. It is love. I’m sure it is.”

“It very well might be,” said Lilian. “But this is your first significant relationship, Rhetta. You might be wrong. You probably won’t stay with her for the rest of your life, you probably couldn’t even get a civil union in Illinois. And what would happen if you went public? Would you get to keep your job? Don’t you know about Cormac’s brother?”

“I know all about it.”

“I’m scared for you, baby.”

Rhetta chose two T-bones she and her father would like—he’d taught her how to pick out good cuts. She’d gained some weight around the hips recently. She was ignoring it. “You being scared for me only makes it worse.”

“Makes what worse?”

“Well, just—the doubts I have. I mean, I don’t have many, I can’t really afford to, but you make me more anxious than necessary.”

“You know you have something to be unhappy about, but you won’t look at it.”

Lilian sighed. “Rhetta, some day you’re going to have to learn to get over yourself. There’s not always going to be someone there telling you what you’re missing.”

“You just said no one can know what someone else is feeling.”

“No, I said that you can’t know. You’re blind, Rhetta. Always have been.”

“Mom, please…”
“I just want you to come home.”

“I know you do.”

“If you know, then why don’t you?”

“I’m needed here.”

“You’re not needed, Rhetta.”

“I am.”

“He doesn’t want you.”

“Who else will take care of him?”

“Anyone, Rhetta. Anyone. You’re not going to save him.”

“Save him from what? I’m not trying to save him. Don’t confuse yourself with me.”

Her mother hung up.

“That was unpleasant.” Josephine appeared to her with the bread she’d been hunting for when Lilian called.

“Be glad you missed it. I think she’s hysterical.”

“Don’t say that.” She put the sandwich bread and baguette she’d selected into Rhetta’s buggy. “She really doesn’t sound that bad. She seems to care a lot.”

“Probably too much.”

“Rhetta,” Josephine said in a choked voice. “You know how much better than my parents she is. It’s a metric—I mean, it’s something. It matters a lot.”

“So I can’t complain about her?”

Josephine glared down at the steak in the buggy. “I’d love it if you didn’t.”

“Jo, that’s not fair.”
“I’m the one who’s not fair?” Her voice rose like a bird stumbling through takeoff. A few heads in the food mart turned towards them. Rhetta glared at her and made to shush, but Josephine turned away before she had the chance. Down the aisle Darla Mumford dropped a packet of string cheese she was stocking. She looked at Rhetta with big, suspicious eyes. It was unclear if they were sympathetic.

After they checked out, Rhetta followed Josephine towards the Subaru, but Josephine put a hand on her shoulder, keeping them a few feet apart. “What?”

Josephine stared at the back of her own hand and maybe the curve of Rhetta’s jaw or the slope of her neck. “I think I just wanna be alone tonight.”

Rhetta felt her chest tighten so deep it almost popped inside out. “I—oh, okay. I understand.”

“Do you?”

Rhetta didn’t answer. “You’re alone a lot these days. Are you doing alright? Are you sure it’s healthy?”

Josephine sighed and leaned against the hood of her car. “I don’t know. It’s because I grew up here. That’s all.”

“What’s because?”

She didn’t answer for a long time, then stood up and gave Rhetta small smile. She opened the trunk, reached for the cherry jar, and handed it to Rhetta. “Catch you later.”

Her car had long disappeared down Poplar Avenue before Rhetta could make herself go home, hoping Josephine would come flying back down the street for her. The jar of cherries in her hand was unopened and empty.
IV.

What is [not] shared

“She sat near me and sang very softly, ‘Before I was set free.’
I heard as far as ‘The sorrow that my heart feels for—’
I didn’t hear the end but I heard that before I slept,
‘The sorrow that my heart feels for.’”

Jean Rhys

“He was always a thousand miles away while still standing in front of your face.”

Kurt Vile
Chapter 12

Indigation

In two years, Rhetta’s garden grew into the jungle of her childhood imagination and she didn’t see Josephine at all. She forced herself to be nicer, milder, kinder to her father, less morbid about everything. She read some books. She emailed her mother. Never found another job, cut back at the library, stayed home. [A two-person family is not a collective.]

She picked up hobbies. She was a hobbyist as a second career. [Didn’t you want to go to law school once upon a time? If your mother did it and you still wanted to, then you must have really meant it.] She learned to knit, make clothing alterations, identify flora and fauna, bake. She excelled at Sudoku, did the Times crossword puzzle every Sunday. She became a jack of all trades and a master of none. The Victorian feminine ideal. An accomplished woman.

She heard about Josephine, going here and there. Around. Apparently she couldn’t stay in Aspen any longer, not after what she learned about Tony, about everybody. [And what even was that? Just the truth of being human? Were the people here really so horrible, so much more horrible than the rest of the world? And if they were, how else were they supposed to end up? What would she find elsewhere? Being surrounded by nothing but fields of wheat and yellow wildflowers for hundreds of miles on every side—nature doesn’t make someone a good person, it just makes them different.]

Rhetta pretended not to think about her. But if anybody mentioned her in public or if Rhetta caught sight of her parents around town, her body began to shake, and she
had to turn away for fear of crumbling like ancient stone or turning into a pillar of salt.

[Why do you think she left? Do you think the truth of it will turn you into a pillar of salt?
This is just every day. This is exactly what’s in front of you, and even if you looked at it,
who’s to say you would change at all? It’s happened before. She didn’t love you then. She
loved herself more. You’d rationalize to yourself that she was the egoist, but you know it
was the other way around.]

She was doing everything right. So what if she was a stereotype? So what if she
wasn’t a raving success, a radical queer liberator, an interesting individual? So what if
she was just a good daughter? [So you’re subsumed by Midwestern complacency and
nothing can alter your course? Who are you, anyways? What happened to your
ambition? Your drive? Your bite? Did you ever bite? You’re almost thirty now—I had to
learn to bite too old and it was hell. You’re hurting me, you’re your own worst enemy.]

Life was what she made it. She was making it what she desired—what was different from
everybody she grew up with in New York.

[Traditionalism tends to brainwash, flatten like a meadow. Everything is the same
to you now. When will you look at something and it won’t be beige?] Remember the days
when she lived in the city and everything was gray? [Remember the days when you would
see rainbows in the street instead of confederate flags?]

She didn’t even miss sex. [Liar. You just resent masturbating because it makes
you feel guilty. And you hate putting things in perspective.]

She’d chosen her life. She couldn’t change it.

[You never found the waterfall.]
And so it was another September and Rhetta was cooking an egg in a hole for her father at five-thirty, their normal breakfast time, when she noticed the dog was missing. These mornings were catching up to her, she had to admit. She had trouble falling asleep, and when she woke up it felt like her body moved against her will, and her spirit laid in bed, getting up ten minutes later and going through the motions in canon with the rest of her. [So this is your precious happiness?]

“Did you put Stinky out on the chain?” she asked her father.

He was sipping his coffee in his self-satisfied way and scanning the paper (through the bifocals she’d convinced him to get that obviously made his life much better.) “I thought you must’ve. You usually get to her first.”

Rhetta finished the egg and put it on a plate for her father, giving him a fork and a napkin that she folded in half out of courtesy and habit, and paced to the front of the house. Stinky was usually begging for food right about now, and Cormac was usually admonishing Rhetta for not giving the dog scraps. It was strange that she had turned out to be the disciplinary one in the end.

She was in Rhetta’s bedroom, curled in the corner, whining and trembling and barely awake. A pain shot through Rhetta’s stomach at the sight of her, old and shivering, eyelids heavy.

She called her father into the bedroom and hauled her into the living room where they could keep an eye on her until the veterinarian’s office opened. Cormac finished his coffee on the couch with Stinky’s head in his lap. He looked into her suffering eyes and
cooed small affirmations into her ears as he stroked her back, so lovingly, so selflessly. The dog was so gentle. So unassuming. She had no reason not to love Cormac. He was the world to her. Their love was unconditional, Agape. The pain in Stinky’s heart might just as well have pierced Cormac’s for how he looked at her, as if they were both dying.

At eight they took Stinky to the vet clinic down the road, a place too cheery for Rhetta. It felt like it was overcompensating, aware that it was often a place of death and so it had to cover the stench with colorful wall banners and bowls of treats and toys for children, like a kindergarten class.

As it were, Stinky was experiencing kidney problems. Treatable, with some medicine and special food, the works for anything sick. The vet wasn’t entirely sure of the problem, so they would have to go through a few different types of medicine to see what worked best, but she was in no danger. They had waited for over an hour in the lobby, terrified that they might have to put her down. Cormac’s fists were clenched in his lap the whole time. Rhetta could barely breathe for the fear it engendered in her. What would they do without a dog to keep them sane, allied?

Rhetta dropped her father and the dog off at home with the new food and the promise to pick up her medicine the following afternoon. Driving off to work, Rhetta watched them hobble together up the walk into the little yellow house, almost exactly as she had found them four years before. Her stomach writhed.

It made her late for work, but Yvonne didn’t mind. Few things truly vexed her. When Rhetta told her what had happened and the fear that had overtaken her father’s system, Yvonne became overcome with an altruistic conviction that she tried desperately to hide under a veneer of nonchalance. “I’ll bake him something, then, maybe,” she said.
“Help raise his spirits. Would you like to help? It might cheer you up a bit, too.” She squeezed Rhetta’s elbow.

It probably would help. Rhetta agreed immediately. She had never visited Yvonne’s house, amazingly, after four years. Not for lack of offers, between the open invitation to Yvonne’s bridge club and the dozens of times she could have offered to help her bake or craft. If anything, Rhetta had been neglectful of her. She could imagine what Yvonne’s house looked like on the inside—like a cottage almost, with lots of little trinkets and cookbooks and colorful tile and bowls of fresh fruit. A little paradise, bright and red and cozy. Not so sterile as Rhetta’s living room.

Yvonne left work at 4:30, while Rhetta stayed until 6 to close. She gave her father a quick call on the drive home, making sure he would be alright if she spent the evening with Yvonne. He said of course because he could take care of himself, he didn’t need her around constantly. He’d answered the landline, which she prayed he put back on the receiver after hanging up instead of just setting down on the table again. He lied to forget about it and let the battery run out so that she couldn’t reach him if she wanted to. She still hadn’t made a good enough case to him that he needed to get a cell phone, sooner rather than later, but she would reevaluate her arguments and try again. Things just took time with him.

His voice on the phone had been soft, like he’d been speaking all day. It was entirely possible he had spent the entire day on the couch with Stinky, cradling her. She’d only ever heard him say “I love you” to the dog.

Rhetta rang the doorbell to Yvonne’s house and was led through the small foyer into the kitchen. Her house wasn’t very different in size or layout from Cormac’s—there
was a small office at the front of the house, bedroom in the back, sizeable yard. The large kitchen window with burgundy curtains faced west, and through it Rhetta could see the signs of a brilliant oncoming sunset.

The house was less cute than Rhetta expected, less like a cottage and more like a home. Yvonne had dozens of bookshelves and paintings, very few photographs. The front office was for Yvonne’s painting, which she did very early in the morning before going to work. It was a habit, Rhetta learned, that she’d been keeping up for nearly a decade, waking up around 4:30 to paint until 7, then work at 8. “So of course my bedtime is usually 8 PM,” she said, “like the old lady I am.”

“You can’t be that old,” Rhetta said. “How old are you?” She felt embarrassed to not know.

“Give it a guess.”

“Forty-five?”

“Fifty-two, but you’re a doll.” She gave Rhetta’s forearm a playful squeeze and started to assemble the ingredients they would need.

“You’re my mom’s age,” Rhetta said.

“We were classmates,” Yvonne said. “Didn’t you realize? We weren’t particularly close friends, but we knew each other.” Yvonne’s smile was like a hearth—almost alarming. “Ready to work?”

They were to make an apple crumble because, as Yvonne said, Cormac had always liked apples and this was all for him. Rhetta had only begun to bake with the intention of improving recently, so she was still mostly a novice by comparison, but the
The recipe was easy. Yvonne had made it so many times that she had memorized all the measurements.

Rhetta got to slicing the apples into small cubes. She was still remiss at chopping even though her cooking skills had improved over the years. Her own mother had never been much of a chef—those responsibilities had often fallen to Jared, but more likely neither of Rhetta’s parents would have had time to cook and so they would just give her a ten dollar bill and send her off to get what she wanted. Until she started to gain weight, which got in the way of gymnastics (which she had done for a while before having a meltdown to her mother about how much she hated it) or just bothered her mother.

Rhetta saw how unalike Lilian and Yvonne were: one a career woman with intense concern for her image and an inability to let others control her, the other, well. How did one describe Yvonne? Rhetta had never sat down to write poetry about her. Part of Rhetta always felt that Yvonne just was. One of those people who didn’t need to justify themselves constantly, unlike her mother, who demanded the approval of everyone she met. Or like Rhetta, who maybe didn’t expect admiration, but strove at least to not be hated.

But Yvonne seemed to strive for nothing. How could Rhetta think of someone that way? As if they were a houseplant, a fixed star that never moved no matter how far you traveled. Rhetta felt cruel. She felt selfish. She’d felt that way about Josephine. When she had been orbiting Josephine like a satellite, loving her, missing her, cherishing her, she’d often fascinated more on her own movement, despite what she told herself. Was this how she was? How she would always be? Did a woman like Yvonne change? Was Rhetta a woman like Yvonne? Was Yvonne like Rhetta?
“How long have you been making stuff for my father?” Rhetta asked.

“Oh, years,” Yvonne replied. “I do it for just about everybody, I hope it wouldn’t hurt his feelings to learn that.”

It surely wouldn’t—Cormac probably didn’t think about Yvonne more than once a week—but it made Rhetta feel embarrassed. “No. Though I always thought you sort of liked him.”

“I do like him,” Yvonne said. “I think he’s sweet.”

“Do you really?”

“Well, it’s as they say, you know. Some people are like peaches, some are like coconuts. The exterior doesn’t always indicate the truth of what’s inside. Of course he’s always been a total gentleman with me, but I understand that he can be challenging sometimes. But deep down, people like him are very good, I’m sure of it.”

“So you do like him.”

Yvonne laughed, less affronted than Rhetta would be in her situation. Rhetta’s heart was pounding like a war snare in her ears. “Do you mean I fancy him? I did when I was a teenager, but everybody did. I was just a part of the group. When he married your mom—he’d been single for probably seven years or so, the other girls in town were so betrayed. I’d moved on by then, but everyone had just thought he would be a forever bachelor.”

“But you never got married?” Rhetta asked. “Never found anyone around here?”

Yvonne shook her head. “I never really wanted to get married. People don’t usually believe me when I tell them I prefer living alone—and my mother, bless her
heart, she’s in a nursing home in Carbondale, she thinks I’m suffering in silence every day. She can’t fathom that I enjoy any part of my life.”

“Do you get lonely?”

“Sure,” she said. “But because I’m unmarried. I’ve had a lot of friends pass on, people I used to spend time with. It saddens me to spend so much time by myself when I could be spending it with friends. I guess that’s when I get lonely.”

Rhetta watched her now. Watching her measure and bustle. Paying close attention to the slope of her shoulders [Where you always liked to look]. They’d finished chopping the apples and Rhetta watched with rapt attention as Yvonne used her hands to mix the dry ingredients together, breaking up clumps of brown sugar between her finger and thumb. Her hands were big for a woman, fingers strong and calloused.

“But Rhetta,” Yvonne said thoughtfully, looking at her hands. “You never really struck me as the type to care too much about getting married.”

“I’m not,” said Rhetta too quickly. “I probably won’t get married.”

“Ever?”

“It’s… unlikely,” she said. But it was like she was in a black room with a wall five feet in front of her that she couldn’t see. Her future was unclear, unwelcoming. Not much to look forward to. “I envy you,” she said.

“Do you now? Why’s that?”

Rhetta’s ears went hot. “You seem to have it all figured out.”

“Oh, I never said that.”

“Then what do you think is missing?”
The question seemed to relax Yvonne. She bumped her shoulder against Rhetta’s.

“There’s always going to be something. People come and go; things change. You know how it is. Either you adapt or you don’t.” Yvonne stretched upwards on her tiptoes to retrieve something from a cabinet and her shirt rode up her stomach, revealing a small scar on the lower part of her stomach, right above her hipbone.

Rhetta didn’t conceal her gasp well. “What happened?” she asked.

Yvonne eyed her, confused at first, then almost offended, straightening out her blouse. “Just an accident,” she said. “From when I was younger.” Her face went downcast.

“I’m sorry,” Rhetta breathed. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

Yvonne gave her a sidelong look. “You’ve been doing a lot of prying, dear. Don’t fret, it’s fine.”

“I’m sorry,” Rhetta said. “I’ve been going through a weird time, I suppose. I don’t want you to have to mother me.”

“Since your friend left?” Yvonne asked.

Rhetta said nothing.

“I don’t feel like I’m mothering you,” Yvonne said. “Not at all. You’re too much like your father—nearly identical. I’ve confused you two sometimes, in my head. You’re so alike. In profile you look the same.”

“Heaven help the woman who raised me.”

“Why’s that? Were you a difficult child? I bet you were. I can imagine it.”

Rhetta’s eyes were glazing over watching Yvonne spread the apples in the pan. The little hairs on her arm were standing up. “Really?”
“Never doing what you’re told, only what you wanted. That’s why you’re so obedient now.”

“You think I’m obedient?”

“You seem to keep yourself on a tight leash. But there are cures for that.”

“Baking is all about following rules precisely.”

“But it’s also about beauty,” Yvonne said. “And beauty is lawless.” Yvonne smiled at her kindly. “And it’s always more fun to experience beauty with a friend, don’t you think?”

Rhetta felt a little storm in her swell and pass. The warmth radiating from Yvonne placated that little stirring for companionship she’d felt for a while now [Why? Why are you alone? Why are you lonely? People don’t have to be lonely, you said so yourself.]—almost. They sipped tea while the crumble baked and Yvonne talked about her painting and Rhetta looked at the curve of her neck and tried not to float far, far away into the recesses of potentiality. Tried, for once, to be happy where she was, even if she failed.

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Yvonne came by with the crumble the next day which was enough to spur Cormac off the couch with Stinky and into the kitchen, leaning humbly on his cane as he leaned down to scratch behind Stinky’s ears dotingly. Stinky smiled dumbly up at the humans, but Rhetta imagined she was trying to say he’s taken, he’s mine to Yvonne.

For Rhetta’s part, it made her inordinately happy to see Yvonne again. She’d been looking forward to it all morning, antsy in that way she got where she constantly straightened things out around the house and closed and reopened cabinets just to distract
herself. But it had all been so normal. She didn’t know what she’d expected. Maybe some heavy glance from Yvonne, something that communicated that, yes, she had one of Rhetta’s secrets and wouldn’t tell anyone, or that she understood Rhetta in a more profound way than before and wanted to remind her. But there was no need, no indication. They just carried on as coworkers and now slightly better friends. Was that not a good way to be?

Oh, but the mind. She would not let it rule her. She would give herself over to feeling, the feeling of time passing around her, through her, like standing in a field on a windless day and watching the sun fall. Life could be easy if she wanted it to be, couldn’t it? Willpower was all it took, and a little elbow grease. You can scratch the itch yourself, that’s good enough.

Rhetta ran out to pick up the medicine for the dog and then went to the pharmacy to retrieve her father’s monthly dose of medication. He had been keeping up with it well for the most part, though tended to fall behind by a day or two. Rhetta managed it for him to the extent he let her. Usually she just kept the meds on her, unopened in their little paper bag, until he told her he needed more, and then she provided, always at the ready.

At the pharmacy, she saw Beatrice Haas and another of the middle-aged ladies from town chatting in the greeting card section. Rhetta instinctively fled the other direction from them, but not without hearing Beatrice say the name of her daughter with shocking elation. It nearly made Rhetta vomit. She ran out of the pharmacy like a criminal.

By 2 that afternoon, Rhetta was scrubbing potatoes and her father was napping and life was normal again. Just like this, always, images flashing through Rhetta’s mind
every few minutes before she gently pushed them back under the tide. She was back in the mindset of vanilla domestic subservience, relaxing, mind-numbing. Doing her father’s laundry, cleaning floors, cleaning the grout of the bathroom tile, making a stew. She’d never painted before. She wondered if it was something she’d be good at. She’d always had an eye for nature, though not as much recently. She’d been spending a bit too much inside. Her father kept the blinds down because the sunlight hurt his sensitive eyes. They hadn’t had a pretty sunset in their house in months.

There was a knock at the door suddenly, and Rhetta wondered if Yvonne was back to—well, do what? She didn’t have time to conjure a justification, but she didn’t need one to get her hopes up. Nervously, Rhetta took off her apron and straightened out her hair in the microwave door reflection before answering the door to see a nearly complete stranger.

Before her was a woman in her late fifties or early sixties, shockingly beautiful and eerily familiar, with a serene unbothered countenance and relaxed posture. She had blunt-cut hair at her shoulders, the wardrobe of a former hippie, and the hooded eyes of someone with much on their mind and little desire to share it.

“Hi,” she said, her voice deep and gruff from years of chain smoking. Rhetta noticed a cigarette pack in the front pocket of her shirt, where Rhetta’s father kept his if he got packs instead of cartons. She seemed surprised to see Rhetta. “Is Cormac here? He still lives here, right? That’s his ugly old pickup in the back.”

“He lives here,” Rhetta said. “He’s napping right now. You can come in and wait for him to wake up if you like.”

“Oh no, I don’t want to be a bother. You must be Rhetta.”
Rhetta flushed and smiled. “Yes. Why don’t you come in for coffee?”

“Oh, sure,” said the woman, seemingly surprised by Rhetta’s hospitality.

“What’s your name?”

“Karen.”

Thunder struck in Rhetta’s heart. She went very cold.

*Your father, he was distraught, he was shattered. And then Karen left—*

Karen sat gracefully at the breakfast table, but then sank back into an open, careless slump. She let out a joyful, reverent sigh. “God, I haven’t been in this place in so long—at least twenty years. It’s so different! So clean. Did someone shampoo the carpets?”

Rhetta stared at her. Tried to see her, but it was as if she were looking through a foggy window. Her vision was yellow at the edges, the vestiges of summer and sunflowers and bumblebees and apples—as if before that it hadn’t been quiet winter mornings and the clear black sky carved open with fireworks on New Year’s. Always a distraction.

“How do you know my father?” Rhetta asked in an unstable voice as she prepared the coffee.

“What, has he never mentioned me before?” asked Karen in a light voice. “I guess that’s not too surprising. We went to high school together. I was a nuisance to your family. Your grandmother hated me. Feeling wasn’t entirely mutual, but I was a bit of a tomboy. Did you ever meet her?”

“No, I didn’t.”
“Well, you missed a show. Why’s your dad sleeping? He used to say naps were for old ladies or jobless deadweights.”

That sounded like him. “He gets drowsy around now most days, and he’s retired.”

“Retired?” said Karen. “At his age?”

Rhetta looked at her with wide-open eyes. She didn’t want to be cruel to either of them, but it would hurt more to betray her father and tell this stranger that he was weak—that’s what it would signify to him. That she was open with his deficiencies, that she wasn’t ashamed of sharing them when most things weren’t meant to be shared.

Karen saw something was wrong. “Can I speak to him? Can you wake him?”

Rhetta’s stomach twisted. “I don’t think I should. I don’t think he’d be happy.”

“What are you doing here?” Karen asked suddenly, her voice harder now. “How long have you been here? Did Mack ask you to come home?”

Rhetta didn’t answer.

Karen let out another deep breath. “Something’s weird.” She stood up and started pacing. “This wasn’t… well, it’s been so long. I guess I just counted on him when I shouldn’t have.” She stopped suddenly in front of one of the paperweights, the one that Cormac had threatened to break once, the one that Rhetta held most dear. “I’m sorry Rhetta. I hope I didn’t startle you. Can you tell your dad to meet me at the Haw? Tell him it’s important please. I’ll see myself out.”

Within a minute she had blown in and left again, just like that. She hadn’t even carried a suitcase.

Cormac stumbled out twenty minutes later on his cane, hair messy and eyes faded the color of pale pine needles. When he saw the look in Rhetta’s eyes he knew
immediately something was wrong. She’d always resented that parental instinct of his, which he so seldom let show, but this time it comforted her because it meant she didn’t have to explain herself.

She told him an old friend had stopped by and was waiting for him at the Haw, and then she looked down ashamedly at her hands. “Old friend?” he said, and she said her name and her father went pale as a ghost. His eyes seemed to catch fire, burning through the flat September ambiance. He looked so himself when he was angry. Within a minute he was out the door, and Rhetta was running down the basement steps as soon as he was out of sight.

Rhetta tore through all the boxes, the books, jewelry, hand-stitched clothes, vinyl records, the perverted, abstract story of her father’s life that she could never look away from no matter what she tried, finally arriving on the box where everything recapitulates. The old photos that she’d gone through years ago (her first betrayal), flat black-and-white abbreviations of her father’s life, all of them faded to sepia, as if soaked in whiskey. And then there she was.

The polaroid of a woman draped across a bed, naked, looking at the camera like she knew all the photographer’s secrets. She had known what this photo was for.

Time spiraled before her eyes. Karen, young, old, and young again. Forty years, surely, before Rhetta’s eyes. She meditated over the photo, looking at Karen’s strong but feminine body, how long her hair used to be, how sharp her eyes were, how softly her unwrinkled skin glowed in the dim morning light. How tender the photo was, how dirty. It made Rhetta dizzy to transport herself into the moment, to be the photographer straddling Karen’s legs. She felt like vomiting.
The landline upstairs started to ring. Rhetta hid the photo in her pocket and went upstairs to answer it, glancing at the caller ID and feeling her racing heart violently skip a beat, and she had to take a moment to compose herself before answering.

“Hello?”

“Hi dear.”

*Dear.* Even the slightest form of intimacy made her flush. “Hi Yvonne. How can I help you?”

Yvonne chuckled quietly. The faint noise of the library’s printer could be heard in the background. “Are you alright, Rhetta? You sound a little flustered.”

“Maybe a little.”

“Well, I wanted to ask if you’d like to come over some morning and paint with me. I know it’s early, but I’d enjoy your company.”

“I’d love to,” Rhetta agreed, and made an appointment to go over a few days later, blood still pounding in her ears the whole time. The call ends amicably, almost exhausting Rhetta with its sweetness. It was nice to talk to someone on the phone again.

Half an hour later, Rhetta heard the faint, angry voice of her father booming from down the road through the open window. When he arrived, he kicked the door open, but was not alone; he was limping into Karen, who had her arm wrapped under his shoulders. Even with the cane in his other hand, he looked near collapsing. Karen had a hurt look on her face, Cormac looked frustrated.

Rhetta dashed to meet them at the door. “Is he alright?”

“I’m fine,” snapped her father.

“Just shaky,” Karen clarified.
“You could’ve called, I could’ve picked him up,” Rhetta said, taking her father into her arms. He entered more willingly than usual, heaving a sigh as Rhetta helped him gently into the armchair.

“I wanted to,” sighed Karen, closing the front door behind her, “but he wouldn’t have it. You really are the most stubborn mule I’ve ever met, Mack. It’s unbelievable! How do you bear putting your kid through it?”

“Oh, shut up,” he growled, rubbing deep lines into his forehead. Rhetta ran to the kitchen to get him some orange juice in case his blood sugar was low. “I don’t want you sticking around here. You can’t stay here this time. I want you out.”

“Fine,” said Karen, “I wasn’t planning on staying with you anyways. But are you really gonna treat me like some monster from hell sent with the express purpose of torturing you? I figured you’d know I was coming. Didn’t you get my postcards?”

“Threw ‘em out.” He took the glass of juice from Rhetta and sipped it without thanks.

“How kind of you.”

“I told you I never wanted you to come back here.”

“Good thing that’s not for you to decide! For Christ’s sake, Mack, I’m here for the centennial, and to see my mom.”

“I meant my home.”

“It was my home too, once upon a time. Did you forget? Or did you push it so far down into yourself that it never even occurs to you anymore? My expectations are curbed, you know. After God knows how many years of no returned calls, not a single
letter, nothing from you, even I knew despite my stupid optimism that it was time to throw in the towel. I just wanted to see you like an old friend. I just missed you.”

“That’s your fault, too.”

“What’s my fault?”

“Missing me.”

She finally became angry, her glassy visage shattering. Her voice stayed very quiet, trembling. “You know, I was gonna say that I wondered what the hell happened to you, but there’s no use fooling ourselves. You’ve always been like this. Promises have always meant jack shit to you. The only way you’ve changed in twenty years is you’re dying faster than you would’ve been otherwise. And fuck you for not telling me you were sick, Cormac.”

“You have no business knowin’ that—or anything. I hate seein’ you in my house, I can’t stand it, it makes me sick.”

“Dad, for God’s sake,” Rhetta said.

“Don’t start with me Rhetta,” he snapped. “I’m not in the mood for your shit right now. Stay out of this.”

Rhetta shrunk back like a wounded animal. Karen’s mouth twisted into a knot.

“You’re so cruel, Mack. Do you hit your kid like you hit your wife?”

Cormac fell silent. He looked like a ghost, ugly, withering. He stared at the carpet.

“I’m sorry to hear about your folks dying,” Karen said carefully. “I’d like to go to their graves at some point, if you’d show me. I’ll be around for a few days.”

“Get out,” said Cormac.
Karen sighed. She glanced back at Rhetta, looking for the first time truly defeated, and left quietly.

Even the dust particles that floated through the light stood still as Rhetta’s father crouched in fury and recompense. Rhetta didn’t breathe. She felt herself take one step back and look at the back of her own head, pass through herself, approach her father, grab him by the collar, shake him, throw him to the floor. But she couldn’t move if she wanted to.

After a few minutes, Cormac helped himself stand up with the cane and tottered into the kitchen. Rhetta stared at the abandoned armchair. He grabbed a beer and a beef jerky and disappeared into his room. The sound of the padlock rang through the house like a service bell. Rhetta didn’t move until the sun started to set, dyeing the house purple and red, like a bruise.

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Rhetta was—processing. That was the word for what it felt like. Her gears were spinning, her blood was flowing, her mind was growing and shrinking, with each realization and subsequent acquiescence to the situation. She let herself process more than she had in a very long time. It made her feel awake, normal, strange. She knew, possibly, more than she ever had, and she wanted nothing more than to bury it all in the backyard.

She kept her distance from Yvonne at work. It was still too daunting to look her in the eye after their encounter. She hoped that Yvonne didn’t take it personally, and she didn’t seem to. Rhetta was the one who was hung up.
Karen came by the library that next day in the late afternoon. She propped her elbows up on the counter and waited for Rhetta with a diplomatic smile until Rhetta acquiesced to her, too.

“My dad is back home if you need him,” she said.

“I went there already,” Karen said. “He didn’t answer, big surprise. I wanted to talk to you. Are you finished soon?”

After Rhetta’s shift was over, she followed Karen over to the Rendezvous Diner, where more memories of Josephine bubbled to the surface. It soured her mood to go there, especially without Josephine. Josephine would understand what was happening with her father—possibly better than anyone else she knew. Rhetta wondered if Kar len had ever talked to Horace Pomeroy for his project.

Karen bought Rhetta’s food and coffee and they sat near the door so that they got hit with the breeze. Summer was on its way out; September had entered quietly, but metamorphized into a ferocious, rainy monster, bringing in hot, sticky afternoons that were subsumed by late night lightning storms, producing brisk mornings with pale fiery sunrises.

Karen considered her coffee, stirring it with a spoon as they waited for their food. Her eyelids bore heavily down, her lips didn’t curl into a smile. Laugh lines cut deep into her cheeks like scars. “I’m sorry to drag you away,” she said, setting the spoon on a napkin, watching the residual drops of coffee bloom blood-like stains in the paper. “But I gathered from yesterday that your father has told you zilch, and I wanted clear the air. He’s acting like he hates me, but he doesn’t. Though even if you begged him, I’m sure he wouldn’t tell you a thing about it.”
Rhetta was familiar with that phenomenon. Her stomach was tight; she didn’t know if she could trust Karen completely, but her father was determined to take his soul and all it protected with him to the grave.

“I saw that photo of you,” Rhetta said.

Karen crinkled her nose. “What photo?”

It made Rhetta flush to explain. She regretted bringing it up. “An old polaroid he took of you… well…”

“Oh!” chuckled Karen. “The one of me naked? He still has that?”

“It’s very unlike him,” Rhetta said. “I sort of didn’t believe he took it.”

“No, it was definitely him,” said Karen wistfully. “You really don’t know much about your parents, do you?”

Embarrassed, Rhetta shook her head.

“Or your grandparents, I bet. You know, on your mom’s side, your grandmother died of a heart attack back in ’85, when you were a baby. Your granddad, he just couldn’t take it. He vanished three days later. Went into the Garden of the Gods and never came back.”

A welt formed in the back of Rhetta’s throat. She’d had no idea. Her mother never mentioned her own parents. They didn’t even have names. As far as Rhetta’s life was concerned, they’d never existed.

Karen grimaced. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to shock you. I’m just trying to help you understand.”

“No, it’s right,” Rhetta choked out. “I’d rather know than not.”

“Are you sure?”
She wasn’t. Not after how comfortable she’d become. She’d finally stopped being scared of her father, and now her peace had to catch fire again. It terrified her to think that if Karen hadn’t approached her, it was possible that Rhetta could go on as she had been, never even thinking about her father having hurt her mother. The possibility had never even crossed her mind in all these years. Not even after he’d thrown things or spent all day drinking or threatened Rhetta. She took a long sip of coffee. “Why didn’t he defend himself earlier? Did he… hit her continually?”

Karen scratched behind her ears. “I shouldn’t have brought that up. It was bad of me, but I knew it would hurt him. I highly doubt he abused her. Everyone has their limit. I know it happened once. That doesn’t excuse him of course, but marriages are messy. I don’t know your mom, I wasn’t around for all that. But I do know your dad.

“Let me start from the top: Mack and I were engaged out of high school. His parents didn’t like me, I was a sort of wild child, I liked to keep him out way after curfew just to mess with them. He’d always get mad at me for that, a little bit at least.

“What I think you need to understand,” Karen said, “is that Cormac was fiercely loyal to his parents. If I said one bad thing about his mother, he wouldn’t speak to me for days. If I ever brought up his brother, he would shut me up. His dad believed in privacy sanctity, the whole family being pure, and Cormac didn’t know how not to feel that way. Mack adored his brother like nobody else in the world. The only time he betrayed his parents was when he quit church when we were younger, and even then he struggled to disagree with his parents. He just didn’t want to hear anyone else say anything against him.”

“He never talks about them,” Rhetta said.
“He doesn’t need to. He thinks about them all the time. Always has. Anyways, that’s all just context. Mack and I were gonna get married, but I didn’t want to stay here. I wanted to move around and travel, I didn’t really think I could stand to be here much longer. It didn’t really matter to me where I went, I liked moving around, seeing different spots, but I knew I wasn’t gonna waste the rest of my life here. We were twenty-three, twenty-four maybe, and we said we were gonna leave and get married up in Chicago. But he was too stubborn, and he got cold feet the morning we’d planned to go, so I left without him. I went to Chicago, played guitar in a shitty country band that toured for a while, took odd jobs, the usual. But I always came through every few years to visit. My dad’s passed on now, but my mom’s still around, and I’ve got a brother down in Kentucky.

“I didn’t quite hate him for staying behind, not as much as I should have. I guess I forgive too easily, and I always hoped that he’d change his mind, you know. Something here would end, he’d lose his job, or realize he didn’t need to live in his father’s shadow, what have you, and then he’d realize that it was okay to move on and, well, run away like we said we would. It’s sounds so naïve when I say it out loud, I know, but I really believed it. If just one thing would go right, we could have the life we planned.

“Regardless, after fifteen years or so I figured I’d call him up and see how he was doing. I don’t want to give you too much detail, but we got a hotel and caught up for a few days, the usual. Trouble was you and your mom were around.”

Rhetta’s mouth went dry. “Did he tell you?”

“Oh yeah,” Karen said nonchalantly. “I knew. My mom was Lilian’s high school math teacher, she didn’t care for her. Lilian was always going on about going to a big city
and becoming a poet, acting all high-and-mighty. Her parents set her up with Mack to keep her in town, I think, since they were the poorest of the poor. I heard she he got her pregnant before they got married and her parents went ballistic. But I didn’t sleep with your dad as revenge against Lilian, I didn’t really care about her. You’ll have to take that up with him.

“Fast forward a few years, Cormac’s divorced and child services took you away and put you back with your mom and her rich new husband. I came back into town when my dad had a stroke and helped him clean up the house.”

The towers of boxes and books, the bugs living in the kitchen, the peeling wallpaper, the months-old food in the fridge, the father lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling fan, watching it spin, trying to motivate himself to wake up, the father drinking until early morning and passing out on the sofa, the father who didn’t enroll his daughter in kindergarten, the father who took her hunting and taught her how to shoot a gun when she was five years old.

“We struck it up again, and he wanted me to move in, but I told him I wouldn’t and went back on my way. He wouldn’t go a mile outside of town, and I couldn’t bear to rot here like everybody else, the same people I’d known my whole life, you know. He’s still mad at me now because I badmouthed his folks and now he’ll never forgive me. The only other times I came back were for my dad’s funeral, but I never saw him while I was here. I just like to pass through now when I’m nostalgic, it makes me feel a bit better about my life, you know?”

She took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly, rubbing her fingers together until eventually reaching for a cigarette and lighting it. “Your dad’s and my generation, almost
all of us are orphans now. My dad died when they were my age, or not much older, both of them worked to the bone. I always thought they just died of exhaustion. The shoe stores aren’t shoe stores anymore, there’s a proper high school, there’s assisted living, there’s chain restaurants and department stores and the pharmacy isn’t owned by my old neighbor Jericho Crosley anymore, but you know what? Your dad’s house is the same, and that bar is the same, so the quintessence of this town has been preserved in amber since the 1920s. I know I broke his heart once or twice, but fuck if I couldn’t stand it here.”

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Delusional, thought Rhetta, staring at her feet on the gravel road and wondering if they were even hers. Delusional. Life felt out of focus. How could a place like this be a hundred years old? Who had come here all those years ago, seen an empty field of green and beige and imagined a future? Had it looked threaded with gold to them? The mind could trick itself in those ways. Rhetta looked from her feet to her open palms, turned them out towards the navy sky, stared at the partitioned clouds through her fingertips and the backs of her hands she was supposed to know so well. In gymnastics as a child, she would always stare at her hands when doing front handsprings or handstands to help herself feel that she wasn’t upside down at all. The world was right. A person could tell themselves anything.

The early morning was airy and dark, mauve peaking out on the horizon miles away. Sometimes this place felt like a different planet, lonely and quiet, no wind to even
tell Rhetta that time was moving around her. How long had time been stopped for her? Were there even people in these houses? She felt like the last person on earth.

A bee flew past her ear suddenly, loud as a bullet. Rhetta followed its trajectory, watching it migrate faithfully from flower to flower in Yvonne’s front garden. Maybe he was thinking of his home, like a wayward samurai. And then she heard the thrumming of hummingbird wings and the coos of mourning doves as they roused, preparing for their calls of life. The planet turned after all. Still, no wind.

In Yvonne’s front office were set up an easel and desk. She’d been up since four-fifteen, dressed still in her robe and flannel pajama pants, reading glasses perched on the brim of her nose.

“Coffee’s brewing,” she said as if they’d down this dozens of times before. “Oil or watercolors?”

“Watercolors.”

Yvonne smiled. “I’m surprised. You struck me as more of an oils girl. Intense.”

Rhetta remained stalwart in her decision. She’d been thinking all week of what she would paint. They sat shoulder to shoulder, Yvonne double Rhetta’s age and experience. Twenty-eight was not quite young. She wondered if she would ever grow up.

“Are you going to the centennial?” Yvonne asked as she poured their coffees. She knew how Rhetta took hers. “Truthfully I think it’ll be a nightmare, but I’ve lived here for half the century, so I’m basically obligated to go.”

“I think I will,” Rhetta said, thinking of Karen, of her father. Of Jo— “It’ll be nice to go somewhere outwardly chaotic.”

“Are you experiencing some inner chaos?”
Rhetta felt the pull within herself towards Yvonne. She pulled herself away, swaying like a reed. She looked at Yvonne’s serene profile, so calm, so steady. She didn’t know what she felt, if it was desire or envy. If it was fear she wouldn’t end up at all like Yvonne. She felt that even if she bared her soul to Yvonne, they would still feel miles apart. But she wanted to try and bridge that gap, somehow. [Why?] Be her friend. [Liar.]

“Internal chaos,” she finally said. “With my father. I’ve barely seen him these last few days. He’s been day drinking and hiding because his old lover came back into town.”

“How? I saw her at the post office,” Yvonne said, unaffected. “She comes by every few years. I always thought she was sort of strange. Sweet though. Worldly.” They moved to sit before their painting stations, Yvonne with her oils at the easel, working on a large canvas of a nature scene. The woods somewhere, surrounding an open field. The leaves were deep teal and purple, closing in like a malevolent cloud over the bright green clearing. Yellow wildflowers sprinkled the fringes, bending towards the center under the weight of warring winds, pushing against each other. The sun was implied, but not seen, beginning to set behind the painter’s head. The sky glowed cerulean with wisps of yellow clouds stringing across like strands of hair. “Well, I’ve been working on this project for a while, but I think I’m stuck,” Yvonne continued. “Whenever I get stuck, I try to take walks or read something, but I’ve been at a standoff in my mind. Selfishly, I thought about painting you here. That’s part of why I invited you, but now I’m not sure. I think you’d stick out. You’re a little too otherworldly.”


“Matchbook Trail?”

“I saw a deer there, once.”
“It was close to you?”

“Yeah, though I spooked it.”

A smile popped across Yvonne’s face, and she took an excited sip of coffee. “Do you know the Japanese tradition of death poems?”

“No,” Rhetta said. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“Poets would write verses when they knew their death was coming soon, often on their deathbeds. Death is treated differently in their culture, of course. There’s no heaven or hell, no judgmental afterlife. Spirits often float at the fringes of the physical world, watching over their family. Often a person is reincarnated as an animal.”

Rhetta felt a great, hot chill move through her chest. The father, the brother, the wallpaper, the lover. [The waterfall.] She knew what she would paint. The yellow burned behind her eyes.

[A person can tell themselves anything, isn’t that what you said? A person’s eyes can gloss over, the hand can paint, the body can move and hold the mind hostage. The mind reveals itself in dire situations.]

“One of my favorite death poems is, ‘The sabre-sword / which I placed / at the maiden’s bedside / alas! / that sword!’ It’s so beautiful. It captures an instant like it takes an eternity. You can feel the blade cutting through him, right before he transforms into a white bird.”

[You want to call your mother.]

“There’s a beautiful poem from the 1100s that I love. I think about it a lot—it’s a love poem, but I like to think of it as a death poem as well: ‘These days / my inmost thoughts recall / an autumn sunset / when the deer’s call / echoes over fields.’ Imagine
that as a last thought.” She smiled to herself. She was very far away. “Thank you Rhetta.

You may have cured me after all.”
Chapter 13

The Thread

On the morning of the centennial, Rhetta caught her father passing from room to room, stealing away with his meager breakfast in yesterday’s clothes and his work boots, which he never removed. The door closed, as if he were to eat sitting on his bed.

He was in mourning, she could tell. For the loss of his purity. Stinky was not responding well to the medication—Rhetta had taken her back to the vet’s office on her own and they gave her something else, which they hoped would work better. Rhetta prayed it would, for her father’s sake.

Oh, she lived in torment this week. She loved him still, but so much less now. She was sure he could sense it, in the way she couldn’t help but take pause when she saw him, in the way she looked at his shoulders instead of his eyes. He had hit her mother. They had not yet talked.

Rhetta knocked on his door. He made no response.

“Dad?”

Nothing.

“I’m going to the celebration this afternoon, if you want to come.”

The click of his lighter.

“Alrighty then.”

She spent the day with Yvonne, in the living room, talking about nothing. Rhetta couldn’t crack herself wide open enough to reveal the truth of what had happened to Yvonne, to reveal to her that Cormac was not the upstanding man she believed him to be. She didn’t know what revealing him to Yvonne would do, but she imagined it would
damage her. It still felt like a fresh cigarette burn against Rhetta’s raw skin, even after a week. Besides, Yvonne was too elated at the companionship and Rhetta didn’t have the heart to spoil it for her. “I’m so glad we can be friends,” she said over and over again. It made Rhetta morbid.

They talked in circles around each other, Yvonne not bringing up Rhetta’s father [or her lover], Rhetta avoiding the scar on her hipbone, though it afflicted her with violent curiosity. Even from the small glimpse she had gotten before, it looked painful, terrible, more like an attack than an accident.

And so they were both hiding from each other, communicating through marionettes of themselves. Rhetta watched her with desperate, hungry eyes. She wanted them to throw the dolls and pretenses aside. She wanted to touch Yvonne, peel away the clothes and skin, she the truth of her. She wanted closeness, she could close her eyes and feel the scar under her tongue.

For what did Yvonne have to live in secret? What force kept her closed in, desperate for companionship but still reluctant to let people in? And why couldn’t Rhetta tell her the truth? Surely Yvonne realized. Why did Rhetta have to live in secrecy while others lived with their hatred in the open? Mustn’t the sun shine on her at some point, even if it hurt her eyes and burned her skin? It must be done to survive. What about Tony?

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It was strange to think Aspen was only one-hundred years old. Compared to a place like New York, where so many of the buildings were new and modern and glistening, Aspen’s ramshackle autobody shops and crumbling churches appeared to be vestiges of a lost time, but, according to Karen, most of them had been built when she and Cormac were children. It only takes half a century for the disintegration process to begin for almost all things and beings with any longevity.

Rhetta arrived at the centennial celebration a little late, as was always her want for anxiety of being too early and having nobody to talk to. The celebration was being held in a small convention center with low ceilings and bone-colored fluorescent lighting. Signs were done up, food was out, the patio was open, a small country-western trio was playing classic tunes through a crackly, poorly functioning audio system. It sounded more like music being played through a gramophone than anything, as if it were transported from another time. Rhetta thought of the old records her parents used to play, sometimes classical, sometimes folksy, sometimes squealing guitar riffs. She didn’t know them well enough anymore to determine who had chosen which songs. Had her father liked classical? Had he once been a sensitive man? Or had he always been hard, unchanging like a mountain? Rhetta began to wonder if men changed ever—if Elwood Haas would ever change, if Horace had changed, if Tony had tried and failed. Maybe he had tried to escape his own failures.

What failures? Who had he failed? Was it a principle of honor? Was it because he couldn’t revert to who he had been as a child? Is a boy not supposed to change from the time he’s six to the time he dies? If Tony had not been able to be who his parents believed was proper, that was one thing. But if he disappointed his brother, a man who
never changed, a man so stalwart in his ways, a man who was always right, what would he do? What *could* he do?

She was becoming incensed. She was halfway through a glass of cheap wine. Everyone here looked so happy, so complacent. She fit in so easily, swallowed by everyone around her like a matryoshka doll.

Karen was wearing men’s work pants and a loose button-down shirt, violently underdressed and possibly already tipsy at five in the afternoon. She was halfway through a bottle of locally brewed beer when she spotted Rhetta and flagged her down.

“Thought you might show up,” she said, smiling. Her cheeks were very rosy. “Shame you couldn’t drag your dad out. He holed up in his room like a teenager still? What a man. I can’t believe you’ve lived with him this long, I honestly can’t.”

“But you love him,” Rhetta said.

“Yeah, well aren’t I the fool.” Karen took a swig and sighed. “Good God, you don’t need all this shit, you’ve got enough on your plate. I heard about your girlfriend quitting town.”

Rhetta choked on her wine.

Karen cackled. “Relax kid, Jesus. I’ve met a lesbian here and there in my life. Thought I was one first time your father broke up with me, but that was misguided. I hope that’s not offensive. My mom is friends with Beatie Haas, that’s how I know. Layers of separation in a town this small are thin. But I don’t think word is getting around or anything.”

“You haven’t told my dad, have you?”
“Of course not,” Karen said. “That’s between you two, I’ll stay out of the way. Beatie brings my mom the church newsletter every week since she’s too old and fragile to go herself, and sometimes Beatie does reenactments of the sermons and stuff. I hear she’s actually quite the character.”

“I only met the Haass once. They didn’t seem like the nicest people.”

“Elwood is a piece of work. I knew him in high school, he really was a mean son of a gun. If Beatie’s anything at all like my mom describes her, I wonder if she isn’t that bad.”

“Feels like that’s the way things go, huh?” Rhetta said. “Was your dad mean?”

Karen gave her a pained look. Took another drink. “Yeah, he was. Died too young and too spiteful.”

“I’m afraid that’s how Cormac is going to end up.”

The band started to play “Paradise” by John Prine. It twisted Rhetta’s heart. “It’s sounds strange, hearing you say his name,” Karen said. “You say it like he’s a stranger.”

“I say it all the time in my head.”

“But you’re not used to it. Call him by his first name sometime, see what he does. Might turn him into a pillar of salt. He used to hate being called Mack, you know. Took him years to stop complaining.”

Rhetta finished her glass of wine. It went down unevenly. “Sometimes, when I first moved in with him, he would tell me things about his childhood, about his parents and stuff. His mom, mainly. But lately he’s been so closed off, like he’s got a cocoon growing around him. He gets angry so easily and doesn’t talk about anything of...
significance, not really. He’s so listless. He’s not meant to be retired. If he were alone and not working, I’m afraid he’d just shrivel up and die.”

Karen took a sharp intake of breath and put her hand over her mouth.

“Christ, listen to me, I’m getting morbid,” Rhetta said. “I’m so sorry.”

“No, don’t be,” Karen said. “That’s what I’m afraid of, too. I can’t help it. I worry about him every day, no matter where I am.”

“I don’t see why you still love him,” said Rhetta quietly, giving Karen a Kleenex from her purse to blow her nose with.

“Can’t be helped,” said Karen. “You know what? For the longest time I didn’t forgive him, and that made me love him more, and for the wrong reasons. I wanted him to be someone different, someone jealous or possessive, someone who would fight to get me back, someone who put me above his life here. But he never did. And so I was always disappointed in him, even though I’d never had any indication he would change. Christ kid, it’s hard to love someone who never sees that they’re wrong.”

Karen excused herself to the bathroom, and so Rhetta got a glass of seltzer water to sip while she played wallflower and examined the crowd of people and teemed further. Yvonne was off talking with someone Rhetta recognized from town hall. She was looking angrily over the group of church ladies, thinking about burning this whole fucking building to the ground, when a handsome enough middle-aged man approached her.

“Looking for someone?” he asked, his voice baritone and a little smarmy. He had a full red beard and very white teeth, barely a fleck of gray in his hair. He looked vaguely
familiar to her, like someone she’d met before in passing but who hadn’t asked her name. He had a glass of whiskey in his hand but appeared as sober as they came.

Rhetta’s mouth tightened into a line. Maybe she had been looking for someone without realizing it. “No one in particular.”

He grinned. He was the grown-up version of the kind of guy Rhetta would have liked in high school, the kind of man she would dislike now. She wanted to mess with him. The ability to flirt with men had never left her, it just felt more like an experiment. And it wasn’t so different from flirting with a woman, physically anyways. Lick your lips, stand with good posture, make eye-contact, the usual. Just talk about him. She knew how to do that, too. Man was her job. From across the room, Yvonne watched her with a pensive look on her face. It felt like they were a mile apart. Maybe Rhetta would make her jealous.

“You’re the librarian, aren’t you?” he said, leaning down a little to talk to her. “I’ve seen you around. I go to the library once a week. I can’t tell you how many guys around town rejoiced when they heard we got a young city girl moving in.” Now that she identified him as a patron, Rhetta could remember him with more precision. He often checked out cyber-thriller novels and military espionage books. Light, insubstantial reading with hot women and cool weapons and evil eastern countries. He was a meathead.

“Not so young anymore,” she said.

“What, how old can you be? No more than twenty-five.”

She giggled. It almost hurt. She felt like she was in drag, dressing as a typical woman. She felt that way a lot these days, putting on her human skin in the morning,
living her domestic life, taking it off before bed. She was dissatisfied with her
performative persona. “You’re close.”

“Twenty-four?”

“Colder.”

“Really? Twenty-six. Highest I’m betting.”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Wow,” he said, eyes meandering below her chin. “Still young though. Got that
energy. It all seeps out of you after thirty.”

She spotted the ring on his finger. “How old’s your wife?”

He faltered without moving. Just left too long a beat open. “My age. Went to high
school with me. That’s how everybody ends up ‘round here, for the most part. She’s a
stick in the mud, but it is what it is.”

Disgusting. His lips were too shiny. He’d been sweating. He hid nothing. What
was that like? Rhetta rubbed her thighs together. Yvonne was so near her. What if they
left now, together? What if she let Rhetta spend the night, let them peel each other’s
worries away, and in the morning, they could paint and feel the sun rise through them,
lifting their spirits out of their feet and into their chests.

“Oh, well she can’t be that bad,” Rhetta said. “She had the good sense to marry
you. Is she here?”

The man appeared conflicted. He gestured over to a small flock of ladies eating
small sandwiches and talking to the mayor, who would soon give a speech. Pastor Lind
hung a few feet behind them. In the cluster was a woman who appeared to be the same
age as Rhetta’s mother, the assumed wife, and then the two old ladies from the church, Louise McSparin and Marianne Cochran.

“She’s standing over there next to my mother,” he said.

“And which is your mother?”

“The little lady in pink with the white hair.”

“Mrs. McSparin?”

“Yeah.”

She looked up at his wide face. “And what’s your name?”

“JC.”

“Short for Jeffrey?”

His eyes shifted. “Yeah.” He chuckled. “What about it?”

“Nothing,” said Rhetta, feeling her body come alive with fury. She saw Yvonne out of the corner of her eye, coming towards. She didn’t care for why anymore. Finally, the fire was beginning to light itself again. It had been dimmed and placated, not by lack of kindling but lack of oxygen. She could nearly hyperventilate.

Unsmiling, she continued: “So what does a man who took a hunting rifle into a high school do with his days now?”

He choked on a sip of whiskey. “What the fuck?”

“What does a man who took a hunting rifle into a school do with his time?”

Rhetta sipped her seltzer. She was stone-faced. She was not proud. [You were, but you hid it well.] She was angry.

JC looked at her incredulously and laughed again. “Are you serious? Are you really going to ask me about that?”
“Why not? It’s common knowledge.”

“Yeah, but fuck. You don’t just ask someone about that. It’s not polite.”

“It’s not a dirty secret. It’s in newspapers. What do you do? What’s your job?”

He hesitated. “I work in insurance.”

“Insurance,” repeated Rhetta. Her heart was beating in her ears, behind her eyes.

“Why did you take a hunting rifle into a high school and shoot four people?”

“Listen, I don’t have to deal with this.”

“Why not?” Rhetta asked. “You did it. Everybody knows. You were a kid, seventeen? Eighteen? You weren’t indicted. You have a good life. Sure, you shot four people, but you work in insurance and don’t love your wife. You’re a different man. You got a second chance.”

“And I’m thankful for it,” he said loudly. His eyes had more white than iris.

“And how is that forgivable?” Rhetta asked. “How were you forgiven? What was your justification for shooting four people?” She saw Yvonne fast approaching out of the corner of her eye. Her voice was louder than she realized, and not a few heads had turned.

JC began to flail a little and took another sip of his drink. “I don’t know, I didn’t have a reason, I was just a dumb fucking kid!”

“And everyone can just get over it? That’s fine? Everyone’s fine with that? You get to have a life?”

“Rhetta!” Yvonne snapped, grabbing her wrist. “Don’t do this here. Please.”

Rhetta turned to Yvonne, the cord of composure inside her snapping. “Where’s the justice, Yvonne? How was he not made a fucking pariah? What the fuck is wrong with everyone here?”
“It’s just the way things are.” She grabbed Rhetta by the shoulders and shook her a little. “We just have to deal with things, okay?” Yvonne looked fleetingly towards JC, who hid his face in shame. The image of the scar on Yvonne’s hipbone burned in Rhetta’s head. Horror overtook her like a sheet being lifted from her eyes.

“You see him all the time,” Rhetta said. “How do you—”

People were looking at her. Karen, the church ladies, Pastor Lind in anguish. A shiny blonde head caught Rhetta’s eye from the back of the crowd—

Yvonne didn’t need to say anything else for Rhetta to understand what she meant by the look, why she flinched at JC’s gaze, why he looked away in humiliation.

Yvonne pulled Rhetta into the ladies’ washroom. Squeezed her wrist. Said, “It’s more complicated than you understand.” And Rhetta said that she was trying to help, that she was defending Yvonne because Yvonne was her friend. [You thought you were being unselfish?] Yvonne said she’s been dealing with this for years. Dropped Rhetta’s hand. Rhetta grasped her elbows, said, “Please, Yvonne, please don’t be mad,” and Yvonne said she wanted space, but her cheeks were pink and so Rhetta kissed her.

Yvonne jerked away. Her face crumbled, like a landslide. Uncomprehending and yet hurting so intensely. Rhetta knew the feeling. It was like looking into her own seventeen-year-old eyes.

But there were two other women in the washroom with them, and they looked at Rhetta with such poison that she felt nothing in her garden would ever be beautiful again. Her heart cracked. Yvonne started to say, “Is it because Josephine is—” but Rhetta didn’t let her finish. She went away.

Far, far, far away.
Eventually, Rhetta made it home. Brewed herself some tea. Sat at the breakfast table in her nice clothes, sun only barely beginning to dip outside the window. She waited. He would have to appear eventually.

You’re too much like your father. Rhetta turned the phrase over in her head.

Nearly identical.

Cormac’s bedroom door opened. He glanced at her sideways as he passed into the kitchen. The dog followed him out sluggishly. Rhetta had no idea a dog could look so sick, but Stinky looked terrible, as if the new meds were making things worse.

“There’s some leftover stew in the fridge, if you want to eat,” Rhetta offered meekly. She stared at his legs. The house stood still. No creaking of the floors, no wind outside, even the cicadas had shut up, holding their wings tight to their backs, fearing one wrong move. Distantly, if she strained her ears, maybe Rhetta could hear the river flowing, the strands of golden wheat brushing up against each other.

“Lady called from the party,” Cormac said coolly, cracking open a beer. “Louise is her name. McSparin. Doesn’t live too far from here. Gave me a piece of her mind because you got in some altercation with her son.”

“He deserved it,” Rhetta said. “He—”

“I know what he did.”

“Mom was traumatized by him. I mean Yvonne—Yvonne, she—”
“Yeah, let’s talk about Yvonne, huh?” he snapped, pounding his cane hard
enough of the kitchen floor that the dog crept backwards in shock. “You’re gonna look
me in the eye and tell me that this was about Yvonne? After what you did to her?”

“What do you—”

“Don’t bullshit me, Rhetta, don’t you dare fucking bullshit me. Don’t try to keep
any more secrets from me.”

Rhetta’s whole body went hot. “You’re the last person I would ever let harp on
me about keeping secrets. After everything about Karen, about what you did to Mom,
about Tony? You’re a goddamn hypocrite, Dad.”

“I’m the goddamn hypocrite?” he bellowed. “You lied to me for months, at least.
You’d disappear into your room all day, go out all dolled up twice, three times a week
sometimes, and every time I ask you it’s a different lie. As if I didn’t hear you sneaking
out in the middle of the night. And you get on my case for keeping secrets.”

Rhetta sputtered, feeling tears coming soon if she wasn’t stalwart. “That’s my
private life,” she insisted.

“Well this is my fucking private life! You’re a damn hypocrite. You call me a liar
but you’re a liar too and you know it.”

“This is about my mom! I’m asking you about my family! That bears directly on
my life. I don’t owe you an explanation about—dating. Who I see doesn’t matter to you.”

“Of course it does,” snapped Cormac. “I didn’t ask you to come take care of me.
You did that all on your own. But you think I owe you something, as if I’ve done nothing
for you. You can’t even fathom the sacrifices your mother and I made to take care of you,
what kind of shit we went through. What shit she put me through.”
“You cheated on her. You hit her.”

Cormac tightened his grip on his cane. “This is what I’m saying. You are so fucking obtuse, you don’t even try to understand. You don’t know the context, you don’t know anything about your mother and I, but it’s immediately black and white. I’m the bad guy, she’s the victim. You think my dad never beat the shit out of us? You think I didn’t regret it the second after it happened? A man makes one mistake twenty years ago and all of a sudden he’s damned for the rest of his life? How the fuck is that fair, Rhetta?”

Rhetta couldn’t speak. She could barely breathe. The desperate flame within her was fighting to stay alive in a blizzard.

Her father took a deep breath in and out, approached the breakfast nook table, and lowered himself down slowly. “Now,” he said. “You’re gonna offer me a good explanation for what’s been happening with you.”

“What’s a ‘good’ explanation? One that won’t make you hate me?”

He said nothing.

“What do you want to hear?”

“I want you to say it.”

“But you know.”

“You have to say it.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t wanna believe it.”

“Why not?”

“You know why.”

“No, I don’t. I have no idea what you’re afraid of.”
He was silent.

“That because I’m gay I’m gonna go to hell? Or do you just hate it because it’s sin?”

He said nothing.

“You have no idea what I’ve been through, no fucking idea. Since New York, since I got here, since——”

“Well maybe you deserved it.”

A knife cut through Rhetta’s heart. “Cormac——” Saying his name aloud made her choke, and she covered her mouth with her hand to keep herself from vomiting. And the look in his eyes…

She’d hurt Yvonne. [Josephine hurt you.] Her father had hurt her mother. Rhetta’s mother had never hurt anyone. [Except for you.] That was different.

[Why? Because you deserved it?]

Maybe.

[The others didn’t but you did?]

Maybe.

[Stop looking in the mirror if it hurts you. Don’t do it if it hurts.]

She didn’t. She kept looking into his eyes.

[You’re hurting me. Why are you hurting me?]

She didn’t stop.

“Get out,” said her father.
The sun had long ago set. Rhetta walked through the cool dusk with her bag slung over her shoulder, trembling. She’d missed the bloody drip of the sun behind the arms of wheat in the distance, missed the earth turning over like a knocked over glass of wine, shattered, irreparable. It is what it is. Whatever happens, happens.

She wandered. Her legs were like jelly, eyes glazed over. She went away from her father’s house, away from Yvonne’s house. She wanted a place that would bring her some solace. As a teenager, her reflex had been the roof of her building, because she had always felt like she was on an island up there, but never alone. Peace of mind. Stars, occasionally.

There were always stars here. The place was not the problem. The problem was her mind. The problem was that she was cursed. Cursed to want to forgive her father no matter what he did, even if she was the only one in the world who felt he deserved it. Even if he hated her. Even if would never speak to her again. All she wanted was to go home and beg for his forgiveness, and for him to bestow it with a kind and open heart. She knew the world didn’t work like that, but she was cursed to dream of it anyways. Cursed to dream of the blood pouring down his wrist and being able to stop it with the bat of an eye. Tethered to the things that hurt her.

Tethered to the memories of happiness, for which her body had carried her to Josephine’s house. No one else had moved in since she left—ostensibly she still payed the mortgage. That’s what Rhetta had heard, anyways. That it was still Josephine’s. That she was still here, in fragments. A name on a mailbox. A smiling face in a few photos. A thread tugging, tugging in Rhetta’s veins.
She sat on the doorstep in the dark. It wasn’t cold yet, not here, not in September. Every year here it was more polarizing for Rhetta, but in this moment, Illinois was beautiful. Illinois was beautiful and she was alone. She was so close into herself that she thought she might die. The world around her spun, the corners of her eyes betrayed her with phantasms, threats of violence and horror lurking in beauty. Trembling uncontrollably, gripping her sides for support, sinking into the earth and wishing for flagellation because she had no feeling to survive on—she was nothing but the back of her head. Was she all she was? A reflection in rainwater? A wilting plant? A back of a head?

Her skull rested against Josephine’s front door. Not a soul moved in the street, no animal, no gust of wind. She could be mummified right here.

Stupidly she looked down the road. Her father had not followed her. So that’s how it was, then.

She reached into her bag, withdrew a bottle of water and a small paper bag. Tore open the bag and took the little pill bottle in her hand. Cracked it like geode.

Her body resisted the first handful. Josephine had kissed her palm like this before. But the glass had shattered, there was no putting it back together. The second went down with less of a fight. It was deliriously easy. Her vision blurred at the edges as she went for another, and a pair of headlights shown at the mouth of the street, resplendent. They turned towards her, almost chastisingly, and her eyes closed.
Chapter 14

Mack the Knife

These moments always happened. Rhetta willed them. Again the fluttering of
bird’s wings, again the dance shoes, the sunsets, the Fourth of July fireworks, a big hand
creeping up her collarbone towards her neck, fire, towers, an empty bottle of whiskey, the
paperweight in her father’s hand, just out of her reach. Yvonne’s broken eyes. Please
baby please.

It was all her, in these moments. Rhetta had complete freedom, could live without
guilt if she really wanted to. But it wouldn’t feel proper. Proper, perfect, mother-
approved. She was twenty-eight now, she would carry it for the rest of her life. Finally,
she could suffer for something in her control. Finally, she received the punishment she’d
always wanted. She had not streaked porcelain walls of her mother’s clawfoot bathtub
with red like she had once intended, but the result was the same. Illinois, New York, it
had never made a difference.

Her eyes opened to a dull gray room she didn’t recognize. Her body felt so heavy,
her blood flowed sluggishly, barely making the effort. Something to her left rang
rhythmically.

The world came into focus: something pierced into her forearm; a pulse monitor
clampd on her fingertip; her clothes had disappeared. She attempted wiggling her toes
and saw them respond at the end of the bed on which she lay, under a soft cotton blanket.

“Rhetta.”

Pain cut through her. God, what a cruel voice to hear. A trick her mind played on
her. Punishment. Reluctantly, she looked to her right.
But it wasn’t a trick, and the reality was so much worse.

“Josephine?”

Josephine rose from the chair she’d been sitting in and came to sit on the edge of the bed. Rhetta reflexively wished to pull away from her but could hardly budge. She looked—different. Older, though only two years had passed. Her hair was still like butter and her eyes were still sharp, but her face had changed. The skin was new. Wrinkles cut from under her eyes all the way across her cheeks. The corners of her mouth were tighter. She looked unhappy. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

Rhetta couldn’t control herself. “What are you doing here?”

Josephine flinched. “I didn’t know if I should have warned you that I was coming into town. I thought that might make things more awkward. I was at the centennial. I saw what happened.”

Rhetta sighed and sank deeper into the bed. The heart monitor kept ringing.


“What are you still doing here?”

“I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Well I’m okay now,” Rhetta snapped. “Satisfied?”

“Like hell,” Josephine bit back. “You tried to kill yourself on my fucking doorstep. There is nothing okay about this situation. I was terrified for you, Rhetta, this is—”

“Please stop saying my name.” Rhetta covered her eyes. “Please.”

“Will you at least tell me what happened?” Josephine asked.

“Nothing happened.”
“For fuck’s sake.”

The thread snapped. Rhetta heard it as loud as a bomb inside her head. “How can you just waltz back in here and act like you care after what you did? No warning, no word, nothing. You left me with nothing to hold onto and now you expect me to take you back as if nothing has changed? Like you deserve to be a part of my life after what you did to me? Like I owe you something? Your sympathy is the last thing I want right now. I can’t believe you.”

Josephine’s face shattered. She moved off the bed and sat back in the chair a few feet away from Rhetta. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. You don’t have to forgive me—I don’t expect you to. But if I had stayed, after everything that happened with my parents, with the church, I—”

“Would have ended up like this,” Rhetta said.

“Rhetta.”

“I wasn’t worth it to stay? I wasn’t enough to keep you here?”

“If staying here would have killed me you would have wanted me to stay anyways? Look at what this place does to people like us, Rhetta. I don’t know what kind of sick martyr complex you have, but I stayed here because I thought I loved it. Aspen broke my heart. I couldn’t bear it here anymore. It hurt too much.”

“I wasn’t enough for you to stay.”

“Well I wasn’t enough for you to leave.” Josephine took off her glasses and wiped the corners of her eyes. “God, I—fuck.” She took a moment to cry into her hand, looking away from Rhetta. Rhetta sat up straight to see her better despite her body screaming in protest. Christ, they must have pumped her stomach. She’d never felt so tired.
“Josephine.”

“You have to know how hard it was, Rhetta. I missed you every day. I hated myself for leaving you. Not this place, not my parents. Just you.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me?” Rhetta asked, her voice breaking. “Why didn’t we talk about it? We could have worked something out, it didn’t have to be so extreme. Would I have not understood?” As soon as she posed the question, she knew the answer. She wouldn’t have understood what Josephine was feeling back then, not like she knew now. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t listen to you back then. I didn’t want to face it. What you were going through. What I put you through.”

“I should have been better,” Josephine said. “I should have talked to you. I shouldn’t have just vanished. I just thought that if I had to say good-bye, I wouldn’t want to leave you.” She sighed. “I should have asked you to leave with me, for both our sakes. But with your dad—”

“My dad,” Rhetta parroted, panicked. “Oh my god. My dad. Was he—did someone call him?”

Josephine sat at the end of the bed with Rhetta again, putting a hand on her thigh. “Relax, he’s here. He’s getting food, he’ll coming back.”

Rhetta brought her hands to her chest and tried to steady her frantic breathing. “I can’t face him. I can’t bear it. We fought, and after—after—”

The tears came then, and she reached out for Josephine, just to feel someone in her arms. Josephine cradled her like she had so many times in the past, but it was fraught. They were not the same people they had been before. Rhetta wanted the old them to embrace, from three years ago, when they passed days and nights together, almost
perfectly blissful. When an embrace like this had been the most gentle, normal happenstance. When they had been where the land met the sky, miles away. When Rhetta hoped they would someday get married.

When Rhetta hadn’t wanted to hurt herself.

“You don’t have to stay,” Josephine whispered against her hair. “You don’t have to do this to yourself. You can leave. You can come with me.”

“Jo…”

“Rhetta, I still—”

She didn’t finish the thought. From down the hallways through the open door, they heard Karen’s voice saying, “Oh, thank Christ,” and Josephine let her go, putting distance between herself and Rhetta. Karen jogged down the hallway into her room and wrapped her arms around Rhetta’s shoulders and squeezed her as hard as anyone had. Against the curve of her neck into her shoulders, hidden under the collar of her shirt, Rhetta saw a gold chain identical to the one she’d seen every day for the last four years.

After what felt like an eternity, Karen let her go and thumbed at her eyes. Behind her, Rhetta saw Cormac leaning on his cane in the doorway. He looked at her for a moment like he wanted to leave, like he had done his duty, seen that she had indeed survived, and could now leave with a clear conscience.

But he didn’t.

He approached the bed slowly and put his free hand on Karen’s shoulder. When he opened his mouth to speak, not a sound came out. He nodded his head frantically, and when Karen put her hand on the center of his back, he seemed to lean into the touch. They looked like they could have been Rhetta’s parents, had things gone differently.
They could have had a life. She saw it, clear as day in her father’s eyes. He was still in love with her.

How frustrating.

The doctor appeared then and so Cormac fled. They had a long, long talk about Rhetta’s mental health, about the irresponsibility of stealing someone else’s medication, about the need for her to see a psychiatrist and a therapist, how she would probably be diagnosed with some degree of depression, how she probably needed to take medication. The information seeped into her body slowly, like the IV drip. Nothing she hadn’t heard before. She’d just been seventeen and more hard-headed than she was now, more involved in the theatrics of her self-harm, more vindictive. It had only been a sign of her rotten personality back then.

Once the doctor had finished giving his explanation, he asked Rhetta if she had any questions. More awake than she’d been in weeks, she asked, “Can I call my mom?”

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Rhetta had cut herself for the first time when she was in high school. It was frightening in the moment, but she’d had someone else with her, and they’d done it together. It had been an agreement. Rhetta had said that she hated Bradley, the boy her mother had coerced her into dating, and that it was tearing her apart inside. Sara Jean had said she would do it with Rhetta so that she wasn’t alone.

They’d become friends in the sustainability society junior year. Rhetta was club VP, jack of all trades and master of none. Sara Jean joined because she had an obsession with bees and was scared of their disappearance. She hoped that they could raise money
for a charity or non-profit. Everything about her was bees. Her hair was bleach yellow and she painted her nails black. She wore baggy clothes and tweezed her eyebrows and sometimes kept sunglasses on indoors. Rhetta thought she was impossibly cool.

She got in trouble for skipping class, for smoking, for sneaking around the school at night. She was obsessed with serial killers and dead girls, reading true crime novels and watching slasher movies in her free time. Her parents were richer than Rhetta’s, but Sara Jean reviled them. Her father had a gambling problem and was cursed to keep winning and winning without an ounce of guilt or remorse. He would never ruin the family, they would never go hungry, he would never blow all their money, but Sara Jean wished he would. She thought they deserved it. Her older brother had a crippling cocaine addiction but, despite his semi-frequent run-ins with the police, had never seen the inside of a jail cell. Her mother was an alcoholic, possibly hooked on Xanax, though that Sara Jean never confirmed. Her younger sister was a hapless Girl Scout who didn’t understand why everyone was so unhappy. They were a generic New York nightmare, a dime a dozen.

Rhetta had been a lonely child. She didn’t make friends easily; she was quiet and a little standoffish. At her public middle school, kids thought she was haughty and delicate, judging; in the elite high school, she was frumpy and weird. Only middle-class. The wind would blow and she would bend one direction or the other, like a cattail. It used to upset her to be so harshly and quickly judged, but eventually she became too weary to put up a fight.

And then she met Sara Jean.
Rhetta knew that Lilian wouldn’t like her one bit, so they spent most of their time together at the school under the guise of club activities. Sometimes they would go into town and Sara Jean would shoplift from Bloomingdales and bodegas alike, enjoying the look of shocked disappointment on Rhetta’s face when she pulled whatever she’d snagged out of the big pocket of her hoodie. At first, Rhetta would chastise her, tell her to put it back, especially if it was something expensive, like a bottle of perfume, or a fancy paperweight. But Sara Jean would just put it in Rhetta’s hand, curl Rhetta’s fingers around it, and say, “I’m trying to be a magpie for you. It’s romantic!” Rhetta always ignored this.

The summer between junior and senior year they didn’t see each other much, and Rhetta was introduced to Bradley, a boy from her school, at a Fourth of July party hosted by Lilian’s work. Bradley’s mom was a well-known news anchor, his father partner at Lilian’s firm. Bradley was the youngest of four, raised in equal part by his grandmother (who his mother fought with constantly) and a nanny. He was slated to go to Harvard or maybe Oxford, study law like his father, enter into the same firm, become junior partner in his thirties, get married, have kids, travel the whole world but not remember much of what he saw, develop alcoholism in his fifties, have an affair or two, eventually lose his wife in a cataclysmic divorce, and die in his mid-seventies with a much younger second wife. That was what Rhetta predicted anyways.

In hindsight, Lilian was certainly trying to do what was best for Rhetta. Someone from a good, big family, with a stable home life and no money problems. Someone adequately attractive, who wouldn’t be too offended if his future wife was just as successful as him. Someone whose parents liked Rhetta. He was an option.
For Rhetta he was a nightmare. He thought she was adequate. He thought other girls were much prettier, funnier. She was a guinea pig on which he tested different high schooler’s ideas of what kissing what like: with or without tongue, on the neck and the collarbone, with teeth. Rhetta didn’t let him go lower, and it aggravated him.

They drank together most of the summer and fall, to pass the time. That they learned together, testing different combinations of alcohols, trying to make different cocktails, calculating how much each of them could stand based on their weights and how much they’d eaten. They made themselves throw up into the Hudson together, and in those moments Rhetta didn’t hate him so much. Rhetta even kept a notebook. The first thing she ever asked Sara Jean to steal for her was a breathalyzer. She did it, but she was obviously unhappy about it.

Things fell apart predictably from there. During school, Sara Jean wouldn’t leave Rhetta alone. Bradley thought Sara Jean was freaky. Sara Jean thought he was a shallow pretty boy. Rhetta said they were both wrong because she didn’t have the heart to say they were both right. She took wine in a water bottle to school and drank the whole thing at lunch. They snuck around at night, trying to get into seedy clubs in the meat packing district or camping outside police precincts to see criminals be brought in and theorize what they’d done. Rhetta thought that if it weren’t for her, Sara Jean and Bradley would have a lot of fun together.

Bradley’s parents left town for a trip at the end of October, so he threw a massive Halloween party. He and Rhetta got blackout drunk, and when she woke up, she was in his bed with her shirt hiked up to her chin, her jeans unbuttoned, and Bradley above her,
opening his fly, muttering to himself. She had scrambled out from under him and stumbled home with Sara Jean miserably. They never saw him again.

“I can’t take it,” she’d said, “I can’t, not another second.” Sara Jean came into Rhetta’s brownstone for the first time, talking her down. They sat on the floor of Rhetta’s bedroom at 3 AM, barely whispering for fear of waking Lilian and Jared. “I want out.”

“Out?” Sara Jean asked.

“There’s something terrible inside of me. Like some horrible black cloud, and it’s eating away at me like a parasite. I want out or I want it out of me.”

The razors had come next. They counted to three and then sliced their upper arms. Not too deep, just enough to watch blood slowly trail down to the elbows, not enough to make them dizzy. Rhetta had yelped with pain, loudly, and then she’d started to choke on tears. Sara Jean shushed her, but she kept crying and crying and so Sara Jean kissed her.

Rhetta’s whole body burned, from the pain and the discovery. She drank Sara Jean in. She ignored the abiding horror in the back of her head, the betrayal, the cacophonous heartbeat in her ears. Her mind shot past the conflict of so-wrong-yet-so-right, past what her parents would think, past the thought of what happened to dykes. She thought: how do I preserve this feeling forever? How do I never lose this? How do I remember what it feels like, who I was, in this moment, for the rest of my life? She pulled Sara Jean into her lap and their blood mixed and dripped onto the carpet. The black cloud slipped out of her arm and nested in the corner.

Lilian opened the door moments later, and the rest was sent to hell.

*****

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Her mother answered the phone on the first ring. “Rhetta thank Christ, what happened?”

Josephine had called Lilian when Rhetta was admitted to the hospital but hadn’t specified why. Rhetta had been terribly grateful. She didn’t always mean to go out of her way to hurt her mother. Sometimes children need to protect their parents. “Hi, Mom.”

“Are you okay? What’s going on? Is your father there?”

“He was here, he left a little bit ago. I… It was alcohol poisoning.”

Her mother let out a disappointed sigh. This was at least familiar. This she could understand. She didn’t know Rhetta had spent the last four years avoiding alcohol almost completely. She didn’t have to. “Jesus Christ. Are you okay? How do you feel?”

“Fine. Tired.”

“I about had a heart attack when your—friend, I guess, called. She said she wasn’t exactly sure what had happened to you.”

Josephine was asleep in the corner of the room, upright in one of the chairs for visitors. That would be terrible for her poor back. Rhetta kept her voice low. “I had a fight with Dad, that’s all. It was just irresponsible. I didn’t mean for it to go so far.” She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry for freaking you out.”

“Don’t apologize, honey. I’m glad you’re okay. There’s a direct flight from LaGuardia to Chicago. I can be there before tomorrow if you need me. There’s one that leaves in three hours, I could make it no problem.”

“No, Mom, you don’t have to come. Don’t miss work.”
“Pardon me but fuck work. Tell me to come and I’ll be there, Rhetta. Please.” Her voice broke on the last syllable and Rhetta felt guilt cut through her stomach. “I miss you so much I almost can’t stand it.”

“I—” Rhetta choked on the notion of seeing her mother again. Forcing her to come back to a place she hated virulently. “I need to smooth things over with Dad first. It would be weird, especially since Karen is here, and Christ, everything is such a mess.”

“Karen?”

Rhetta sighed. “Yeah. Dad’s pissed.”

“Don’t see why he would be,” Lilian muttered. “Regardless, I—”

“Why didn’t you tell me about what happened?” Rhetta asked. “The cheating, the—hitting.”

Lilian released a deeply held breath. Any other day and this would have been a massive argument for them. At least in this moment they were closer to equals. “It wouldn’t have done any good. I knew you would have stayed anyways. The argument—the hitting—happened once, and it was the last straw for both of us. I’m sure he didn’t tell you I hit him first.”

“So that makes it okay?”

“Of course not. It hurt like hell. You know his big his hands are. My lip split and he nearly broke my nose with just one swing. I didn’t even tell Jared about it until you were ten. It was too muddy, my feelings were too twisted up for too long, I wouldn’t have been able to explain it to you in a way that made sense. I didn’t want to be seen as some victim of abuse or anything.”

“Were you not?”
“I don’t know, Rhetta. I have no idea.”

“I don’t understand any of it,” Rhetta confessed. “You and Karen—Yvonne, even. Why him? It’s not like you were all settling, Karen travels all over and just keeps coming back.”

“If you’re there, you can’t see it,” Lilian said. “It’s just hard. You want to be there for him. I think he’s hurting but he’ll be dead before he shows it to anyone. But there’s always a shred of hope you’ll see him that way. He doesn’t mean to hurt you, he just does. Or maybe he does mean to. I don’t know. I never understood him. Eventually I just gave up.”

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Later, she called Yvonne and left a voicemail apologizing for what had happened at the Centennial, and saying that she was going to resign from her job at the library. She’d eaten and rested enough to feel closer to full strength, but she still felt like she was in purgatory. It was the beginning of her third, likely last, day in the hospital and it felt like a strange dream.

And Josephine still hadn’t left town. It gave her a stomachache. She spent time with her mother but spent plenty of time with Rhetta in the afternoons. Talking. Checking up on her. Being terribly kind. They hadn’t talked about it, not beyond “You don’t have to stay.” Rhetta had been turning it over in her head ceaselessly to no avail. As if just sitting in bed and fantasizing about all the possibilities that implied would help her decide.
She could leave. She could be free of herself. She could run away from it all. Her life didn’t need to be clean and symmetrical; it didn’t have to be solved, it didn’t have to be anybody’s but hers. Hers and Josephine’s. If she wanted.

Early in the day, Karen reappeared to Rhetta to offer an open-ended goodbye:

“I’ll probably be back, but I need to spend more time with my mother while I’m here.”

“Of course,” Rhetta said. “I understand.”

Karen hesitated in the doorway, then pulled up a chair to sit beside Rhetta.

“You’ve gotta be patient, okay? He’s taking it all pretty hard. That you hid it for so long.”

“How was I supposed to tell him?”

“I don’t have the answers you want,” Karen sighed. “But I do know one thing better than anybody else, which is that Cormac really wants to be a father—a good father. We fought over having kids constantly when we were together. I didn’t want to, he did. It was horrible, loving someone and knowing you weren’t right for them. I couldn’t make him happy in that way. It was terrible. I’d never seen anybody closer to the brink of death than Cormac after you were taken away.”

Brink of death. Rhetta flinched, wondered what that looked like on him. She would hardly be able to fathom it were it not for the time he cut himself in the kitchen. She’d thought he’d done so because Rhetta had hurt him, because he hated what he’d produced. Maybe it had been the opposite.

“You make him sound much gentler than he acts most of the time,” Rhetta said. “He would never tell me something like that, you know. He’s never said anything kind to me, anything affectionate. He’s hardly been here.”
“Honey, that man will carry most of his life with him to his grave and through hell,” Karen said. “There’s so much about him I still don’t know, and I’ve known him since I was nine. There were things that happened to him when I knew him, when I was here, that he’ll never tell me about.”

“But who’s making him suffer like that?” Rhetta asked. “Why does he do that to himself?”

“Probably not a choice. You never knew his dad.”

Rhetta went very cold. You think my dad never beat the shit out of us? Why did he never say anything against his father? Why did he keep so much memorabilia of him as if he loved him? Why was he Rhetta’s namesake? She waited for Karen to elaborate, but she didn’t. It felt like someone’s hands were trying to pry Rhetta’s ribs wide open. Could the same thing be said for her forty years from her? If you never knew Cormac, then how could you know why Rhetta was the way she was?

She unwound herself. Her head was much less foggy today. She could bear it.

“Regardless,” Karen said, standing up. “You’ll survive, you too. He’s just heartbroken, but he’ll get over it. All he does is get his heart broken.”

“I hope we see you again,” Rhetta said. “It might be good for him, too, to have someone else who around who cares about him. Some stability.” Especially if Rhetta were to leave him after all. Guilt cut through her at the prospect, but elation, too.

“I’m not quite the picture of stability, darlin’,” Karen teased. “But I know what you’re saying. He might need someone. But sometimes I really hate being just needed.”

“But I think he really loves you,” Rhetta said desperately.
Karen’s chest stuttered almost undetectably, but Rhetta understood her now. She wasn’t unlike Lilian; she was the kind of woman Cormac fell for. A woman dissatisfied with her situation. Always slipping through his fingers. The receptacles of blame.

“Well—” she muttered. “That’s neither here nor there, is it?” She reached into the pocket of her shirt and withdrew her pack of cigarettes, putting one between her teeth unlit and offering Rhetta a small salute. “Take care,” she said, sounding a little sad, and then she vanished in the hallway.

*****

Rhetta later learned that Cormac spent those three days wandering the halls of the hospital, alone. Thinking about himself, mostly, leaning heavily on his cane, moving slowly, feeling the pressure on his joints from the exhaustion of his bones and muscles from the invisible rupture in his brain. He didn’t have it in him anymore. He shook. He thought of himself because if he let his mind wander, it made him angry. It hurt him. To Karen, who would leave him again soon and there was nothing to do to stop her, never had been; to Yvonne and the slight on her; to Lilian, and what she must think of him, and if that even mattered; to the Haas girl, who dressed like a man and hovered around Rhetta’s bedside; to Rhetta, who’d stolen from him; to Tony, who—

He fit in with invalids, old men, frail ladies. Their children in their thirties or forties, sitting at their bedsides, holding their arms as they inched down the hall, huffing like freight trains. He looked like a success. Recovering.
He wandered the halls alone, meeting Karen outside to smoke and press into her when she touched his shoulder. He stood outside Rhetta’s room and didn’t go in. When it was time to leave, he sat in his car in the lot and wondered. Hardly slept.

The first night he drove down to his family’s graves. Didn’t get out of the car. Just sat and stared. Thought he saw a flicker of blue over the old gray stones. Saw deer at dawn, grazing.

The second night, he and Karen went to the waterfall.

The hike was brutal, and she wouldn’t let him be for a second. A mile and he was exhausted. “You need to take better care of yourself,” she croaked, and they hacked in unison and then shared a cig all the same. He stepped in the water before he saw it, walked to the mouth of the waterfall, Karen yelling after him to make sure he didn’t fall, as if they didn’t know this place like the backs of their hands. Could he imagine it? Falling, cracking his head, scarlet pillows blooming in the water below like fungus. It wasn’t safe for them out here, there were coyotes, there had been bears in their childhood. All he had was his pocketknife. With any luck, he’d die, and Karen would survive. She’d deliver the news to Rhetta, and when she turned her back, Rhetta would smile. She’d finally be free of him. Victorious.

They let their feet dangle, like they’d done as teens. And he talked, more than he had in months, because she couldn’t see him in the pitch dark. And Karen talked too, and he listened to her, really listened, like he hadn’t in years. He didn’t feel himself change. He just felt a shroud was lifted from his eyes. Or maybe a few threads had been cut. He told her he would stop smoking. He told her he didn’t like the look of the Haas girl, didn’t like her crooked mouth, that he didn’t understand it still, that Rhetta could still
grow out of it. He told her that all he could manage to feel was anger. He told her that Rhetta didn’t know what was under the wallpaper. He told her that at least she hadn’t done the same thing Tony had. He told her that he was probably going to hell. She said she’d see him there. She wouldn’t.

He told her he wouldn’t be better in the morning, that maybe he wouldn’t even remember anything he’d said here. She reminded him it had always been like that. He was just a man, after all. She moved his trembling hand to her knee.

It was pittance. He’d always known himself. In the morning, he’d forget what he did to people. Someday, he’d forget forever, and then it wouldn’t be a secret. God knows our secrets after all. If it’s not a secret, if you just forget, then maybe you’re absolved. The water rushed under his fingers and he wished and wished, as he had all his life, that it could just be that easy.

*****

Josephine came back again. Rhetta wondered if she was making a point of it. Showing Rhetta she was capable, that she was sorry, how much she meant it. Rhetta believed her, but that didn’t mean she forgave her. Not yet. It felt uncharitable to think not ever, but Rhetta had bled internally for two years because of Josephine. She’d thought Josephine would be different from Sara Jean, and that Rhetta would be a different person than who she’d been back then.

The hospital gown hadn’t covered her arms, the scars. Cormac had seen them. Josephine had brought Rhetta a sweater.
The third day would be her last. Josephine came by around dinnertime with takeout from a place they used to go to all the time. She’d offered, and Rhetta had been too helpless, or maybe hopeful, to decline.

Josephine made to drop the food off and then leave, but Rhetta told her to stay and eat with her. She sat a few feet away awkward, pensive. Rhetta oscillated between guilt and righteous anger.

“Where did you go?” she asked. “When you left.”

Josephine took a long time before answering, maybe waiting to see if Rhetta would just drop it. Her fingers twitched like a smoker’s. Rhetta wondered. “Kind of all over,” Josephine said. “I was alone a lot at first, just driving. I ended up staying in Utah for a while, working, hiking, writing.”

“Writing?”

“I took Uncle Horace’s stuff with me,” she said. “He didn’t seem to mind, or even notice. He’s in rough shape. But I worked on his story of Aspen thing. It helped a bit, reading interviews with my parents, my grandparents, their friends. It helped.”

“Is it really that different?”

“Depends on where you go,” Josephine sighed. “I drove through a thousand Aspens. Some places are worse, too. A lot are better. Prettier. Easier to be happy.”

“So are you going back there, then?” Rhetta asked.

“I don’t know. It depends.”

“On what?”

Josephine didn’t answer.
“You can’t put this on me,” Rhetta said. “And I don’t want to have the same argument again. It’ll only make things worse.”

“Do you really want to stay with him?” Josephine asked. “Trying constantly to make him love you when you know he won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Rhetta, what do you gain? What was wrong with your mom and Jared?”

“I can’t explain it.”

“Wouldn’t you rather be happy?”

“Picking up my stuff and leaving won’t make me happy, Josephine. I tried that already, it didn’t work.”

“If it doesn’t matter where you go, why stay? What else do you have here? The library?”

“I quit.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Rhetta, you’re wasting away. It’s scary. I want to help you. I want us to be together again. Don’t you want that? Don’t you miss it?”

Terribly so. She said, “Tony.”

“What?”

“Tony’s here.”

Josephine sighed. “Just read the diary. Pack it in your backpack, take it with you.”

“I don’t want to do it that way,” Rhetta said. “I don’t think it’s right. I wouldn’t do that to him.”
“He’s dead, Rhetta, he doesn’t care,” Josephine said, standing up. “Your dad’s never gonna tell you.” She put her hands on Rhetta’s shoulders. “You don’t have to sacrifice more of your life for this. You can run away, no one will think worse of you. It’s okay to live for yourself. God will forgive you.”

Rhetta’s eyes went wide. Josephine let her go, her hands trembling a little in shock at what she’d just said. Her face went pale when she looked towards the door. Rhetta’s father was right outside.

Josephine hid her face in shame, thumbed at the corners of her eyes. “I think I should go.”

Rhetta reached out and grabbed her wrist. “I’ll still love you,” she said. “I’ll catch up with you someday. I promise you, I will.”

Rhetta let her go. Josephine offered no pardon to Cormac as she pushed past him.

Rhetta and her father packed her stuff and left together. He stood with her while she talked with the administration and got the names of several psychiatrists at the hospital. He didn’t say anything when she cried quietly in the long car ride home, just put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. He didn’t say anything when, after they pulled into the driveway, Rhetta got the mail and found a note from Yvonne addressed to her. He didn’t say anything when she read it and saw that Yvonne forgave her, and didn’t say anything when she pulled out of the envelope the painting she’d done, which depicted their little yellow house burning, as if it were any old house—was it not her house, where she could do anything she wanted? He didn’t say a word until he opened the door for the first time in three days and remembered the dog.
They hurried inside to look for her, but she wasn’t hard to find, sprawled out motionless at the foot of Cormac’s bed. Without her food or medicine, it was pointless. There was nothing to be done. She’d been gone already for a day.

Cormac crumbled. He wept. Rhetta had never seen him cry before, and now she had the triumph of seeing tears streaming down his face. He’d been neglectful. A bad father. The only woman who ever loved her father unconditionally was gone. Finally, Rhetta would have to do.

She took a step back to leave him alone, but he reached out and grasped her wrist desperately. Rhetta came back to him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and he hugged her back. The bough had broken for him, too.

“It’ll be okay,” she said. “We’ll make it okay. Talk to me, Dad.”

And finally, eventually, he did.
V.

Even if you don’t mind

“I remember experiencing for the first time that sense of emptiness that comes with the knowledge of what has been destroyed, razed to the ground.”

Patrick Modiano

“When I was a child, I cried
Until my needs were satisfied.
My needs have grown...”

Loretta Lynn, Willie Nelson
Chapter 15

*Exposition, Development, Recapitulation*

Why the garden? An activity that had meant nothing to her as a child, that never featured in her happiest, or even saddest, memories, and that she often failed at. Was it just the act of being there? Was it the feeling, the sharing, the commiserating with the plants in a silent language, one she didn’t speak, but she understood? Feeling them breathe through the soil beneath her hands and feet, feeling the soil that continued for miles and miles, to the riverbank to the south, the lake coast to the north, through the Appalachian mountains east, on and on through the Blue Ridge, where her grandmother had been born, west to the labyrinthian coniferous forests, where midwestern girls disappeared when they didn’t want to be found. All of it, thrumming under Rhetta’s hands like a heartbeat. Is that what she thought of? The Midwest girl at the crossroads, the axis on which the country turned? All intersecting underneath her hands…

“Or do you just like to see something grow and heal?”

Rhetta looked to the left corner of the office—where she looked when she didn’t want to admit that Mark was right, and so she looked there often. To avoid his kind gaze. Because no matter how many times he got to say, “I told you so,” he was never cruel about it.

She’d asked him about it once, if it frustrated him to hear patients act so resistant and obtuse when the truth was so clear in front of his face. He’d said, “Nature gifted me patience. It’s my job to share my gifts with others.”

“Nature’s gift? Not God’s?”

“Oh, I don’t believe in God. Do you?”
It had been difficult to respond.

Mark looked at her kindly still now. He was a mild, friendly-looking black guy with soft eyes and a graying beard. He was fifty-four, twenty-three years older than Rhetta, with a wife and three children. They lived in a suburb on the west side of St. Louis, the kids went to public school, one of them was going to graduate and go to the University of Illinois, “God willing and the creek don’t rise,” as said Mark frequently. They were almost friends, which worried Rhetta, because she didn’t want to get too close and have to have to find a new therapist. She knew a fair amount about his life, though he knew infinitely more about hers, but occasionally they talked politics or childhoods and Rhetta felt that they really were friends, that she really had a friend. It was dangerous thinking.

So were gardens. He cocked an eyebrow at her. “Things die there just as much as they grow. Maybe that’s what I like about them.”

“I’m surprised you like spending so much time somewhere you have no one to be contrarian with.”

Rhetta bit the inside of her mouth. On second thought, maybe it was time to fire Mark. “It’s work, too,” she said.

“Work you chose,” he replied. “Because you like it, right? Doesn’t that feel good?”

“I guess it does.”

“And your father approves.”

“He does. But he doesn’t see it the same way I do.”

“So you do see it someway special.”
She sighed and scratched the back of her head. Her hair was getting long. “It just gives me hope is all. Is that so bad?”

“You tell me.”

The session ended and Rhetta offered Mark a small goodbye before returning to the waiting room. She saw him twice a month after a two-hour drive to St. Louis with her father, the same hospital as his neurologist because it was covered by their insurance. Rhetta’s session started at 11 AM, Cormac’s at 11:30, so she never saw him go in, but always waited patiently for him to come out.

It was a miracle she thanked someone for every day that he agreed to therapy, eventually. He kept it close to the chest, didn’t let Rhetta handle the process at all, never even referred to his therapist by name, just called her “the lady at the hospital.” He wouldn’t afford her the respect or dignity of the title of doctor and wouldn’t reveal her status as a therapist out of shame. No one else in his life knew, just Rhetta. It was their secret, and barely hers, but it was a success all the same. Worth the hours in the car, worth dipping into savings, selling the old truck scraps and haggling the price up, working long hours, having people check on Cormac during the day as favors. It added up. It was worth it.

He appeared, pushing forward on his walker, and Rhetta put her e-reader into her backpack. She didn’t ask him how it went. Half the time, if she did, he just asked, “How did what go?” before remembering a moment later. Those moments scared her too much to revisit frequently.

They had talked. They still did, sparingly. They had buried Stinky together in the back, and as her frail father had feebly dug his spade into the ground, he’d said to Rhetta,
“Sometimes I think I hate you.” She’d felt an earthquake pass through her chest, and then asked him why. And they’d gone from there. Slowly but surely, for almost three years. They proceeded through the hospital slowly, Rhetta’s shoulders a few inches in front of her father’s yet still a few inches shorter, and returned to the car. A man approached them and said he didn’t have money for food and couldn’t find the VA center, and Rhetta gave him a ten and disregarded her father’s displeasure. These days, that didn’t start an argument. Cormac just asked that she play more of the audiobook they were listening together as they rode home, and she did as he asked. They were going somewhere.

*****

Illinois was everything. Still, to her, it was everything. It had voted for Barak Obama’s reelection, but was red with fury south of Peoria and boiling, it was months away from legalizing same-sex marriage, it was steamy and desert-like in April down by Cairo, its air was filled with white plumes that came from some plant Rhetta had never identified and they spread across the land like a plague. Illinois was everything, beautiful fields and ugly strip malls, dark, dewy caves and explosions below the earth, wealthy investors complaining about high taxes and homeless people freezing to death at night in Chicago. Illinois was Rhetta maintaining the flowerbeds she’d planted in front of her house with contentment but hiding her face as Yvonne’s car crept past. It was the empty bed where Rhetta brought herself to climax with an expensive vibrator and it was the house where Josephine had lived, now occupied by a young couple with a baby. It was an episcopal church in Carbondale welcoming its first gay pastor and the suicide of a college student from Decatur who had been traumatized in a gay conversion camp as a teenager.
Illinois was everything. Everything and the big sky. Everything but what she wanted. Everything but perfect.

Cormac didn’t ask her about women ever. Maybe he thought he knew, or he thought he understood. Or maybe he didn’t want to understand, didn’t think he needed to. But sometimes, nowadays, she had to help him in the bathroom: help him stand up from the toilet, help him with the shower. And through the shame and fury and refusal to look at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, refusal to look at the floor where he’d spilled his own blood seven years ago, every once in a while, he thanked her.

*****

Despite her public humiliation at the centennial, Rhetta had managed to turn her image around and procure a job with the local government, first as part-time assistant in the mayor’s office, then moving to city council administration, then becoming a member of the public property board because her environmental studies degree made her slightly more qualified than the other candidates, and she was also the only new employee in the last five years and therefore was the least tied-down. It was in this manner Rhetta went from social pariah to assistant to the head of streets, parks, and public property, and therefore, by her count, the twelfth most powerful person in Aspen’s government, though her salary didn’t reflect it. Her boss was named Calvin Hunsinger, an unimpressive and uninteresting man in his late fifties with a divorce under his belt and a second soon on the way. He didn’t mind that Rhetta was “a bit of a lez” so she tolerated him the best she could, but she wondered what constituted the difference between being a bit of a lesbian and an entire, whole lesbian. (Maybe he pictured a biker dyke with small eyes and
massive arms, or maybe a jealous, man-hating temptress. Rhetta had met neither and was sure that neither existed within a fifty-mile radius, or she surely would have thrown herself at them by now. They were negative stereotypes, she knew, used against lesbians to prove that they were evil or degenerate, and she didn’t want lesbians to have bad PR. But so what? Let them be real, and let Rhetta be real with them, other people’s opinions be damned. That’s what she wanted.) Their department was headed by another unremarkable, heavy-set middle-aged man, this one named Rupert Simon, who acted as commissioner for both them and water, sewers and flood control. Rhetta rarely saw him, though he was usually polite with her, and he wasn’t tempted to check out her ass every time she stood up, or if he was he at least didn’t act on it, and that was enough to put a man in her good graces these days (what her life had come to). He was usually more occupied with water and flooding because of the abundance of showers this spring inspiring the river south of town to overflow its banks and creep into town.

All this to say her life was full of abundance and constant joy and stimulation and did not involve her sitting in a beige-gray office with only one window for eight hours a day sorting files for a man who thought she shouldn’t have the right to marry and would burn in hell and praying every thirty minutes for a woman, any woman, to walk through the door of their office and say something nice about her blouse or her hair or her blush and boost her mood for weeks to come. Some woman, some kindness, some mercy. But struggle was necessary, she reminded herself. Strife made us who we were.

“So you admit that you’re struggling but insist you’re happy?” Mark would ask her.
“I’m happier than when I said everything was just fine,” Rhetta would reply. “I know myself better now. I know the signs now. I need something to push me, to hurt me. It makes the other moments in life more joyful.”

“You mean you need to punish yourself so that you don’t feel guilty when something goes right.”

The silver lining had been the garden. There was an empty lot near the center of town that the city had bought back after it had sat for years empty and depressing. At a city council meeting, Rhetta had suggested turning it into a community garden, paid for by the people, used by the people. She was promptly called a socialist, but Rupert had been pleased by the idea and threw his support behind her. “Of course, you’re going to have to do most of the work,” he and the mayor had told her when the motion had been approved.

“Of course,” Rhetta had said. “I’m prepared.” And she had been, for the most part. It kept her busy, which kept her happy.

Her father monitored her, though she never noticed. She was like this:

The morning, waking at five. She brushed her teeth, didn’t brush her hair, put on her robe and slippers, got the coffee pot brewing, then went into Cormac’s room to rouse him, though he was always awake when she arrived. She helped him stand, helped him walk to the bathroom, then gave him privacy until he called for help again, standing dutifully by the door with her mind half there, half elsewhere. She didn’t like to embarrass him, or herself.

They ate breakfast together quietly, sometimes Cormac played the country radio or asked Rhetta to put on a record. Sometimes he suggested she buy some of her own, but
she wasn’t much of a music person, and it was hard to push her towards things she didn’t like.

At six-fifteen, she drove to the community garden, not far from the library, where she toiled until eight fifteen, before driving down the block to work, changing and reapplying deodorant to her unshaved armpits in the tiny bathroom, and getting everything ready for Calvin’s arrival at nine.

The garden had been more popular than anyone on the city council committee had anticipated. Children came by often before lunchtime with their parents to pull carrots or pluck cherry tomatoes. Mothers and fathers brought by seeds or fertilizer, the elementary school organized trips once a month for every grade level to have lessons about life science. The high school literature club came by once every week or so to write poems, about growth and change and life and death (Rhetta suspected their continued presence had something to do with the very gay looking but likely closeted club president, who enjoyed stopping by whenever Rhetta was working and ask her questions, even an hour before school started. She appreciated the company, the girl was sweet and over-eager, how Rhetta wished she’d been in high school. It was nice to be looked up to.) It was something that earned Rhetta nothing but enjoyment, time to herself, time to have epiphanies and promptly forget them, time to miss her mother, time to think about the world boiling and the bees dying. Illinois was on fire, but she was calm. It was strange.

“This isn’t the life you would’ve had in New York,” Mark said once.

“I wouldn’t have been alive if I’d stayed in New York.”

“And you credit your ability to live here to what? Sense of purpose? Your father?”
She sighed. “It sounds silly, but hope, I guess. Hope that someday he and I will connect, that we’ll be what I always wanted us to be. I always felt like I was beyond hope with my mother, like she would never forgive me for not living up to her expectations. But Cormac expects nothing. And I’ve disappointed him. But we’re turning things around.”

“And what happens after?”

“After?”

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A scalding April morning, Calvin came in a few minutes late as per usual and dropped an address on Rhetta’s desk. “Can you get a flower arrangement sent here?”

“Who’s it for?”

“The Haas family. Funeral.”

Rhetta’s body went completely cold. “Who died?”

“Horace Pomeroy,” he said. “Oldest guy in town, I think. He was something like 95. Just died last night in his sleep. Funeral is this Sunday.”

There was a letter from Beatrice Haas carved open on the kitchen table when she got home that afternoon. Cormac had gotten to it before she could stop him. He held it in his trembling hand, reading and re-reading it for ten minutes as if the words when through his eyes and out the back of his head.

“Are you going?” she asked him. “He was Tony’s teacher. And yours, right?”
He looked at her without an ounce of recognition, then gave one of those sudden, jerky head nods that signaled his return to earth. “He was, wasn’t he.” He put the letter down on the coffee table.

She took the funeral note and passed her fingers over it, looking at the picture of Horace from around 20 years ago. His skin was firmer, his smile was bright and cognizant. She saw Josephine in the slope of his jaw, in the droop of his eyes. It almost didn’t pain her anymore. Almost.

“What do you talk with your psychiatrist about him?” Rhetta asked, still standing a few feet away from her father. He didn’t like it when they got too close.

He didn’t say anything at first. None of his friends knew. It was taboo, their private secret. If she exposed him, he would never forgive her.

Eventually, he conceded, “Sometimes.”

“And Tony?”

The eternal bruise. He would not put salve on it or take medicine, but he had grown accustomed to the pain of her curiosity. It hurt him less now, he could curb his fury. That he had learned in therapy.

“There’s something I should…” he began quietly. He started to rise. “I have something.”

Rhetta’s stomach knotted. “Of Horace’s?”

“In the basement. In the box, with…”

“What is it? Don’t go downstairs, Dad. Tell me where it is, I’ll get it.”

“It’s none of your business.”
“Dad,” she insisted, grabbing his arm. “You can’t do those stairs anymore. Tell me what to do.”

“Don’t touch me,” he snapped, yanking his arm out of her grasp. “You touch me too much.”

Rhetta dropped his arm in shock and mortification. It felt worse than almost anything he’d ever said to her. Worse than when he said he hated her, because at least there he felt uncertain. She touched him too much. She clung to him sometimes, held his arm as he walked when he didn’t need help balancing, grazed his shoulder, gripped his hands tightly to help him stand.

All this time, after she felt they had finally become a family, the touch was still conditional. It could not be casual.

Cormac sighed and sat back on the couch. He saw the hurt in her eyes, and murmured, “I’m sorry.”

That, too, she committed to memory. That, she would never lose.

The air relaxed again like an overworked muscle. Rhetta sat in the armchair and wrung her hands together. “I’m sorry,” she said. “You just worry me, that’s all.”

“You don’t need to.”

“Worry? Dad…”


“The poems?” Rhetta said. “I… I have it.”

He gave her a pained look. She got up and went into her room, closing the door carefully behind her so that she could rummage under her bed in peace. She didn’t want him to see what all she kept and where.
She withdrew the box of Tony’s belongings that had been given to her by Horace and set it to the side. The other books were behind it, along with her mother’s box of tapes. Even seeing the fragile old boxes made her eyes glaze over. She eventually found the book, feeling its familiar cover and spine warped with age, and replaced everything under the bed.

Cormac looked like he’d waited patiently as she returned and sat back down in the armchair. “I grabbed it years ago,” she explained, “right after I got here. I always assumed it had been Mom’s, since you were never one for poetry.”

He took the book in his hands gently, opening it to the inside cover. “It was a gift,” he said. “From the old pastor, Sam Horbelt, right before he died. He was friends with Mr. Pomeroy, way back when.”

“What else do you have in there?”

“Just my stuff.”

“Don’t lie to me, Rhetta. I know you. I know when you lie. I can see it. Your eyes flash blue.”

“Stuff form the basement,” she said. “Photos, books, Mom’s old cassette tapes.” She took a deep breath. “Why did he give it to you? Was it after Tony…”

He sank deep into the couch and told her to get him a beer. She got two, and they drank them together. Halfway through his bottle, he said, “You know Mr. Pomeroy was a queer too, right?”

Rhetta almost choked on her drink. “I’d heard rumors,” she said. “Suspected.”
“You ever meet him?”

“Once or twice.”

“And yet he was best friends with a Baptist pastor.” He shook his head and drank more. They sat in silence until he finished, the beckoned for Rhetta to get him another. She did, and he continued: “After what Pastor Sam did… to Tony.” Each word took an eternity. He didn’t look at Rhetta. He almost seemed to pretend she wasn’t there, to pretend he was talking to someone else. “Well, they say he killed himself. But he gave me this to say sorry.”

Cormac took a deep breath in and out, staring off into that unknown place that only he seemed to be able to pinpoint, and then came out of his trance. His whole face reset with a snap. He rubbed his forehead with his hand and grimaced, putting the beer to the side. “Bah,” he groaned, and reached for his walker. “Well, I’m not going to no funeral.”

“I’ll take the book,” she said.

He waved his hand dismissively and disappeared into his room, back to his old self.

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Rhetta arrived at Horace Pomeroy’s house on St. Victoria street the following Sunday a few minutes early. It had evidently been his wish to hold the funeral in his own home, rather than in the church, though no one quite knew why. The choice seemed to perturb Beatrice, but then the whole situation was upsetting for her. Every window in the house was open and a dozen box fans were on full blast. Horace had been delicate his
whole life and never got cold, never had air conditioning, and so the whole service attendants sat and fanned themselves with their programs, all of them sweating like sinners in church.

Pastor Lind conducted the service and the church organist played on the out of tune upright piano in Horace’s living room. Lind was somber, obviously devastated but putting up a brave face for the sake of the community. Beatrice delivered a tearful eulogy, and so did Josephine.

Rhetta had seen her when she’d entered, given her a tight hug, feeling the devastation and betrayal intermingle where their bodies met. She was less of a slit wrist and more of a small thorn in Rhetta’s side. An occupational hazard. An ex. Everybody had them. She could bear it now. Rhetta shared in her sorrow.

Josephine’s eulogy was tight-throated and tormented. She seemingly wanted to talk about her great-uncle’s truth but couldn’t bear to carve him open for everybody like that, let him be vulnerable to ridicule. “He was a staggeringly good man,” she said. “I never knew a softer soul than his.” Rhetta believed her.

The pianist played “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” at a melancholy tempo as the crowd dispersed quietly to mingle in that weird way you do at a funeral. It wasn’t Rhetta’s first, but she could count the number she’d been to on one hand. It just made her think of the dead dog buried in her backyard. And the little orange bird.

She looked over Horace’s massive library, all the books he must have taught when he was young or used in his law practice. All the books he must have longed to have written himself. He had a shelf upon shelf full of atlases, history books, travel memoirs, books in languages Rhetta didn’t recognize. A mind so rich and complex and
fate had confined him to this building. Beautiful as it was, with its high ceilings and plush rugs and warm, dark woods, it must have been torture, being alone for so long. No one could bear that, no one deserved to bear that. He had lived, of course, but a thousand lives had been so far from his grasp, so far from Illinois.

Eventually she was able to approach Pastor Lind alone as he contemplated a small statue in the corner of Horace’s office. His hand twitched, and he reached into his shirt for a small flask, took a swig, and replaced it, no one seeing this action but Rhetta. Self-consciously she tapped him on the shoulder and held the book out to him. “I hope this doesn’t bother you,” she said in a low voice, letting the pastor collect himself, “but my father wanted me to bring this. It… it was your father’s, but of course he was good friends with Mr. Pomeroy, so…”

Lind’s face transformed in shock tinged with agony. “Your father asked you to do this? What possessed him?”

“I couldn’t tell you,” Rhetta said, though her first guess was always guilt. “His initials are on this inside there. It’s up to you what’s to be done with it.”

“I’ll ask the family,” he said, putting the book under his arm. He made to walk away, but stopped himself. “Rhetta,” he said. “I think that you and I should be friends.”

“You do?”

He nodded, but he seemed uncertain. A war seemed to brim within him, one that seemed bigger than what Rhetta could grasp. “Yes, I… well, I just think we’re alike is all. This loss has disturbed me, I’m sure you understand.”

“Questioning your faith?”

He looked at her darkly. “I hurt to think about what comes after, that’s all.”
Cormac knew what happened after. “My mother,” he’d told Rhetta one night when they’d shared a few beers on the back porch with Bill. Bill dozed in the rocking chair, but her father was wide awake. “I’m sure she’s in heaven. My father, not too sure.”

“Heck?”

“Not sure I believe in that.”

“If there’s one, there’s gotta be the other.”

“That’s assuming there’s scales to the universe, kid. Something balancing it all out. But I don’t think that’s what God does. I used to think about hell. But I don’t think it’s somewhere else. I think it’s just here.”

Rhetta had sipped her beer measuredly, committing every word he said to memory. “That’s technically limbo. Spirits wandering the earth, not being able to do anything.”

He had sighed and lit up his single daily cigarette. He would forget this conversation the next morning. It was how he could be open with her. He could rely on the vulnerability being fleeting, there and then gone from his memory. One step forward, two steps back. “I think if that’s what you got, the semantics wouldn’t bother you much. It’d feel the same.”

A few feet away from the casket, Rhetta finally caught Josephine alone.

“Did he still have it all together at the end?” she asked.
Josephine nodded. “I was with him a lot these last few weeks. He showed me the will. He’s letting me use the interviews for a book.”


“That’s amazing,” Rhetta said. “I’m happy for you. You seem like you’re doing really well.”

Josephine shrugged. “Ups and downs. I’ve been in Ogden, Utah for the past few years, which has made me happy. Seeing someone, too. But it’s too soon to bring her along to this kind of family function.”

“Understandable,” Rhetta said, feeling a twist of jealousy somewhere below her stomach.

“Anyone new in your life?”

Her ears got red. “I started a community garden, that keeps me busy.”

“Still haven’t fucked anyone new, then.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“It’s all over your face,” Josephine said. She dropped her voice to a whisper. “He told me about Tony. Everything that happened.”

“I see.”

“You don’t know yet, do you?”

“Stop it, Jo. Stop being cruel to me.”

“I said he wouldn’t tell you, and I was right.”

“He’s in therapy. We both are. You come up a lot, you know that?”

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“How much time do you have left in you Rhetta?” Her voice was half pleading, half spiteful. “Your life is passing you by, and I bet Cormac’s memory isn’t holding up well. Just read the diary.”

“What, so that I can tell you what it says? No way.”

“That’s not what I want.”

“Don’t try to fool me. You’ve always cared about the diary more than I have.”

She took a step back and lowered her voice. Another public stir was the last thing she needed for her reputation, especially at a funeral of all places. “If you wanted an ‘I told you so’ moment, there, you got it. It’s not all butterflies and flowers, I admit it, but at least I’m taking my life into my own hands.”

“But I know you Rhetta, it’s killing you.”

“It’s not. I’m sorry, but you’re just wrong,” Rhetta said. “Flat wrong. I’m better now than where you found me three years ago, where you left me five years ago. Your way isn’t the only right way. You’re not seeing the diary. My family is mine.”

Josephine’s lip curled. She looked angry and betrayed. She looked like she pitied Rhetta. It hurt her more than anything had in years. She was still so beautiful, and that hurt, too. “Yeah, claim that family without knowing what it means. You’re fucking delusional Rhetta, you always have been. Cormac’s the reason Tony killed himself, just like he was the reason you tried to kill yourself, but you wouldn’t see it if it hit you. God, the look on your face right now, it’s like you saw a ghost. Sometimes I don’t know how I loved you.”

Josephine moved to stalk off, but Rhetta swallowed the blood and bile in her throat. “So what about the wallpaper, then?”
She stopped mid-stride. “What wallpaper?”

“So you don’t know everything,” Rhetta said. “You don’t know about the wallpaper, you don’t know about Bradley and Sara Jean, about Lilian or Yvonne or anything. You don’t know about my grandfather. You used to say there was good here when I didn’t see it. I thought it was nuance, but it was just black and white thinking. It’s what you’re doing now. Life doesn’t work that way, Josephine. If you think that Horace was perfect, you’ll be disappointed, just like if you think my father is evil. You’ll never be able to forgive your parents—or me, for that matter—if you think like that.”

“Don’t you dare patronize me,” Josephine snapped. “Some things can’t be forgiven.”

“What can’t be forgiven? A mistake made when you’re a kid, when you’re twenty, when you’re fifty? Can you not forgive ignorance? Product of circumstance? Where is the line? Do you even have a line? Or are you just blindly swinging your sword around?”

“You have no principles. You act like you do, but you just do whatever anyone tells you. You’re destroying your life striving for approval from a father who will never love you and you can’t get over it. And don’t lecture me on forgiveness when you clearly can’t get over what happened between us.”

“What do you want from me, Josephine?” Rhetta begged, her voice rough. “Tell me so that I can just give it to you and we can leave each other be.”

“Did Cormac ever apologize? For anything he ever did?” She took another step back, and they both finally acknowledged the attention their argument had attracted.
Rhetta couldn’t respond. “You left me for him. You see how fucked up that is, don’t you? Open your eyes, Rhetta.”

*****

The drive to St. Louis was easy for her now. She could do it without directions, without hardly blinking. The silence in the car didn’t bother her either. She hadn’t even bothered to leave Cormac a voice mail. Her life didn’t revolve around him.

She had half thought to drive straight to Mark’s door, beg him to talk her through this, to tell her that everything would be fine, that Josephine’s bitterness wasn’t her fault, that she couldn’t control what other people said or how they felt. Other people were outside of her scope of control. All she could control was herself.

But she didn’t have the control to go home, or to Mark. “You realize why you ran to Josephine’s house that night, don’t you?” he’d said to her not long ago. “It wasn’t because you missed her. You just needed someone’s arms to catch you.”

There was a bar she’d heard of. Who knew if it would be worth it, if there would be women her age, or women at all, but she had to try. She couldn’t help herself.

Rhetta ordered a rum and coke and sat, embarrassed to be in funeral clothes surrounded by attractive young people, largely charming, pixie-faced queer men, but not all. They danced and talked and got giant bowls of alcohol that would surely destroy their livers. This was what she had missed out on. Carefree hookups and groups of friends, road trips, psychedelics, the neon colors of your twenties. It had all slipped through her fingers, and she had let it. Even her own adolescent alcoholism hadn’t managed to be fun, just disgusting.
She’d thought she was free of this. She’d thought that things would be easier, that the truth would set her free, that exposure therapy would make her love more and care less. That she would be able to someday cut the thread.

A man sat next to her and struck up a conversation for a little while. He was fine. Another day she would have been nicer, but eventually she rudely shooed him away. And then she sat alone in humiliation. She just wanted someone to fuck her brains out, was that too much to ask?

She started to walk through the dark streets, pocketknife gripped tightly in her pocket. She used to get a perverted rush from this in her teens, walking through sketchy neighborhoods alone, tempting fate, hoping that something bad would happen to her, some outsider would come along and impartially administer the punishment she deserved. Would she always feel like this? Would she just keep spinning her wheels? Walking in circles in the darkness, waiting for someone else to come along and destroy her stasis?

You left me for him.

Rhetta stopped on a quiet corner and stifled sobs into her hand. This feeling was part of her routine. It was such a part of her life, she didn’t know who she would be without it. Without a hope to squander.

She found her car with a ticket in the windshield and drove back towards Aspen. Past the motorcycle club on highway 13 in the dead of night, she pulled over onto the grass and got out of her car. The stars were so clear here. She took them for granted.
She sat on the hood of her car and stared at the sky for as long as she could stay awake. Sometimes she could bring herself respite as well. Even through something as weak and distant as this.

She didn’t want to chance a run-in with an officer and no way to explain herself. At 3 in the morning, Rhetta got back in her car and drove the rest of the way home in the hot summer morning.

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Rhetta stumbled in the front door at 5 AM Monday and dragged her feet to Cormac’s door, but when she opened it, he wasn’t inside.

“Dad?” she called vaguely into the tiny house. There were few options as to where he could be, but it appalled her to even consider it. Either dead at the foot of the basement stairs, or…

She looked towards her bedroom and saw light from under the door. Suddenly aware, she lurched forward and flung the door open to see her father, crouching over the box of Tony’s belongings, diary open in his hands.

“Dad—” she began, but he cut her off.

“How long have you had this?”

“I never read it,” she choked out. “I couldn’t. I couldn’t bear it, Dad I’m sorry.”

“All this time?” His voice was bubbling with anger, beads of sweat on his forehead, sorrow turning his eyes black. “All this time?”

Rhetta couldn’t speak. She couldn’t even cry. It was like watching a volcano erupt, knowing there was no escape. Nothing could be done.
“Well it doesn’t matter anyways,” he said, dropping the diary onto the bed.

“There’s no one left to hate me but you.” He stumbled backwards, reached for the wall, and found a seam in the wallpaper where two pieces met. With a single pull, he ripped off a large portion of the sheet to reveal a brown wall, nearly falling backwards doing so. Rhetta went to catch him, but he barked at her not to touch him, swinging his arm as if he would smack her away. He returned to the wall, tearing away piece after piece, disemboweling the wolves and tigers and deer, until Rhetta realized that the wall underneath was in fact white, decorated with a massive, abstract stain.

A blood spatter.

[You did this. This is your fault. You did this with your foolishness, you goddamn bitch you bitch you stupid fucking—]

Cormac wailed and wilted to the ground. As if he’d been the one to pull the knife across Tony’s throat. Maybe he might as well have been.

Rhetta didn’t touch him. She strode slowly to the diary and let her eyes cast over the text on the page as the world died around her.

Mack told our parents about me and Gene, what he saw. Mom has been praying day and night. Dad won’t talk to me anymore, won’t even look at me, said he had a dream where I was burning and he was holding the match. As if he hasn’t done worse already to Mack, as if he hasn’t broken every bone in Mack’s face. But that he could apologize for. Burning me he would do gladly.
But Cormac. I always thought I don’t know what I thought. I hoped he could look at me, love me, no matter what. Isn’t that what brothers are for? Am I so terrible to him?

There’s no hope left. I’ve lost them all to hatred, even Mack. They’ll bury me in this house.
Chapter 16

Root of the Root

Perhaps Rhetta had never truly known who she was. When she had looked in the mirror years ago with blood streaming down her elbow, she had seen the wide, dead glass eyes of Tony—eyes she’d never seen in person. Was he a distraction? How could she be him? They had been so different at seventeen.

This was the end of her hibernation. She was molting. *When I was a child, my speech, feelings, and thinking were all those of a child; now that I am a man, I have no more use for those childish ways.*

She had been a child all this time. And the child self was burrowed deep in her soul, so close to her heart that it jumped with every heartbeat. She felt it pushing against her ribs, all this time begging to be drawn out—but it would not do, she couldn’t. The seventeen-year-old Rhetta couldn’t be abandoned—who would Rhetta be without her? If someone didn’t look at her and see that Rhetta, peeking between her ribs, how could she be understood? Pitied? She was never pitied, only in her dreams, when Tony would come to her and say that he would share in her grief, when it arrived.

Rhetta often held her palms in front of her face and stared at them. Half her life ago, her world had come to a halt. Soon her child self would emerge from her chest as a nymph and fly away from her, forever.

*Would you leave before your dad dies?*

She was thirty-four.

*One of us is gonna have to fold first.*

She had to survive it.
Her routine had not much changed in the passing years. Rise early. Brush her teeth, not her hair. It was nearly at her waist now. She hadn’t cut it since she moved to Illinois, except trimming her bangs in her bathroom. Economizing, she told herself. Put a cream on the bags under her eyes. Took her antidepressant.

Helped her father sit up, put his slippers on, helped him stand, walked with him into the bathroom. Waited patiently as he sat on the toilet, then helped him onto the stool in the shower. Bathed him. Handed him a cloth so that he could clean himself with less embarrassment. Shampooed his hair.

When she woke him, he would often ask her name, and she would remind him in a patient, pliant voice: “Hi, I’m your daughter. Remember?”

When she washed his hair and he couldn’t see her reflection in the mirror, he would often call her by different names. Lilian, usually, sometimes Karen, sometimes just Ma. Depending on the day on his mood, on his persona. Would he be his child self today? The one who thought Rhetta was his mother, the one who still believed Tony was alive? Or his teenage self, blushing and in love, guilty of sneaking around with Karen but to overwhelmed with joy to stop himself? Or his adult self, taking a second chance at his life. When he called her Lilian, he would often say, “I can’t believe you’re still here. I can’t believe you really stayed. With someone like me.”

“What kind of person are you?” Rhetta would ask him when he said this. His hair was almost fully gray. He looked so much older than 74.
He would shake his head, smiling bittersweetly. “The wrong kind. The rotten kind.”

She didn’t know how to correct him.

The garden still took much of Rhetta’s time. She left at seven these mornings. She was exempt, so she was allowed to work from home more in the evenings, leave earlier, spend time with her father. When she scheduled herself just perfectly, she only needed one home aid to come in per day for two hours, but even that was expensive. Thirty dollars per day added up. She always kept the fridge stocked so that he could always eat something he liked, and Rhetta didn’t rely on others to be as good of cooks as her. She knew him, after all. She knew everything about him.

She didn’t work Fridays to drive them out to St. Louis for Cormac’s bi-weekly check-up with Dr. Qin. Rhetta’s own therapy sessions had to be scheduled on opposite weeks of Cormac’s appointments, so she hauled out to St. Louis regularly, making up the work hours on the weekend. Kindly Yvonne spent therapy days with Cormac, having retired herself from the library some time ago. She was restless without work, and Rhetta felt for her.

They had resumed talking when Cormac’s memory had started to deteriorate, October of 2014, two years before. The breakdown about Tony had seemingly pushed him over the edge, beyond hope, or so Rhetta felt, though she would never admit it aloud. It caused her more pain than she could yet articulate.

She’d approached Yvonne with a peace offering of some fresh tomatoes and basil from her garden and a heartfelt apology. They had cooked dinner together and talked
things over well into the night. Yvonne had still been angry with Rhetta for the kiss even though she’d offered Rhetta forgiveness. The distance had done them both good.

“I was a horrid friend to you,” Rhetta had said.

“You were sick,” Yvonne said. “You were hurting. I know what heartache does to people.”

She had no idea.

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Rhetta had thusly tasked herself with the removal of the rest of the wallpaper. After the fact, she hadn’t known what to do but to sit and stare at it for hours on end, wondering, horrified. She had been so close to this herself so many times. She had nearly done it.

After hours in silence, she got up and approached the wall. She placed her hand against the white part of the drywall, then moved it slowly, closer and closer to the stain, half a century old. She expected it to feel different under her palm, expected to pull her hand away and see it sticky and red. But it was dry and smooth as stone, just a part of the wall. Part of the house.

She’d once seen this house and thought to burn it. Now she couldn’t stand to touch it. She had no idea what to do.

For a while she’d just hung a sheet over it, but covering it up didn’t make it go away. Even if she painted it over, she would still know it was there. Cormac could come into the room and see a blue wall and fly into a rage. The damage had been hidden, not
erased. He could never bear to do that. Because for all he had acted as if Tony never
existed, he could never truly erase the reminder. He had to be punished.

And he was. His first heart attack had been in April of 2014. Minor, but terrifying
for both of them. His skin had been almost green with sick and his eyes had been glazed
over for days afterwards. Rhetta hadn’t known how to feel about his brush with death. A
part of her, small but noisy, was sad he had survived. Another part, even smaller, just a
whisper behind her ear in the dead of night, was happy that he would be made to suffer
more. Did he not deserve it? It was no matter. His second and final heart attack would
follow eventually.

In the following months he never fully gained his strength back, though it had
been expected, and was consequently bound to his wheelchair. It infuriated him. He still,
always, somehow found the energy to be angry. He knocked things over on purpose, hit
the wall weakly, woke screaming in the night, beads of sweat congealed on his forehead,
piss sometimes running down his leg. When Rhetta came to his side, he often shoved her
away, too weak to hurt her but strong enough to frighten her. Fear, at least, she
masked well.

For all she feared him, she still believed there was a chance he would get better.
Every meeting with Dr. Qin she asked if there was a different combination of medication
she could prescribe. Maybe there was a solution yet alchemized that would counteract the
dementia, relieve his pain. Everything else could stay, the rest of it they could bear, the
rest of it was human. But this was too cruel of punishment, even for him.

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Illinois, early morning, ten years later. September 2016, back in the near-present. Rhetta’s 35th birthday was on the horizon, but Cormac had no clue. They sat in the examination room, waiting for the cardiologist when Cormac said, unprompted, “I need to go to the waterfall.”

Rhetta looked at him in stunned silence. The polaroid photo she’d found ten years before flashed through her mind. She’d still never seen it in person. “What waterfall?”

“Half-Moon,” he said. “My daughter is in the hospital. Karen said we would go.”

They sat shoulder to shoulder. He refused to sit on the examination table until the doctor arrived, and often objected even then. Stubbornness, evidently, was not swallowed up with memory. “What happened to your daughter?” Rhetta asked. She was accustomed to playing the game of disembodiment. Pretending she was someone else, or, as in this case, no one at all, didn’t hurt her that much these days, because she knew how to control it. She knew how to keep it from getting the best of her.

“She—” Cormac sighed, looking above the doorway. “She tried to kill herself.”

Rhetta swallowed bile. “I’m very sorry to hear that. What happened?”

He clicked his tongue. “Oh, I don’t know. She thinks her life is so sad. Being a homosexual and all, maybe it is. But I don’t understand it. Not a bit.”

“What don’t you understand?”

“Just don’t see why she couldn’t find a nice guy and put all those feelings behind her.”

“Maybe that’s why she tried to kill herself,” Rhetta said. “Because she couldn’t put the feelings away. People lose to their emotions sometimes.”

He scoffed. “Don’t I know it.”
“Do you?”

Cormac turned to look at her. “I’m only telling you because you’re a stranger, and you can’t do anything to hurt me. But my dad used to beat the ever-loving shit out of my mom. Over little things, the food, the floors not being clean. Thing was, she could stop bleeding when else someone was hurt, but she could never stop her own.”

On the drive home, he insisted Rhetta drop him off at Matchbook Trail so that he could hike to the waterfall with Karen. “She’s gonna meet me there,” he said.

“You can’t hike, Cormac,” Rhetta said, maintaining her outsider persona. “You are in a wheelchair.”

“We’re gonna go. You have to stop. You have to let me go.”

“What’s there?”

“It’s where we always went,” he said obstinately. “It’s the most important place to me.”

“How did you first find it?” Something Rhetta had observed was that the elderly loved to talk about their lives with strangers. Even Cormac, as reserved as he was, would crack his ribs open and bear his soul to any listening ear.

“My brother and I found it,” he said. “A few years ago, hunting with our dad, but we got separated. Man, Tony was so scared. I always protected him, you know.”

“Did you?”

“I did. I do. Nobody understands me like Tony.”

Rhetta said nothing.

Back in town, she stopped at the food mart down the road and picked up a rotisserie chicken for them to share for dinner. Wheeling Cormac across the rocky
driveway and up to the front door always posed a challenge, but Rhetta managed on her own well enough. He used to insist he walk it himself but was too detached these days to pay mind to the pavement.

They ate chicken and salad with vegetables from Rhetta’s garden in silence while the television aired coverage of the presidential race. When lucid enough to comprehend contemporary politics, Cormac voiced his abhorrence for Hilary Clinton. Rhetta generally kept her comments to herself.

“Rhetta,” Cormac said suddenly, his eyes dark and his own again. “I need you to cut my hair.”

Rhetta put down the chicken leg she’d been working on. “Okay,” she said. “Right now?”

“Yes please.”

She wheeled him into his bathroom and clipped a hand towel around his neck.

“Your beard too, Dad?”

“If you would.”

She held the cheap electric razor in her hand for a moment, considering it. She put on the second smallest guard and got to work, doing her best to be even. It was something she’d never done for him before. The electric razor she’d trusted him with, and usually he enjoyed going to the barber shop down the road from the Haw. The scar on his neck almost glowed in the yellow light.

“What happened to that Haas girl,” he asked.
Rhetta nearly dropped the razor. “Josephine?” He wouldn’t make eye-contact with her in the mirror. He seemed reluctant to accept that he’d opened the line of questioning. “She left,” Rhetta said. “She lives in Utah, now.”

“Hmm.”

“I haven’t seen her in a few years.”

“I didn’t like the look of her.”

“That’s your feeling, Dad,” Rhetta said. “I happened to think she was beautiful.”

“Do you miss her?”

Rhetta’s heart was loud as a jackhammer in her ears. “A little bit. It used to be worse. She made me happy, for a while. But I’ll find someone else eventually.”

“Another…”

His beard was finished. She went to her own bathroom for her hair scissors and returned a moment later. “Alright, now keep real still,” she said, taking a bit of his hair between her fingers.

“You should be happy,” he said. Rhetta finally found his eyes in the mirror. She couldn’t tell if they were his or someone else’s. They twinkled. He nodded his head slightly, then wet his lips. “You should.”

The ocean inside her that had raged for so long almost calmed itself. She clung to the mast despite the clearing skies for fear of being flung from the decks. “Dad,” she said tentatively.

He just stared at her.

“Dad.”
He was silent. He brought a trembling hand to the scar on his neck and gazed at it in confusion. Gone, as quickly as he’d arrived.

Rhetta finished his hair and shortly afterward put her father to bed, laying down a clean towel and squeezing his shoulder as she left. He didn’t say another word for the rest of the night.

When she returned to her own room, she sat on the bed and stared at the blight on the wall. The reminder.

“I’m sorry,” she said to herself.

She didn’t hear the answer, but it came. [I’m sorry, too.]

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Personnages Principaux:

RHETTA JERI ANTONIA WOLFF

PASTOR LIND HORBELT

Scene: The basement office of the Baptist church. LIND opens a bottle of whiskey, already half empty, and RHETTA retrieves a bottle of Coca-Cola from her backpack. They sit opposite each other with the desk in the middle, but the power imbalance is not clear. LIND pours two glasses of whiskey, and RHETTA adds coke to hers.

RHETTA: I used to drink a lot more, when I was younger. I almost ended up in the hospital a few times.

LIND: Well those days are gone now, aren’t they?
They clink their glasses together and each take a small sip.

RHETTA: Still the bane of my mother’s existence. You know I haven’t seen her in ten years now? Ten years. How do you do that to somebody?

LIND: You have a gift for hurting people, Rhetta.

RHETTA: (she laughs) It’s my rotten personality.

LIND: No, I think you’re charming. You’re beautiful too, though you don’t act like it, which makes you even more so.

RHETTA: I don’t like that logic. Because I don’t have confidence in my appearance I’m more attractive?

LIND: No, because you’re not self-possessed, because you’re not concerned with beauty.

RHETTA: But I am concerned with it. I want to be attractive. Just not for you.

LIND: (chuckles bitterly) Don’t I know it. In a different life, maybe we could have made something work. Been a normal couple like everybody important in our lives wants.

RHETTA: Had kids?

LIND swirls his drink.

RHETTA: You’ve gotta let that go.

LIND: I have. I have, I really have. I’m finished with fatherhood. Maybe it’s sacrilegious of me, but I can’t bear the burden. My bloodline ends with me. As if blood matters at all. My mother will never forgive me, my father will never know. I’ll never be the man he wanted me to be.

RHETTA: Do you think he was a good man?

LIND: It doesn’t matter.

RHETTA: It does.
LIND: He’s dead.

RHETTA: If you’re going to dwell on him shouldn’t you at least dwell on who he really was?

LIND: And do you know who he was? Did you bring the diary?

RHETTA: *takes another sip of her drink* Tony liked your father, respected him. That’s why his betrayal hurt so much. I’m still only beginning to grasp what kind of a man my grandfather was, but from what evidence and accounts I have, he could have very well been a monster when they were young. He beat my father senseless once. Broke his nose, knocked out one of his teeth, nearly broke his jaw. He hit Tony, too, and his wife. And no one on the outside would have been the wiser. Karen didn’t even know how badly Cormac was abused. Tony was the only one to talk about it. *she takes a deep breath*

I’m sorry I didn’t bring the diary. I could barely bring myself to read it, I don’t think I can bear to show it to anyone else. You’ll have to take me at my word. I’m sorry.

LIND: *sighs and buries his face in his hands* I still don’t understand why he didn’t just run away.

RHETTA: Where would he have gone? He had no money, nobody to go with him, nobody to take him in. He wanted to tell his parents in due time, he wanted them to love him. He had no vision of the future that could replace the one my father ruined.

LIND: I envy you, you know. Even though it’s painful, you know Cormac. I never got to know my father. I barely got to lose him.

RHETTA: He sounded like a troubled man.

LIND: He was wracked with guilt. We’re connected in that way, you and me. Our fathers have the same boy’s blood on their hands. Do you think they’re going to hell for it?
RHETTA: Do you? You’re the expert.

LIND: I can’t say. I feel compelled to say yes, but saying yes when you want to say no is what sent my own father to hell in the first place.

RHETTA: I don’t think Cormac believes in hell. I don’t think he’s going somewhere he doesn’t believe in.

LIND: We all believe in hell.

RHETTA: No, we don’t. I don’t, either.

LIND: What do you believe in then? Whatever I don’t? Contrarianism isn’t a real dogma, despite what the Democratic party will tell you.

RHETTA: We’re not arguing politics right now.

LIND: Aren’t we? If hell is real, you’ll be there for having lived in sin, if we are to follow the scripture closely. And if you go to hell, you and your father will be together forever, just like you always wanted.

RHETTA: And you’ll be jealous.

LIND: [silence]

RHETTA: I don’t believe in hell. I’m very sorry that you do.

LIND: Eternal suffering is better than eternal nothingness.

RHETTA: Only if suffering is the only place you can find meaning. [She stands up and finishes her whiskey.] And that’s a very sad life.

LIND: Speak for yourself.

RHETTA EXITS

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“The doctors say his heart doesn’t look good. He might not survive another attack like his first. But I can’t get him to stop smoking or drinking. It’s one of the only parts of his identity that has survived all this. Usually he just acts like a child, but sometimes I get the feeling he’s come back to me, and things were like they were before. I know this is what I signed up for, what I came here for, to care for him, but now that I’m doing it I can hardly stand it. I can’t bear that this is his life, that this is my life. I hate myself for it, but I look forward to after, like I never let myself before. I don’t look forward to his death, but I don’t want him to suffer anymore, even though I worry, deep in my heart, he’ll suffer forever. We all will, won’t we?”

“Depends on what you believe,” Mark said, jotting something down on his steno pad.

“After all I’ve lied to myself, I guess it’s the only thing I can’t fully convince myself of. I don’t want it to be true. I don’t know if I’m actively deceiving myself or chipping away at the paint that covered it before. I can barely trust myself anymore. Last week, he said the most amazing thing to me, and I have no idea if it was real or not.”

“What did he say?”

“He asked me about Josephine, and then he said I should be happy. Like I deserved to be happy, despite his objections. Like he didn’t mind.”

Mark gave her a solemn look. “Do you think he meant it?”

Rhetta shook her head. “I don’t think I’ll ever know.”

“You’ll have to live with it,” he said. “Or forget it, if you can’t. But I think you can stand it. I do believe that.”
Rhetta drove home in silence after her session, aware of her stomach churning uncomfortably. Illinois boiled around her, like her mother had always warned. Still, somehow, Rhetta loved it. Maybe it was Stockholm syndrome, or maybe it was real. Maybe it was because now she had learned to see the life moving through the blades of grass, through the bees and flowers, through the vast forests and the empty Ozarks, through the water that dripped from her storm drain. All of it touched her keenly.

She took an exit onto another highway and headed northeast, curling around on a road she was hardly familiar with anymore, but muscle memory was a powerful thing. The map she’d found nine years ago guided her now.

She pulled off at the entrance to Matchbook Trail and entered the woods without a guide. She counted the steps, felt the newly fallen leaves crunch under the soles of her feet, heard the birds, tasted the wind.

A familiar curve found her, and she diverged from the path, took to the woods. Walked until she came upon the clearing where she’d found Josephine’s camp. In a clear spot of grass, she sat down and let her hand brush across the clean earth. Part of her hoped that a deer would come and look at her like one had looked at Josephine, just so that she could tell it, “No, it’s just me this time.” She moved on.

Any semblance of a path was totally overgrown, but she was calm. Eventually her foot hit stone and the gentle rushing of water reached her ears. The trees curled down over the stream in a perfect canopy. The leaves glistened honey yellow in the afternoon sun, and Rhetta felt herself being wrapped, finally, in the arms of gold.

She approached the mouth of the small waterfall and sat next it, letting her feet dangle, feeling the water run over her open hand. When she looked down into the pool
below, she swore for a second that she saw a girl, or maybe a ghost of a girl, bathing in
the pool, eating an apple. *What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror.*

After all that had happened three years ago, she had read the diary. Privately, in
her own time. Her father had never asked about it again, had shut himself away from the
world, and in turn, Rhetta opened herself up. She had learned about his childhood, about
how deeply he and Tony cared for each other. Being a lonely child had made Rhetta
wanting. She had always wanted to be loved like Tony loved Cormac. She would have
loved a younger brother, someone kinder than her, someone to protect and mold into
someone better.

The story was trite, really. Tony had fallen for a boy named Gene, and Cormac
had discovered them. Out of some twisted sense of duty to his father, Cormac had gone to
their parents and told them the truth. Gene turned his back on Tony, Tony was locked in
the bedroom. Soon enough he found a way out.

Tony had been eighteen, which made Cormac twenty-two. All that time and
Cormac hadn’t been able to distance himself from their father. He couldn’t escape that
grasp. The love of his brother couldn’t overpower the years of abuse that had made him
obedient, fearful, ashamed. And even Tony’s friendship with Horace didn’t give him
enough hope for a life outside of that bedroom. Horace lived in secrecy and confinement,
safe but never accepted. Tony had wanted to live *in* the world. This world didn’t want
him.

Maybe today Cormac wouldn’t mind. Maybe he would have changed, grown to
accept a different type of person, like Tony, like Rhetta. But even if he didn’t mind, she
felt that it hurt him. It hurt him, and that she could do nothing about for all she tried. That pain was his own.

Rhetta laid there for a long while, watching her part of the earth turn away from the sun. Half asleep, the ghost of someone she didn’t know brushed her lips. A weight pressed against her ribcage, like a flat hand pushing its way into her body, her heart. The black cloud seeped out of her eyes and drifted up into the sky, dissipating into nothingness for now. That pain was hers, and it was gone, but it would be back. For now, Rhetta was herself, alone. This was a place for love.

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November, chilly, gray. Cormac had not spoken in a few days. He had wet the bed several times. The two-hour car rides would soon become nearly impossible, but Rhetta wasn’t giving up yet. Even though he would be gone in two months.

Still, sometimes, he put his hand on her forearm kindly, or looked at her like he understood her, like he was sorry. The moments were few and far between. This morning he had smiled at her as she poured his coffee and the foolish hope had warmed her blood so.

Michael Schroeder was on his way with the will. Rhetta didn’t know this yet. She didn’t know that minutes after the garden called her away, Cormac would sit with Schroeder and verify the partition his mealy estate in that frail voice of his, almost like a flower now, forgetting about it only minutes later. Thinking already of the numbered days, the responsibilities that would fall on his daughter, so innocuous and self-centered, still so fleetingly hopeful that things would get better, that he would be himself again. His
parents’ names he barely remembered, nor the face of his lifelong best friend, dead from a sudden heart attack on a hunting trip, discovered three days later with a rifle in his hand and his eyes eaten out by rabbits. He would remember the cheeks of Karen but not her voice, her having never returned since blowing through in 2010, but Cormac knew that she was off with a man called Reggie in Atlanta because she’d sent him a postcard and signed it with almost true love. He would forget periodically that his daughter loved other women, and then remember again, and then remember Tony and the bedroom and the wallpaper and it would all crash back into him. He watched her constantly. She buzzed around purposefully, seeing nothing, and he knew her as perfectly as he could, knew the glow of her eyes and the way her voice cracked and the kind way she lifted him, afraid to hurt him as if caution had a point anymore. He knew her so well because he had seen her as a child playing in the river and chasing frogs and squeezing her mother’s breasts and wiggling her toes as she watched television and staring wildly up at the mountains of clouds on the horizon as if she would someday climb them. He knew her.

[I’m sorry, too.]

Rhetta knew nothing of this, still, nothing of him. She disappeared into her room to check her email, and when she reappeared a few minutes later, she found her father gazing into the glass expanses of the paperweights, arranged on the side table against the living room wall. He had moved his wheelchair and was leaning a little too far forward to pick up the one with blue and honey yellow swirling through it, the one he had once threatened to destroy. He let it rest in his palm and watched it as if it were moving, as if there were a fish swimming around inside. The paperweight, too heavy for his bony
hands and their loose skin, was so perfect in his grasp, so sacred, and she could not imagine what he saw in there.

THE END