ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: CONFESSIONS

Katherine Hansen, Master of Fine Arts, 2023

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This is a collection of magical women doing bad things. There are six stories narrated by six women. These women are: Louise, a woman cursed with the knowledge of when her husband will leave her; Joy and Amity, two young sisters struggling with their roles in their uncle's small-town drug business; Lisi, a new mother who has been separated from her body; Flossie, a woman whose jealousy manifests itself in the mysterious and supernatural deaths of those around her; Clara, a conservatory musician confronted with the sudden disappearance of her girlfriend; and Ruth, a lost daughter who finds everything she wants in a magic powder which returns the skin to youth. Their tales are strange and otherworldly, occurring in planes beyond comprehension and control. The women narrate; their words always are their own.

CONFESSIONS

by

Katherine Robbie Hansen

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Sedona

After Sedona was abducted, her boyfriend gave me a key to her apartment so that I could water her plants. I don't really know why the boyfriend couldn't water her plants. It's not like he was doing anything. Sedona and I were both in conservatory at the time, rehearsing eight hours a day and then studying at night, while he was preoccupied with failing out of community college.

He told me he was too busy, and I said I didn't think it took all that much effort to fail out of community college. Then he said he thought I would do a better job.

A better job of watering the plants?

Like it mattered if the plants lived anyway.

When she was taken, and I was down at the station getting interviewed, the detective asked me a lot of questions about the boyfriend. She wanted to know when Sedona started going out with him. She wanted to know how he treated her. She wanted to know if I got a bad feeling around him.

The detective was never outright about it, but it was clear that she thought the boyfriend had killed Sedona, and that we were going to find her body floating in the harbor any day now. But I didn't think so. The boyfriend didn't even have resolve enough to get out of bed and go to class. I couldn't see how he could find the motivation and energy to plot a murder.

Plus, say what you will about him, but at least he cared enough to make sure her plants were watered while she was gone. Not enough to do it himself, but still.

No, I didn't think it was him. I had other suspicions.

The night she disappeared, we were all out drinking. It was the Friday after the first week Juries and we were looking to get wasted. Sedona had finished hers—I had not yet done mine. Pianos always went before violins.

Everyone was worried about their scores. That slipped note. That uneven run. That passage where we lost time.

We had too much too fast. We were drunk almost immediately. I remember feeling wild. I remember breaking a bottle open on the table. I remember a cut on the palm of my hand. I remember kissing Sedona. I remember her pushing me away gently, the way she always did when I tried to kiss her outside the confines of her bedroom.

Sedona stood on the bar and sang. She sang Danny Boy. She didn't have a good voice—or, at least, it was on pitch, but rough, much too rough, and throaty—but nonetheless everyone stopped and listened. Everyone always stopped to listen when Sedona opened her mouth. She was that sort of person.

I remember she was wearing a gold leaf around her neck. Her favorite necklace. Gold little earrings—these were leaves too. Black dress, black stockings. Big green coat.

I remember being on my back, my head in her lap. And she was balancing her bottle on my forehead. Cold drops of water ran over my temples and into my hair. With her free hand, she petted me idly on the head.

"I think I could run the Rachmaninoff perfectly right now," she said.

I was singing softly to myself, playing Schoenberg in the air, trying to remember the bowings I had changed last minute. "Is it up, up, down, up, up? Or was it up, down, up—"

"For God's sake, Clara, you're wasted and you're trying to parse bowings?"

"I changed them a week ago."

"What did you go and do that for?"

"Glutton for punishment."

She tapped my nose. "Dr. Wolfe got in your head, hm?"

I licked her finger and she snapped it away. "He didn't get in my head," I said.

"I tell you what," she said, "I tell you one thing I'm glad for. I'm glad I've never owned a bow in my life. No up or down business with keys. It's all straightforward."

"You wish you owned a bow," I said.

She was suddenly wistful. "I do sometimes wish I owned a bow. Then I could play a note that lasts forever. You can't play a note that lasts forever with a piano. You hit the key and the note dies so soon. We all die so soon."

"Maybe we are the note that lasts forever," I said.

"Well," she said, "I don't think so."

It all gets foggy after that.

She left early, I know this—she said she had a gig in the morning.

The next day, she was gone.

She never showed up to the gig. Some low-paying church affair—but bless them, they called the school when no one else would have. The school called her, and when she didn't answer, they called her professor. The professor called me. I called the boyfriend, the boyfriend called her parents, and her parents called the police.

Somewhere in between the bar and home, she was taken. Later, witnesses would say they saw a man dressed in dark clothes put his hand over her mouth—they watched him shove her into the backseat of a car, watched him jump in the front and drive away.

I was kicking myself the next day, tripping over words and tears as I apologized to her parents over the phone—I should have walked her home. If I had, maybe this wouldn't have happened.

Her parents were kind. They said, if you had walked her home, maybe you both would be gone. Maybe you were lucky.

As it turned out, her parents were very rich—newly rich. Saved up their whole lives to buy a parcel of land and that parcel was on a gold mine. I don't know how I never knew. I suppose I could have guessed by her apartment—she had a spacious studio while we were all living with five roommates. Somehow, she'd never taken me home. She'd been to mine for Thanksgiving and Christmas, and summer break besides, but I'd never seen her hometown. Before now this had never struck me as strange.

But now there was a motive. Or at the very least, a theory of one.

Because she was young and pretty and talented, and there was extensive footage of her playing the piano in evening gowns, the morning shows picked up the story and ran with it. They had her parents on, sleepless and hollow-eyed, grey even under the layers of makeup, and her parents brought clips from her Junior Recital, talked about how talented she was and how destined for greatness she was and how much they wanted her back. They had the boyfriend on, and he played the part of the grieving lover.

The boyfriend and her parents and I went all over the city putting up posters:

MISSING: Sedona Stanton, age 21, height 5'8, weight 130, red hair, grey eyes, scar across her left shoulder. Last seen in black dress, green coat, gold leaf necklace.

We focused on public spots—busy squares and street corners, bus stops and train stations. I couldn't help but feel that we were looking in all the wrong places.

"It's like this," I said to my stand partner, Davis, during rehearsal break—our last rehearsal before the Christmas Spectacular started. "We're looking at trains—Sedona never took trains. We should be looking in the places where she was. We should be looking for clues."

"There might not be clues, Clara," Davis said. He tucked his violin under his elbow, carefully laid his bow across our music stand, and reached down beside his chair for a drink of water. "It might have been random. A crime of opportunity."

"That doesn't fit in with the motive. The gold motive."

Davis sipped his water slowly. "I'm not convinced about the gold."

"Well, do you have any better ideas?" I said this rudely. I was feeling snappish.

"You won't like it."

"I don't like anything about you right now."

"My first thought was trafficking."

I slumped in my seat, thinking about how there had not yet been a ransom, and it had already been five days. "Shit. Me too."

Davis poked me in the side. "But this is shabby, Cartwright!" he said, mimicking our conductor's thick Russian accent. "Posture!"

"Fuck you," I said, closing my eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know." I felt his hand on my shoulder. He was one of the few who knew what she really meant to me. One of the few that understood. Sedona did not like for people to know. She would not even allow me to tell Davis. I told him anyway. Davis always says, there are no secrets between stand partners.

I asked her once, why. Is it because you're cheating, or is it because I'm a woman?

She thought about it for a minute. Then she said, both. Neither. I don't know. But does it matter? I am your secret. And you are mine. Can't that be enough for now?

It could not, but I did not say so. I couldn't risk losing her.

It is now my sense that she would not have much cared if people knew she was sleeping with a woman. She just wanted to keep me on a line. She had everyone on a line. The boyfriend, the Maestro, all the professors. Professor Pika did things for Sedona she would have never done for anyone else. I did things for her too. We all did.

I think I knew, even back then, that she was bad for me. But in those days, I was so distant from myself. Adrift. A constant, ever-widening hole in my stomach. This feeling, this darkness, this loneliness—it was eating me alive. I was fading away, and I needed someone, something to hold on to.

She was the only thing that kept me tied to this world. Without her, I was untethered. Out there, floating. Waiting for her to reel me in.

Before Sedona was abducted, she and I were engaged in making a map of all the secret pianos in the city. It took up most of the time when we weren't in rehearsal or practicing. I don't really know how the map started. She had all these grand ideas of widening the network, of connecting the threads—a syndicate of pianists and their secret pianos. I just wanted to be close to her.

Sedona was terrific at finding hidden pianos. Like she had a sixth sense about them or something. She'd stop in front of a building and say, sort of sniffing, like she was picking up on a scent, "I have a feeling about this one—maybe the attic." And then we'd go in and inquire after

pianos, any public use pianos, hidden pianos, maybe in the attic, but possibly in a back room or a corner of the lobby, or sometimes the ballroom, or the basement, or even the landing—and, lo and behold, there would be a piano.

She always knew.

The idea of the map was this: the practice rooms were always full-up, stuffed with non-performance majors who didn't have a right to be there, and in any case, it wasn't quite fair that pianists couldn't practice any old place they wanted to like the strings and winds could. But this way, with the map, they could find a way to practice in every corner of the city.

Of course, I don't even play the piano. Somehow, she roped me in. She was very good at roping people in. You could say it was her specialty.

The night of our first Christmas Spectacular, I began to have this feeling—like maybe her disappearance was connected to the pianos. I wondered if we needed a new set of posters. I thought I might put them up in all the places where we had been.

"Don't you think?" I said to Davis in the greenroom during intermission. "Don't you think there might be a connection?"

"I concede it's possible," he said.

"So you'll help me."

"After," he promised. "But for now, we have to go play 'Sleigh Ride' for the thousandth fucking time."

"Right."

"Fucking WASPs," he said, closing his eyes wearily, "forcing a Jew to play Christmas sing-a-longs."

“Steel yourself,” I said. “There are so many more to come.”

For some reason, the boyfriend had come to the Spectacular. He was waiting for me outside the back doors when Davis and I exited after the show. He waved me down. Reluctantly, I went to him, shivering in the sudden cold.

“Are you watering the plants?” he asked immediately. He was wearing a thin jacket and a thin scarf. All his clothes were thin.

“Yes,” I said. “The police cleared me to enter yesterday.” Davis came up behind me. I could feel his warmth at my shoulder. “This is Davis,” I said, gesturing at him. “Davis, this is Sedona’s boyfriend.”

“My name is Emmet,” said the boyfriend.

“Hi, Emmet,” said Davis.

“I prefer to call him the boyfriend,” I said.

“God,” said the boyfriend. “Listen, I need to talk to you.”

“So, fine. Go on, then.”

He eyed Davis for a moment, then said, “I think we need to widen the search.”

“We were about to widen the search,” said Davis.

“Tsch, no we weren’t,” I said.

“Yes, we were, we were going to look at the pianos.”

The boyfriend nodded. “The map?” he said. He had his hands stuffed deep in his pockets. He was not wearing gloves. Through the thin of his jacket, I could see his hands were clenched into fists. He looked blue. “I know the map. Right. We’ll start tomorrow.”

He turned and left. I whacked Davis across the head.

"Oi!" he said, his hand rising to the place where I hit him.

"Next time," I said, "keep your mouth shut, then."

In the morning, we started in on the map—me, Davis, and the boyfriend. We went to the library, printed new posters on the backs of old sheet music. Her picture came out of the printer over and over again, a thickening stack, a proliferation of her.

We split up—they in a team of two and I in a team of one—and hit the streets. Hotels. Office buildings. Crowded atriums. Empty lobbies. One side of the bay, the other. In the financial district, some skinny kid in a suit thought he might have recognized her, but then when he looked closer at the picture, he realized he had never seen her before.

In the bright back room of a little community center near the park, there was a grand piano all painted in swirls of red, yellow, and blue. I had never seen this piano before. Evidently, she had come without me, marked it on the map without me. I tried not to feel offended. After all, the map had always been Sedona's. I was only the afterthought. I was always the afterthought.

I decided that this time, I would walk around. Look for clues. The young girl who had been minding the front desk lounged in the corner pulling at her gum while I searched all over the room, peeking under low tables and tiny chairs, poking my nose into bins filled with wood blocks and bouncy balls.

On a whim, I lifted the lid of the piano.

The inside smelled fresh and clean and new, not like most pianos, not the old musty smell of wood and metal.

"Is this a new instrument?" I asked the girl.

She wrinkled her nose. “In a way, yes. In a way, no.”

By which I knew she meant: it was new, but it had come to them in some unsavory way. Probably why it was painted, then. That is how it is with some pianos.

I leaned in closer. I saw something glinting through the strings. It was a gold leaf. Like her leaf—Sedona’s leaf. A tremor of excitement ran through me. I wasn’t sure what this meant, but I was convinced that it must count for at least something.

I waited until the girl looked away for a moment, and then I snatched it.

The next few places, I looked inside their pianos. They all had leaves. Gold leaves hidden beneath the strings. Little glimmers in the shadows. I collected them, put them in my coat pocket. By the time the day was done, I had ten of them. I kept taking off my glove and slipping my hand in my pocket so I could feel them. I liked the way they felt. Cold and smooth, sharp at the edges.

Little messages, maybe. Left for me.

Later, I met up with Davis and the boyfriend on a street corner. They were both empty-handed—no more posters left to give. And no luck, they said.

I didn’t tell them what I had found.

In the morning, before I met up again with Davis and the boyfriend, I went to Sedona’s apartment to water her plants. After I was finished, I went to her room to search through her jewelry box. I was looking for the leaf bracelet that went with her necklace and earrings. I wanted to see if the leaves on the bracelet matched the leaves I had found in the pianos.

The box played Chopin when opened—light and distant and fairy-like. While the music ran, I picked through solitaire diamond necklaces and emerald drop earrings and ropes of seed pearls.

In retrospect, I should have known she was rich. I guess I didn't realize the diamonds were real. She never talked about money—I suppose because she knew I didn't have any. And it would have been déclassé, wouldn't it have, to reveal that she was one of the few who were getting paychecks instead of scholarship funds for the Christmas Spectacular. But besides that, she never really talked much about herself, I was realizing.

When she was taken, and I was down at the station, giving my statement, before her parents' plane arrived from out west, the detective asked me the color of her eyes. I realized I didn't know, and this in and of itself was almost more disturbing to me than the fact that she was missing. The detective asked, do you have pictures of her with you? I didn't. I don't know why I didn't.

"What can you tell me about her?" she asked. "Anything."

The shape of her face swam before me. Flashes of red hair, her big green coat.

"She's very beautiful," I told her. It was all I could think to say. "The conservatory has her picture on the brochure."

The detective located the brochure. Her eyes were grey. This was surprising to me.

Sometimes, I wondered if I ever knew her at all.

The bracelet wasn't in the jewelry box, so I turned my attention to the dresser drawers. No bracelet. Then the vanity and the closet. No bracelet. Under the bed?

There was something in the corner, way back, shifting and shining in the beam of my flashlight. I took a deep breath, pinched my nose against the dust, and I crawled under.

I emerged with another leaf. Just one leaf. Gold, like the others. But this one was big, almost the size of my hand. I had recognized the others as elm leaves, small and delicate and veiny. This one was a sugar maple, wide and flat with five spiked fingers.

I peeked under the bed again. In the opposite corner, something shining. I dove under once more, this time surfacing with a golden oak twig sprouting three leaves and an acorn.

"What in the world—?"

I had no answers. She had left me with no answers.

Sedona was the sort of person who liked to leave marks on things. People, places, objects. I knew this. She left a mark on me. I still have it: a small tattoo at my ankle, a crown, because my nickname for her was Queenie. She was supposed to get one too: a swallow, because her nickname for me was Clara-bird. In the end, she never did.

As I stood at the street corner, shivering under my umbrella, waiting for Davis and the boyfriend to arrive, I ran my fingers through the leaves in my pocket and I thought about this. About my tattoo. About marks.

The question was: were the leaves marks or a trail?

In the days after I found the leaves, I often thought of the night Sedona first kissed me, the night she singled me out from the crowd who flocked to her apartment every third Saturday for movies and Allen's Coffee Brandy. When the night was gone, and everyone else was drunk and sleeping peacefully on her green velvet couch, when the light was rising in the east and the hours between the now and the morning were steadily shrinking, when it was too late to stop any of it from happening, the inevitable—she put her hand on my neck, swept a half-moon behind my ear. Leaned in.

We were playing a wedding in the morning. A trio—piano, violin, cello. When we left to meet the cellist at the venue, we were still drunk. It was the early hours of the morning, and the sky was green and grainy with new light, and we were dizzy, laughing, playing that we could reach up and take the moon from the sky, hold in in the palms of our hands like a pearl.

In the middle of a crosswalk in an empty street, she stopped me. "Hey," she said. "Hey. Hold on." She adjusted the collar of my concert black shirt. "You have a love bite." She giggled.

I remember my stomach swooping at those words. *Love bite.*

"Better cover this up. We don't want Sita knowing what we were up to all night."

"Of course," I said.

"You know," she said, "I have this feeling—like we're going to be best friends."

In the marble bathroom of the hotel, in between the wedding and the reception, I pulled at the collar of my shirt and looked at the mark she made on me. Small and purple, the size of a coin. Proof, right there on my skin. Proof that I was alive. That someone knew I was alive. That I had been seen, and maybe even, for a moment, loved.

Davis and the boyfriend were late to meet me at the street corner, and therefore we were late to start the search. We split up two ways—Davis and I went one way, and the boyfriend went the other. We didn't have much luck. It was cold and rainy, and everyone we talked to was irritable. They did not want to be working, especially so close to Christmas. In their minds, I think, they were already on vacation.

"Meanwhile," Davis whispered to me, "We still have six of these fucking Spectaculars left."

I patted his cheek. “Oh, darling. You poor, misunderstood artist. How dare they make you earn your keep.”

In between stops, I told Davis about the leaves. He was skeptical of the idea that they might be a trail, a cry for help.

“Sedona loves her secrets,” he said. “I’m sure she did this to amuse herself. I’m sure that’s all.”

Our last stop before nightfall was a big hotel near the water. Their lobby was decorated for Christmas: trees dressed up in silver, wreaths on the doors, garlands strung from the chandeliers and candles glowing in the windows. They had a grand piano, a glistening black Steinway, edged in gold, lonely and cold, top open, in the corner of the room. I checked inside—no leaf.

We went up to the front desk and rang the bell. Immediately, a girl appeared from the back. She was thin and sullen looking, with a hard tight mouth and the biggest eyes I have ever seen. Her blue uniform was neat and pressed, her hair smoothed back into a tidy ponytail. Her shoes were worn. Around her neck, she wore a necklace. A gold leaf. Like *her* leaf—Sedona’s leaf.

“Hello,” Davis said. “We’re looking—”

“I like your necklace,” I interrupted.

Her hand went to her neck. She touched the leaf delicately. “Thank you.”

“Where did you get it?”

Her eyes shifted to the side and then back. “I don’t know,” she said.

“All right,” I said. I looked down at her nametag. “Ramona. Have you seen this girl?” I held out the poster.

Her fingers played with the leaf. She didn't look at the poster. "I don't think so."

"She might have been in here," Davis said. "Playing the piano. Maybe meeting someone."

"I don't think I've seen her."

"She's been abducted," I said. "We're handing out these posters, asking people if they've seen her. I know she was here at least once because she was here with me. Are you sure you haven't seen her?"

"I said I didn't see her," she said.

"All right," I said. I looked at her leaf and then back at her eyes. "I don't know if I believe you."

She shrugged. "Okay. I guess that's your choice." She crossed her arms and her sleeve rode up. A gold leaf bracelet flashed at her wrist. Catching my gaze, she hurriedly uncrossed her arms and tugged her sleeves back into place. "Eric?" she called. "Eric!" There was a beat of silence and then a bellman suddenly appeared beside her. He was a taller, sullener sort of version of her. He was thin and wiry but he looked strong.

"Hello," he said. He crossed his arms. "Problem?"

"Hi," Davis said. I could hear the nervousness in his voice. "Hi. We were just leaving."

"I wasn't done," I said.

"Yes, you were." Davis tucked my arm firmly in his and began to pull me away. "Come on. We're getting the fuck out of here."

I wanted to call the police. Davis didn't. What good could it do, he argued, to call the police on a woman because she was wearing a bracelet? There was no proof that it was Sedona's

bracelet. Surely, hundreds of women were now wearing that same bracelet. Nay, even thousands. And must we incriminate them all for their taste in jewelry?

I guessed then that I had met her abductors. More of a feeling than anything else. Davis guessed too. I know he did. But he was right—what proof did we have? It was only a bracelet.

We both agreed we would not tell the boyfriend.

There were five Spectaculars that next weekend—two Friday night, two Saturday night, and one Sunday matinee. Sedona was still missing. Her face was still all over the news. There were still no leads. Every concert, the conductor made a short speech about "one of our own" being gone. A small moment of silence for the missing. And next, Jingle Bells.

I couldn't stop thinking about the girl in the hotel. I thought about her all the time. Sleeping and waking, I couldn't get her face out of my head. In the end, I had called the detective, left a message with an assistant. I had not heard anything back from her. My sense was that she still thought it was the boyfriend, and she still thought Sedona was dead.

After the Spectacular ended, the Stantons invited me and the boyfriend out west for Christmas. They needed a break, they said, a respite from the searching. And they couldn't bear the holiday alone, not without her. Wouldn't we come? Just so their table could be full at Christmas?

We came.

Her house was in the foothills. Mountains rose out the back window and the air was thin. Everything was modern and angles and glass and weird black flooring everywhere.

"It's reclaimed," Mrs. Stanton explained. "From a burnt-down barn."

I thought I knew what that meant, but I wasn't sure. The boyfriend and I nodded politely. Neither of us had ever been rich enough to say things like "reclaimed." We preferred to use the word "found." Or "stolen"—but that was only once, and I did pay them back in the end.

There was gold everywhere. Inlaid into the kitchen counter, the bathroom tiles, the sink. Gold trinkets on bookshelves and coffee tables. Gold-brushed light fixtures and doorknobs. It was more gold than I had ever seen in my entire life.

In Sedona's room, I picked up trinkets from her desk. Leaves, more leaves, endless leaves. More maples and oaks. Elms and poplars, gingko, evergreens and even a small saguaro with one delicate flower.

The strangest things were the animals—small racing animals frozen in motion. A field mouse in midleap. A mantis opening his arms. A hummingbird stretching her wings. Two tiny frogs. A fish the size of a dime.

I picked up the mouse. He sat heavy in my hand. Of course—solid gold. I ran a hand over his fur. Each little hair was etched in fine, delicate detail. I put a tentative finger in his mouth, felt the rows of teeth. The teeth were small and impossibly sharp. I leaned closer—his eyes were wide open. Fearful.

He could almost have been real.

"Aren't they lovely?" Mrs. Stanton said.

I looked up. I had put down the mouse, and now I had a butterfly in my hands. "Yes."

"So intricate," Mrs. Stanton said softly. She ran her finger along the wing of a sparrow. The sparrow looked frightened. They all looked frightened. "Sedona did them, you know."

"She did?"

"Yes. She had a teacher—at school—I never met him, I suppose—" She trailed off, looking lost. "Would you like to see the plot? It's up in the hills. Bill could take you tomorrow."

I nodded, yes. Yes, I would like to see.

I called Davis later that night. He asked, "What's it like?"

I was lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling, at the gold chandelier above her bed. It was coated in leaves and butterflies and yawning hummingbirds. I was thinking about last year, before Junior Recitals, when I was in her bathroom throwing up pills and she was telling me, you idiot, you fucking idiot, and then I said, if I kill myself, it won't be your fault, you know, and she said, I know. And that's all she said. That's all she ever said.

"I've been thinking," I said. "I was her boyfriend until she found a real one."

"Yeah," Davis said impatiently. "I know. I could have told you that. I think I did, maybe a hundred times. What's it like? Being there?"

"It's strange," I said. "Beyond what I could have imagined."

"Tell me."

"You know how when you get new rosin for your bow, it's all shiny and glossy and perfect, and you can see your face reflected in it, but then you have to scratch it up with a penny for the traction, and then the next time you go to rosin your bow, the rosin is this mess of dust and little microscopic fissures, and now it's not beautiful anymore?"

"Yeah."

"I realized—she's the gloss. I'm the fissures."

On the drive up to the mountains, I could see that all the yards and plots were covered with holes. Some were fresh, some had been filled in some time ago, leaving only a gentle indentation, while others had clearly been abandoned as they were, left to fill with rain.

"After we found gold in our plot," Mr. Stanton explained, "all our neighbors started digging up the land. But none of them found a flake. It's the strangest thing, you know, that the gold ends at the edge of our property line." He laughed. The mirth left his face quickly, and then he looked drawn and sad again.

In the front seat, the boyfriend was twisting his hands together. He had twisted them so much that he had made them red. He looked upset.

"When did you buy the land?" I asked.

"When Sedona was about eight or nine. We were planning to build a house there. Then—the first day it was truly ours, we took Sedona to see the new land, and she came running back to us with flakes in her hand—"

"So she found it," the boyfriend said. It was the first time he had spoken in hours.

"Oh, yes," Mr. Stanton said. "She found it. Our golden girl."

At the edge of the plot there was a small stream. The water tumbled over rocks and across sandy stretches. I sat on the bank with the boyfriend. We did not talk. I had nothing to say to him. I had never had anything to say to him, even from the first time she brought him around.

I had imagined that he would not have anything to say to me. But after a long while, he spoke, his voice slightly strained: "I know that you're in love with her."

"With who."

"With her. Sometimes I wondered if she was in love with you too."

I trembled, but I said nothing.

"But then," he said slowly, "then I thought—what do you have to offer her? You're such a nonentity."

There was a silence.

"That's really mean," I said.

"I know," he said.

"The detective thinks you killed her."

"I know."

"Did you?"

"No." He shook his head. Liquid ran from his nose into his mouth. He wiped it away with his sleeve. "She was the only good thing in my life."

"Yeah," I said. "Me too."

After Christmas, there were still a few weeks before the next semester started up. I didn't want to go home. The dorms were still closed, so I stayed in Sedona's apartment. Slept in her bed. Ate her oatmeal. Drank her wine. The plants had died while I was gone.

I decided to go back to the hotel. I wanted to see the girl again. The detective had still not returned my calls, and in spite of her assistant's stern warning not to do anything, I felt that this responsibility had been left in my hands.

There was another girl at the front desk. Very young. Blonde hair and freckles and sweet brown eyes. I asked her when Ramona was next on shift.

"Oh," the girl said, "she's gone."

"Where? When?"

"You know her?" she asked.

"Yes," I lied.

"I don't know. It was out of nowhere. She and her brother—they recently came into quite a bit of money. They moved up north. Bought a big house by the ocean."

"Where?" I asked again. "Where."

She didn't know.

I called the detective again. She did not answer. She did not call me back.

When you are headed for conservatory, no one ever warns you about the loneliness. When you are interviewing and auditioning and traveling across the country alone on a Greyhound bus because your mother cannot afford plane tickets; when you are writing essays and appearing before scholarship committees in a thrifted suit that is slightly too tight; when you are in an empty recital hall before a jury of three, holding your violin gently at the neck while they ask you what studio you are from, and you have to say you were never in a studio, you learned at school, public school; when you are hoping and praying and wishing all day every day and all night every night that you get in, because this is all you ever wanted, this is all you need to make you complete, to make you human—no one ever tells you about the loneliness. That it will be you, alone, late night after late night in a practice room, six until midnight, bitter cold on the walk home. You, alone, waking up early to run scales and arpeggios and etudes before arriving at rehearsal. You, alone, picking apart the Schoenberg in your professor's empty basement office until the melodies unhinge.

And then, maybe, the one person who keeps you sane, the girl in the practice room next door, the girl who brings you coffee for the late nights and donuts for the early mornings, the only girl to have noticed you in years, is taken from you.

I ask you: what then?

It was February, and then it was March. The detective didn't call. It was clear to me that Sedona was dead. If I had been holding out hope before, it was gone now.

April, May.

And then, she came. Locals found her in a cove up north, disoriented and half-naked in the water. A gold leaf in her hand. She said she remembered nothing.

I didn't get to see her before she went on the morning shows. Before she was out there all shining and starving-skinny, smiling bright for the hosts, saying how it was a miracle, saying how her past wouldn't hold her down.

I called the boyfriend. I kept calling until he picked up.

"Have you seen her?" I said. I didn't even bother with hello.

"No."

"Has she called you?"

"No."

This was the end of our conversation.

Around the same time, two people were reported missing from the town where Sedona had appeared. They showed the faces on the news, and it was Ramona and her brother. I assumed this was significant. I did not call the detective.

The school waved her through juries. Hadn't touched a piano in months, and she passed with flying colors. That was the day I finally saw her. I was waiting. Waiting outside the jury room, pacing and angry and longing. She had been avoiding me. Changed the locks on her doors. Dodged my calls. And I was at the end of my rope.

She emerged breathless and shaking and grinning ear to ear. She was in her concert black for probably the last time. After this, she would only wear ballgowns. Colors. All the colors. Never black again. She would only grow in fame from this moment, was already growing, right then, as she was stepping out of the jury room and into the hallway bright with sun. Everyone in the world wanted her in their concert hall. The found girl. The miracle girl. The girl with the golden touch.

"Sedona," I said.

She had walked right past me. She hadn't seen me in the shadow of the doorway.

"Clara," she said. She looked surprised. I had caught her off-guard.

"I've been calling you," I said.

"I know."

"Why didn't you answer?"

"I've been—coming back has been—I can't say how—"

Her glow was leaving her. Her eyes shifted like she had been cornered.

"I was so scared for you. I thought you were dead."

"I know. I'm really sorry. I've been busy."

"Busy."

She cradled her music books against her chest almost as a shield. Her head bent toward the floor. I was reminded of the way they taught us to bow back when we were littles playing May Song and Lightly Row: *Heads down. One, two, gee I like them shoes. And up!*

"It's just been—" Her voice was fading. "All that lost time—and returning, trying to get well again, I can't—and the season filling up already, and practicing, all the press, I don't know how to headline a program, I hardly have time to breathe."

"Right. Well. I've been busy too. You know, auditioning, with the rest of the untouchables."

She reared back, stung. "You can't deny me this. After everything I've been through."

"After everything you've been through? After everything *I've* been through—!"

Silence.

I hung my head, immediately ashamed.

"Oh, Clara." Her face softened. Sadness, and pity. And something else I couldn't define.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry. Just, please, just—can we go somewhere? Can we talk?"

"I can't handle this right now," she said. "I can't handle you right now."

"Why?"

"Because," she said, and that was the only answer I ever got. The next morning, I opened my door to find a small shoebox of my things, packed and folded neatly. I called her number, but the line was disconnected. Her parents' numbers too. Disconnected, disconnected.

She wasn't the only one to leave us behind—just the first. There were a precious few others, of course, who leapt into the stratosphere, who became regulars at Aspen, who were headlining Carnegie, who were interviewed on public radio, who never had to teach lessons

unless it was a masterclass at the conservatory, who were living the lives we had always dreamed of living.

But for most of us—the rest of us—it was harder than we had been promised. There were the private lessons, yes. Full studios for all of us, even the ones who had symphony chairs. And there were corporate gigs. Funerals. Weddings. We played Canon in D far too many times. There were symphony auditions. Many of them. Waiting and waiting and waiting for that spot to open up, for somebody to die. And every audition, a hundred of us in that room.

Some of us won symphony spots. Some of us never did. Strange, Davis always said, that school was the last time he would play with an orchestra. He wished he had known then. He might have held onto it—those final bars.

Years later, when Sedona was rich and famous and dating a pretty actress and on international tour, she came to play with the symphony. My symphony. I was summoned up to her dressing room. I knocked on the door and she answered all in gold. Gold dress. Gold leaves around her neck and in her hair. Her earrings were butterflies in flight. She was shimmering, almost gold herself. I felt afraid.

She embraced me. I tasted metal in my mouth.

"I've kept track of you," she said. "I was so pleased to see you won a chair."

I said nothing. What was there to say? Fifteen years with no word, and now this. I had spent the better part of a decade trying to untangle myself from the memory of her, and I feared that if I opened my mouth, all of that darkness would come rushing back in.

"I wanted us to make things right," she said. And then she looked at me expectantly, like I had been waiting all my life for this, for this chance to forgive.

The next summer, the news broke: two statues had been discovered in the cove where Sedona had appeared. A man and a woman. Solid gold. Caught with arms outstretched, almost in flight. They played the footage over and over again—the ocean gloom and slanted light, the kelp and the algae-green bodies, glinting cold, unmoving in a heavy tide.

Confessions

The year that we both turned twenty-seven, I wished for Flossie St. Clair's husband to die and then he died.

This sort of thing had never happened to me before. After, I tried wishing for more things. I wished for him to not be dead. I wished for myself to be dead. I wished I had never wished anything at all. But nothing changed. He was still gone.

I debated whether or not to confess. To Flossie, to a priest, to anyone. But the thing of it is—it was too strange. The whole thing was too strange. Too impossible. And even though I knew I was responsible for JD MacAlasdair's death, even though it was my wish that killed him, I knew that no one would understand. And if they did understand, they would condemn me.

Well, I condemned myself.

So I said nothing. I said nothing when Flossie called me, sobbing, to tell me he was gone. I said nothing when she buried him. And I said nothing when, weeks later, she came to me saying that she had a feeling, a dark feeling, a feeling unlike any she'd ever had before.

x

The day after JD's funeral, Flossie and I rowed the dinghy to the cove so we could dump all JD's marbles in the ocean. JD had an enormous collection of marbles from all over the world. He was a traveler and he'd been everywhere.

On the way out into the cove Flossie was crying a lot and three times we almost turned back. She didn't want to dump out the marbles, but we had to because of the note. It wasn't official—more of a last wish than anything, just a piece of paper JD had left tacked onto the will. But Flossie took it really seriously. She took everything about JD seriously.

When we got to the middle of the cove I waited for a long time while Flossie sniffled. Eventually I tapped her on the shoulder and I said, “The weather’s about to turn.”

“I know,” she said.

“It’s about to get rough out here.”

“I know.”

“So we should probably do it.”

“Okay,” she said, and then together we turned the big box of marbles into the sea. They flashed clean and bright as they sank, these small spots of color disappearing into the dark.

On the way home, there was a big cloud at our backs, a storm front arriving, like a tall purple cliff rushing across the sea. The dark came on quick. We made it back before the rain.

x

A few weeks after Flossie and I dumped the marbles, they began to wash up on shore, because that is what things do when you throw them in the ocean. People at the beach started picking them up and taking them home, because they didn’t know the marbles were the JD’s marbles. They just thought that the marbles were everybody’s marbles.

Flossie was furious. She took to yelling at people on the beach, like that crazy old man in town who yells at pigeons. She tried to explain about JD being dead, and about his marbles being the last thing of him, and about how the marbles need to be in the ocean because that was his final wish.

But as it turned out, people in town didn’t understand. First of all, they weren’t the biggest supporters of JD on account of his aggressive tactics regarding waterfront real estate. And second, they didn’t get why the marbles needed to be in the ocean at all. But really, I think they were just excited because the sea glass at Seal Cove wasn’t very good anymore—it was

mostly brown from the beer bottles that high school kids smashed out by the rocks—and the marbles were pretty and colorful and sort of livened up the whole beach.

"You dumped them in the ocean," one woman said. "And as of that moment they were public property. The property of the public."

"You're stealing from a dead man," Flossie said.

"No," said the woman. She held up her big green marble to the sun. "I'm taking what's mine."

Flossie had her fists balled up at her sides and she was shaking like maybe she was going to hurt that woman. Her face was turning red. I could even see red through the roots of her silky yellow hair. She lunged toward the woman and I lunged after her. I caught her and looped my arms around her to hold her back.

"It's not worth it," I said. "JD wouldn't want you to."

Flossie turned into me, dropping her face into my shoulder, and cried like she was so ashamed. Later, she would confess to me that she was worried she was beginning to lose her mind. The paranoia was taking over, keeping her up at night, keeping her from eating, keeping her from washing, keeping her from anything except that singular, pulsing thought:

What happened to him wasn't an accident.

I said nothing of my impressions. I didn't yet know for sure that I had killed him. I suspected. I suspected strongly. The feeling that ran over me when she called to tell me he was gone, the tremor that came when I remembered my wish—

But I didn't yet know—the confirmation would come later. And so I said nothing of what I had done. Instead, I told her she was crazy, and I gave her the number of my therapist.

x

A year before JD died, I got held up in the city. Some desperate junkie, looking for cash to burn. He took my wallet and my phone. After, I called Mama from a stranger's phone but she didn't answer. Then I called him. I didn't want to call him. We hadn't spoken since the day I quit. Since the day he asked her to marry him.

But other than Mama and Flossie, work was the only other number I knew by heart.

He sent a car to pick me up. The car dropped me at the office and I took the elevator to the top floor. His new assistant—the one they hired after me—let me in and told me to wait—he wasn't yet back from dinner.

I slumped in the chair in front of his desk, bleeding from my forehead, petulant like a child. The assistant passed by the door every few minutes to peek in on me—probably to make sure I wasn't bleeding on his new leather chairs, or maybe just trying to get a good look at the woman who was intruding on her territory.

She was working late, I noted grimly, and seemed to be almost happy about it. Happy that he had kept her here. I'm sure he told her he needed her. I'm sure she believed him. And when she talked about him she called him *Mr. MacAlasdair,* like the way I did when I first started working for him, all formal and trying to keep my distance before I fell headfirst in love.

Yes, I recognized the signs.

When I got the job—straight out of college, only twenty-two, young and eager and underqualified—Mama as good as told me how this would end. She said, "This is a man who likes to walk all over people. He chose you for a reason. He chose you because you're weak. And he's going to walk all over you."

There was blood on my hands. I was tempted to wipe it on the chair, but I didn't, mostly because the assistant kept watching me.

I waited a half hour before he finally came. He took one look at my forehead and ordered another car to the hospital.

"I'll come with you," he said.

"You don't have to," I said.

"I want to."

"No, you don't."

"I do."

"You just want me not to hate you anymore."

"I can want two things," he said. And then he smiled. Big smile.

"You're not allowed to want anything from me," I said. "You already took Flossie."

"I didn't take her. She came willingly. In spite of all you said to dissuade her."

"You," I said, "are her biggest mistake."

"I'm a mistake?"

"Yes."

He nodded slowly. "Good to know."

He came to the hospital anyway.

x

In the hospital waiting room, he filled out my information without asking me for any of it. He talked to me to keep me from falling unconscious. He held my hand while they gave me stiches.

They released me to his care, let him take me home.

x

I don't know why I do bad things. I just do.

Those days, I used to get so mad. I wanted to hurt people. I wanted to hurt myself. Little things set me off. Loud noises. Tourists at the beach. Cars going too slow down Route 77. Solicitors at my door. Mama hovering over me while I made tea, telling me I was doing it wrong. Being alone at night. Being alone in the morning. Being alone.

I was so angry. I was shivering with my anger. I carried it with me all the time.

There was the sense that I was at the edge of control, drifting away.

I don't say this to absolve myself. I just want you to understand where I was, where my mind was when I did what I did.

JD was so beautiful, you know. Almost as beautiful as Flossie, and Flossie is very beautiful. But I suppose rich boys are always beautiful. Mama says it's the tax breaks, but I think it's the gold flecks they have in their face creams.

In any case. That night after he took me home—muted shadows, cool blue, barefoot in my living room, his fingers trailing over the leaves of my potted avocado trees—I knew I was going to do it. I flew at him, kissed him. And he kissed me back.

x

I think he hated himself as much as I hated myself. Maybe more. I know he had been unfaithful to her before me. People talked.

I did crazy things to be with him. I crawled out of second-floor windows when Flossie came home early. I drove hours away so we could have dinner without running into anyone we knew. I lied to Mama. I lied to Flossie. My best friend. I put my life on hold for him, knowing that it could only end in disaster.

Mama found out. Of course she did. People talk. And she was immediately disapproving. "JD MacAlasdair is a wolf," she said. "You aren't the only woman to have him in her bed."

As if I didn't know.

"He's never going to love you," she said.

And that I knew too. But back then, I didn't care. I had this picture of myself, you know, like I was so twisted. So messed up that no one could ever love me. Sometimes I didn't even feel like a person. I was floating, floating above myself, apart. Apart, apart, apart.

Doing bad things made me feel real.

I wonder if it made him feel real too. If that's why he kept cheating. I guess I'll never know.

x

A few months into the affair, JD took me to see that hidden cave on the east side of Shelter Island—the one under the cliff where you can row a dinghy right through and there's light coming through the ceiling, and underneath the water, starfish everywhere. He took me as if showing me something new for the first time, and I didn't have the heart to tell him that I had already seen it. That Flossie and I had spent countless summer days here when we were kids.

Well, he was so excited to show me. He was excited to show me how to sink all the way down to the floor, how to let the starfish climb onto my hands and crawl up my arms, how to rise back up to the surface, the starfish peeling off of me as I rose, and then to look back down to see them falling through water, orange and purple and red.

After, I was tired, so we rested on a rock at the edge of the cave while he ran his fingers up and down my spine. Moments passed before he said, "You know—Flossie misses you." I tensed up, but he continued to run his fingers over me. "I know you haven't been speaking lately, but she really does miss you."

"What are you doing," I said.

“Touching you.”

“No. Not that.”

“She talks about you all the time, Callie.”

“I don’t really care.”

“I think you do.”

“I don’t want to talk about Flossie.”

“That’s new,” he said. “Used to be you couldn’t shut up about her.”

“Well.” I shrugged. “Used to be she was my best friend. But things change.”

“I don’t see why things did change.”

Sometimes he really was an idiot. “She married you,” I said.

x

They met at the opening of one of our hotels. Well, *his* hotels. I invited Flossie to the party because I had no one else to invite—Mama had already been too many times. We got ready together in her bedroom. We both wore black. She looked beautiful. She always looked beautiful. I looked fine. I always looked fine.

She had never met JD before. I talked of him constantly, of course. I was in love with him. I had never admitted to it, but she knew. He knew. I’m sure everyone knew.

I don’t know why I was in love with him—proximity, I suppose. Pathetic. But the eyes want what they can see. At least, my eyes wanted. His never did. Not then.

And yet, from the first moment he saw Flossie—pathetic. God, he was after her so fast. And she ate it up. She always loved to be the center of attention. Now that she’s a widow, she’ll be the center of attention for the rest of her life. Everything she could have ever wanted.

I guess that's cruel. I'm sure she misses him. But two things can be true at once, you know. And there's a certain glory in being the one left behind.

x

Here's the thing, you know, about best friends. You think they're going to be forever—and they're supposed to be forever. That's the promise you make.

But sometimes I used to get this feeling—like she was only holding on to me until something better came along. She wanted to be in love so bad, you know. I guess we all do. It's this fantasy—if only you can get someone to care about you more than you care about yourself, maybe everything will be all right. Maybe you'll just make it.

There was a series of failed relationships—men who wanted too much or not enough. And at the end of every one Flossie would be at my doorstep, falling into my arms, swearing that this was the last time, that she was going to stop trying, that she was going to learn to love herself without anyone else.

When she started with him, I was angry, you know, but I didn't do anything, because I expected it to end. Of course I expected it to end—with her, things always did. And besides, he was serially unfaithful. I was so sure he would ruin things.

Somehow, it lasted.

I didn't go to their wedding.

I guess it was beautiful. I guess they were beautiful. I guess they were both happy, so incandescently happy. That's what people said.

Before the wedding, after the invitations went out, after I replied no, she showed up at my front door with my RSVP in her hand, asking me what was wrong with me, asking me why I wouldn't come.

“Why?” she said. “Why can’t you just be happy that I’m happy?”

What an impossible question.

It was raining, clouds gathering, everything in blue shadow, the air wet and cold and poised, waiting for lighting to strike. I stood at the door, blocking her entrance while she shivered on the doorstep, standing small and straight under the overhang so she wouldn’t get wet.

“Couldn’t you just come?” she said. “Couldn’t you just do this one thing for me?”

“No,” I said.

“Why?”

“He’s bad for you. He can’t stay true. He’s incapable.”

“He said he could. For me.”

I shook my head. “He always says that.” And then I was worried that she was going to come out and accuse me of the real reason, the reason which she and I both knew to be true but which neither of us had ever said aloud, so I told her, “But you know what, that’s only half of it, really, because you haven’t been around since you got together with him. You haven’t been there.”

This was true. I had been angry about this for a long time.

“I’m sorry,” she said, wilting slightly. “It’s been busy. I should have made time.”

“I knew this would happen,” I said. “I knew you would give me up the minute you found someone who would stay. Both of you.”

She paused, breath catching in her mouth, then finally said, “I feel like I don’t even know how to talk to you anymore.”

“The feeling is mutual,” I said, and then I closed the door.

x

Six months into the affair, I got pregnant. An accident. I was beside myself, no idea what to do—I called him and he just made it worse. He kept saying, "You know, it's your choice—it's your choice."

"Obviously," I said to him, "I know it's my choice. You don't have to tell me that for it to be true."

"I know. I just—I don't know what to say—"

"It seems like you know what you want to say," I said, "but you're too scared to say it."

Silence.

I hung up.

x

And that was the beginning of the end. Most times it is with these sorts of things. I guess I always thought he might leave her, if only I tried, if only I was enough, if only—

But he didn't want it. He didn't want me. He made that so clear. Even when I told him that I wanted to keep it. I wanted the baby so badly. Just to have someone of my own. Someone who would stay, because they had no other choice, because they were mine.

x

The pregnancy ended itself within the first few months. The blood came out green. *Green*. The doctor said she had never seen anything like it. She was worried for me. Worried I wasn't taking care of myself. And I wasn't, you know.

I wasn't eating much then. When I was a kid, I had always heard that my mama used to be so thin that when she turned sideways she'd almost disappear. I liked that—the idea that I could be so delicate that I might blow away with the wind.

I knew it was bad for the baby, but I couldn't stop.

At first, everybody told I looked beautiful. They could see the thinness in my face, the lean ropes of muscle in my arms, that desperate starved look of one who has recently lost too much weight too quickly.

They liked that I had taken it upon myself to get skinny. But then I got too skinny, and they stopped telling me I was beautiful. They just looked worried, but not in a nice way. More in a way like after they were done worrying about me sweetly to my face, they were going to go say mean things about me to the neighbors.

But I don't think that was why it came out green, you know. It wasn't the not eating. I think it's because there's something bad in me. Something really bad, and that's why the baby couldn't stay. He had to escape from me.

After a while, you know, JD was the only one who still thought I was beautiful. Even when he was ending things, he thought I was beautiful. I know because I kept asking him, just to make sure. And he kept getting frustrated, saying, "God, Callie, come on. You know you're beautiful." And then I'd say, "Then why are you leaving me?" And then he'd say, "I can't keep doing this to Flossie." And then I'd say, "I thought I could be enough for you." And then he wouldn't say anything at all.

x

After he died, things went almost back to normal with Flossie—like the past few years had never happened. It was almost all I could have wanted. She needed me more than she ever had before. She needed me so desperately. I craved that—being needed.

When I was still working for him, he needed me, you know. To keep his schedule, to make sure he never missed a meeting, never missed a call. But needing isn't the same thing as loving, and I was replaceable. I know that now.

x

A few months after the funeral, Flossie joined me for dinner. She came by in the early afternoon. We went out to the flats and dug for clams, baked them on the beach. We collected the marbles that had washed ashore then threw them back into the surf. After night fell and the chill set in, we lit a fire.

Midges swarmed in the firelight, shimmering in the haze of heat. Flossie watched the flames blankly. The midges were biting, but she didn't swat them off. She didn't move.

"Flossie," I said. "I'm worried for you."

She shifted her gaze to me. "Why?"

"You're not yourself."

"My husband just died."

"I know."

"I had to bury him in a closed casket."

"I know."

"I am the grieving widow."

"Flossie—it looks like you aren't sleeping."

"I'm not. Because it wasn't an accident. I'm telling you, it wasn't an accident."

"And I'm telling *you,* it was." I took both her hands carefully in mine. "Everyone else from the crash is dead."

“It’s more than a feeling now,” she said, looking away from me. “It’s a certainty. I’m more sure of this than I’ve ever been of anything. Someone did this to him.”

“But who?” I said. *Fool. Coward. Fool.*

Her eyes returned to me, cool and distant. “I don’t know. But I will. I will know. It’s only a matter of time.”

x

Shortly after our dinner on the beach, Flossie had his body exhumed. She wanted a second autopsy. But there was barely any of him left, at least anything recognizable—his body was green. All of it. Everything. His whole body. Green.

I came with her to see the body. She said she needed me. I held her hand. She had to beg them to let her see him—they didn’t want to let her look. They said no one should look. No one should have even dug him up. He should have been left to the Earth, or a toxic waste dump, or anywhere other than the examiner’s table.

The moment I saw him, I threw up in my mouth, and then I swallowed it because Flossie was holding onto my arm so tightly I couldn’t leave.

“I don’t understand,” Flossie kept saying. “How could he be green? How could this have happened?”

That was when I started to really understand that it was me. That I did this.

x

I’ll tell you what I did. And it’s awful, but I’ll tell you.

After he ended it for the last time, after he told me *no more, never again,* after I ran into them downtown—both smiling and laughing like I had never mattered, like I wasn’t even a stop

on the road to their happiness—after they met my wave with blank looks, after they turned away coldly—

I went back to Shelter Island, to the cave with the starfish. I tied up the boat and swam to the middle of the pool, I took a breath, and I let myself sink. I let my breath leave me in streams. I let my head become light. I let my chest constrict. I let the starfish crawl onto me. I let them pull at my skin. I let them pull me down.

And then I wished to die.

But then, I was panicking, because, no, that wish wasn't right, because in spite of all my intentions, my lungs still wanted to draw breath, because I wanted to live, I did want to live, I was just so angry. Just so angry.

So then I wished for him to die.

As I broke the surface, gasping for air, oxygen searing through me, there was one clear thought in my mind—less of a thought and more of an image, a knowing, an understanding:

He will be gone. He will be gone soon.

x

I suppose now is maybe the point when you would want to know why. Why, why, why. Why was I so angry. Why was I so sick.

And I guess you could talk about Mama and how she wanted too much, expected too much. You could talk about Flossie and how she was always light and beautiful and easy and I never could be. You could talk about JD asking everything of me but never giving anything in return. You could talk about the baby, and losing him, and how even he didn't want me, and you could talk about the loneliness and you could talk about the way it was so dark every morning when I woke up, even when there was sun.

You could say it was a lot of reasons. You could say it was nothing at all. But I don't think it matters, really, the reasons—when it all comes to the same end.

So I won't waste your time.

x

She found out. I don't know how she found out. Someone told her, I suppose, about the affair. Well, people talk.

She came pounding down my door early in the morning, burst in when I pulled the lock, pushed right past me into the living room, down the hallway, into my room. She began to tear through my dresser, opening drawers and boxes until she found what she was looking for—a handful of marbles, green marbles, nestled in the bottom of my jewelry box.

She held the box up high, turning to me, her face tight and furious. "Well?"

"Well what," I said.

"So you were sleeping with him?"

I shrugged. "Half of town was sleeping with him." Not entirely true. But true enough.

"You're sick," she said.

"I know." I did know.

"Why?"

"Why am I sick?"

"No, why would you—"

"Why does anybody? I was lonely."

"He was my husband."

"I know."

“God!” she shouted. She threw my jewelry box on the floor and glass and marbles shattered everywhere. “What is wrong with you?”

“I wish I knew.”

“All this time, I had this feeling, this terrible feeling, and it was you—”

“I’m sorry, Flossie,” I said, and I meant it.

“Shove it,” she said. She stormed past me, heading for the doorway. “I never want to see you again.”

“Wait—Flossie—” I reached out and grabbed her arm. “If I could just explain—”

“Let go of me.”

“Just wait—”

She looked down at the place where my hand touched her skin, her expression suddenly going blank. “What’s happening,” she said. “What’s happening.”

I glanced down at her arm, and it was green. Green, green, spreading from my fingertips, spreading up her arm, across her neck, her chest, over her chin, down her torso, her legs, spreading, spreading, until she was all green, until she was gone.

The Diver

I have this memory of driving out to the country for a party—there's snow on the ground, snow everywhere, light spilling from an open doorway, Westley laughing, I'm in a green dress I'm with Elisa, something about champagne and a camel coat, unbuttoned—and I can't stop thinking about it.

It was near the end. I know this. One of the last parties. But the same as all the others. A crowd gathered around me in the living room—come, come, see the miracle! The crowd dispersing—the miracle will be back next time. Elisa falling into me—her tongue in my mouth in a darkened room. Then goodbyes, goodbye to the crowd, goodbye to Westley—thank you kindly for the party, what a party it has been.

We left too late. My hands white on the wheel, quiet on the drive home. I took a turn too fast, car slipping in the snow. Heart in my throat even after I steadied course. She didn't admonish. She knew I was angry. Those days, I was often angry.

This, I remember.

Let's work our way backwards. Let's start with now, a house with no mirrors, my trembling hands, my insides rotting while my skin fades. Let's start with yesterday, Elisa on the silver screen, Elisa throwing up fish. Let's start at eighteen, Westley in the hotel lobby, I'm in my uniform and I'm calling him Sir.

No. Even before that. Let's start when the tree fell.

June. I'm seventeen. My birthday is in the morning. Westley is arriving in the morning. All the hotel staff are buzzing. He isn't a famous movie star, not yet, but he *is* in movies, and anyway, he's famous to us, because he grew up in town.

The tree falls in the night. Our tree, the oak. It's a clear night—a cold night. The heat of summer has yet to arrive. No wind. So, it's unexpected, yes? The slow crack, like a spine breaking, the whistle of air through branches, then the thud, and dust rising.

Mother and I stand at the base and look up to the place where it snapped. Fifteen feet, give or take. So high. Why did it snap? I don't know. Mother says it's because my father left, and this time, he's not coming back.

It missed the house by an inch.

Morning. I'm eighteen now. I'm at the front desk when Westley arrives. He's tall. Rich men often are. He has dark eyelashes and a movie star smile, and the disconcerting sort of presence that is common to movie stars when you meet them in person—he is both smaller and larger than life.

He asks for a tour. I say yes, because we aren't allowed to say no. This is part of our training. Always yes. Never no. And it is Sir and Ma'am. Remember who you are. Well, it's an expensive sort of place. Waterfront and the like. The nicest thing about this town. One night costs more than I make in a month. And so there must be standards, the manager tells us, for our decorum.

I show him the terrace: mossy stone and an open view of the ocean. I show him the dining room: still draped in silk from yesterday's wedding. I show him the ballroom: gold and disheveled after the party. We take the elevator to his room. In the elevator, he turns to me.

He knows about me. About my father, about what we do. Someone told him—I don't know who. I ask but he won't tell. He came here, he says, to see if I could, if I *would* stop time. If I would keep him young.

I say, what if I can. He says, anything you want, it's yours.

I take him home after my shift. We enter through the back door—the movie star and I. My mother is at the stove making soup. If she's surprised to see Westley Curtis standing in her kitchen, she doesn't show it. Westley shakes her hand. He compliments the aroma of her soup. He notes our fallen tree. We are indeed lucky, he agrees, that it missed the house. He politely excuses himself, then I lead him to my room.

He sits on the bed while I gather supplies: a soft brush and ocean water, a small velvet pouch filled with powder that shines like the moon.

I tell him, look up, and he raises his face to me. I hold his chin with two fingers. The light from the window is yellow, heavy. I lean in. With my index finger I trace the slight wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, his mouth. The little peach hairs at his temples quiver under my breath.

I say, are you sure you want this? It's barely noticeable.

Yes, he says. I want it.

I say, okay, and I mix the powder and the ocean water in a glass. The room smells strongly of fish.

What is it? he says, wrinkling his nose.

A secret, I say. Close your eyes.

He closes them. I dip the brush into my glass and smooth the treatment over his face. The powder in the water glints softly in the sun, a slow, undulating sort of light, like the rise and fall

of the ocean. I pray I am doing it right. This is my first time and I hope he can't tell. But it seems my father has taught me well: his wrinkles are disappearing.

When it's done, I show him in a small hand mirror. He gazes in wonder.

Does it last? he asks.

A few months, I say.

Nothing lasts, he says.

No, I say. Nothing lasts.

My mother says nothing at dinner, only watches me with sharp and accusing eyes. I can tell she is angry. Disappointed. She's forever looking down her nose at it all—my father's business. She always says she wants higher things for me, though I'm not sure what sort of higher things. She never really explains.

Westley pays me well. Lots of money. More money than my father has seen in a day working in this town, I am sure. I wish I could tell him, but he isn't here. My mother was right—he's left for the last time. I don't know this, though. Not yet.

August. Westley comes back. He wants more. The lines are returning. See? he says. He leans across the hotel desk, leans in close. See them?

I can see the lines, yes, but barely. I tell him I can give him more, but then I'll be at the end of my supply. I've been treating my father's clients in town, and this has run me low. I'll need to source more powder.

I have never done this part alone—the gathering. My father has always been there with me. But he's still gone, and I'm still waiting for him to return. I don't know that I will always be

waiting, that he is at the far-flung reaches of the Earth, forever searching for secrets only he knows.

But Westley is anxious. He says, so yes, so fine, use it up, use it all up, I'll pay you to get more. I have the money.

I say, it's not so simple, and he says, what do you mean?

And I realize that it's impossible to explain my situation, impossible to explain that I am flying in the dark, solo for the first time. Impossible to admit I have no idea what I'm doing.

So I say, never mind, and I prepare myself to go diving.

I have learned to swim with my eyes open. My father taught me long before he disappeared the first time. He'd push me gently under the bathwater, saying, come on, Ruthie, you can do it, just open your eyes. Smiled when I came up gasping. His big hand smoothed hair away from my face. Good try. Now, again.

I think of this as I pilot the skiff out to the islands, to the edge of Smugglers Cove. Think of his tests: how many fingers? Think of his hand on my back, keeping me down: hold, Ruthie, hold. Only a few more seconds, and then you can breathe.

I am a strong swimmer because of him. I fear the ocean because of him.

I anchor the skiff and ready myself to go down. Swing my legs over the edge, let my toes touch water. The ocean is very cold today. Clear like a cut gem.

I sink to the ocean floor.

The sun is high and bright. Light bends through the water and stretches across the sand in a net of gold threads. I pass my fingers through the light.

I am here to gather sand dollars.

There's a colony in this cove. Thousands of them, above and below the sand. Dark and spiny and strange—alive. This is the way they look before they die, before they wash up on the shore, bleached white.

Even with the coating of black spines, the five-petaled flower at the center of a sand dollar will be visible—radial symmetry. I do not want these sand dollars. I want the ones with seven petals. Slightly darker than the rest. Smaller. Thicker spines. When dried, the spines will fall off and the remaining skeleton will be bone white, almost shimmering. These are the sevens. These are the ones with the magic.

My father never found the sevens anywhere other than this cove. They were few and far between when he first discovered them—fewer now that he's been taking them. And now I'm taking too.

Westley invites me to a party. There will be people there, he says, who would pay well for my treatment. I'm in the midst of packing for college, nearing the end of my last two weeks at the hotel. But I say yes.

The party is out on Little Canis. I have never been to this island. Well, it's all summer houses. I tell Westley I'll take my skiff, but he says, no, come with me, we'll take a water taxi.

On the water taxi, Westley tells me he has something for me. He holds up his hand. A thin necklace dangles from his fingers—silver and faceted glass, iridescent.

So you can fit in, he says.

Thank you, I say.

We're both imposters here, he says.

And I don't know if that's true, at least for him anymore, but it's clear he believes it.

We arrive together. I have just done Westley's face, and he looks younger than ever. He looks like he could be my boyfriend. People notice me when I'm near him. They study me like I am a curiosity, like I am a rare thing. I like this feeling. I have never been a rare thing before.

He touches my shoulder. Light. Barely there. He can see I am tense. He says, relax. Do you want a drink?

I nod yes. He brings me an old fashioned.

Better? he asks.

Yes.

Are you ready for them?

Yes.

I take the clients on the back porch. The house is a salt-worn thing—three stories, grey shingle siding, barn wood floors and an ancient heating system. Everything on this island is sort of ancient, especially the money.

There's an older woman: Tall. Pale eyes. Hair cut to the jaw. Pearl earrings. She wants her face, her neck, her hands. There's a young man: Slim. Open collar. A watch with five hands. He wants his laugh lines, and the line under his navel where his belt cuts into skin.

There's a very young woman. A girl, really. No older than me. She's brown-eyed and sweetly rounded, immaculately beautiful. There's a line on her forehead from each time she raises her eyebrows in expression. I remove it. After, she studies herself in the hand mirror which Westley has procured from the host. A smile flashes across her face and her eyebrows lift and fall—I watch the line reappear and then disappear again.

It strikes me that these people are, in the end, no different than the ones I treat in town, back on the mainland. It's just that these people have more money.

After a while, I run out of powder. Westley tells everyone, next time, folks, and the remaining crowd disperses.

I sit with the girl on the back steps. She smokes and I watch her. Her dress is black organza with a skirt full of silver stars. I want to touch each one. I wish I had a skirt of silver stars. Maybe one day, I think, when I have sold enough treatments. Then I can have nice shining things. Well, I already have a necklace.

She leans in when she talks. Her body is close to my body and I can feel the heat of her skin. I learn she's the daughter of a banker. She just finished school, and she wants to be an actress. Her name is Elisa.

So, she says, you came here with Westley Curtis?

Yes, I say.

Together?

Not together. Well, together at the same time, but not together like together.

She laughs. Would you introduce me?

Of course, I say, too eager. Anything.

She's laughing again. Come here, she says, come with me. And she leads me through wet grass and spiderwebs to the orchard, through the old trees already losing their leaves and their apples, and she pulls me behind the farthest one and she says, have you ever kissed a girl? And I haven't, but a few seconds later, I have.

For the second time that night, I am a rare thing.

November. I'm at college, and Westley wants more, so I return home to go diving. I've never gone diving in winter. We always gathered in summer. I tell no one I'm going, though I know this is unwise. It is so easy to drown.

I wear my father's wetsuit. Worn, ragged, slightly too long. Everything but my face is covered. My cheeks are raw from wind. I swing my legs over the edge of my boat, toes touch water. Even through the wetsuit, the water is so cold. So cold.

My father is still gone—he didn't leave an address. I miss him though I know my mother does not. Where is he? I have so many questions for him. I wish he would come back. I didn't think I would have to do this on my own.

I pull my feet from the water. Put them back in. Pull them out again.

I've heard that the sands shift in winter. Through the water I can see that the colony is moved, slightly, from where it was before. Farther out, deeper. A longer dive for me. Not very safe. I think even my father would disapprove. Though perhaps not.

He was always vain, my father. He needed the treatment, I think, more than any of his clients ever did. I wonder: did he take a supply with him when he left? How much? At what point will he run out, and when he does, will he return home?

Cold, cold.

I cross my fingers, hold my breath, and I let myself fall.

Elisa calls me. She wants more too. She says, can I come to your house?

I'm back at school by now. I tell her, come here, then.

She comes.

After I fix the line on her forehead, we go for a walk around the lake. She tells me she's been out west. Westley got her some auditions. No one biting yet, but Westley says she's good. Westley says it's only a matter of time.

We sit on a log by the lake. It snowed last night. Only a few inches—the real snows will come in January. But the horizon is winter blue, and the lake has begun to freeze at the edges. This is the way it goes: the ice advances toward the center, then it closes over.

There's a sign near the lake which reads: do not go on or in water.

Elisa laughs at this. They mean, she says, don't go on the *ice.*

Perhaps, I say, they mean, don't go boating.

Then they should say that, she says.

I think to myself that they did say that. They were quite clear. But I don't say it aloud, because I am so completely enamored with her, and I want her to be enamored with me. And I'm worried that she isn't. I'm worried it's only the treatment. Even when it gets quiet, and then we are kissing once more, I still worry.

My father always taught me to be suspicious of people. We provide a service, he said. A service, and we have to be careful with the customers. This is why we don't waive fees for the ones who can't pay, yes? We can't afford to waive indiscriminately. People will always want more from you. People will take and take, if you let them. We can't let anyone take advantage of us. Of our kindness.

Summer again and I am back at the hotel. The treatments sell well, but college is expensive, especially with my father gone. We need all the help we can get. There hasn't been a call from him—not even a letter. My mother says he's probably dead. She says she doesn't care.

I think I care. But I can't tell if it's because I miss him, or because I am still worried that something will go wrong and he won't be here to fix it.

Westley returns for more. In the bathroom of his suite—soft sunlight, curtains billowing, trails of ivy down the windowpanes—I treat his face. There's a new wrinkle this time—a little furrow between his brows. He's been anxious, he says. He's filming. A new role, a big role. Maybe *the* role.

His agent says he's looking younger than ever, he tells me. She says that's why he got the role. He was looking too old, before. Getting too old. But it's something about him now, something. A glow.

Yes, I say. The treatment will do that.

Some people in this town, he says, they glow. I can see it.

My eyes are trained on my work, on the curves of his face. It's the treatment, I say. For some of them. Others are just like that.

I wonder how you get to be just like that? he muses.

You had glow, I say, even before.

I did?

Oh, psh. Like you didn't already know it.

You're too kind, he says, it a way that makes me think that he maybe didn't already know it. Maybe he isn't half as vain as I thought him to be. Well, I suppose I can't help but compare everyone to my father.

This role, Westley says, I really feel like I'm saying something. Finally. It's been years of these empty sort of parts—parts that aren't saying anything at all. Where the whole narrative is a wash. But now, getting this part—I think the story is important this time.

I'm happy for you, I say. You can open your eyes now.

Elisa is up for the summer. Her father's on Little Canis but she stays most nights on the mainland, first at her uncle's place, then, later, at mine.

On my day off, we drive up the coast to visit some old gardens. There are bees in the back corner and a greenhouse full of orchids. White shell paths, shade and roses. Koi in a shallow pond. On a bench by the bank of a small stream, I tell her I want her to be mine. She says she wants this too. I think she means it. I hope she does.

I am a sophomore. Elisa gets a part. She pays for me to fly west so I can visit her on the set. I've only been on a plane once before, years ago. I'm nervous the whole time. The lady next to me is sympathetic—she lends me her magazine. Westley is in it. There's a feature on his new movie, and how he keeps fit, and what he does in his spare time. Apparently, he's taken up wind surfing. I hadn't heard.

I'm going to visit my girlfriend, I say to the lady. She's going to be a movie star.

The lady smiles at me. Lucky you, she says.

Elisa comes to pick me up at the airport. It's still small time, still early days. Not big black car days—not yet. I run into her arms in the baggage claim. She's smiling so wide.

She shows me around the set, shows me the trailer she shares with another actor. It's messy—makeup and costumes everywhere, but, she says, laughing, it's home.

It's wonderful, I tell her. I'm very proud.

Thank you, she says, kissing me quick.

Suddenly she starts coughing. The coughing turns violent. She opens her hands and into them she coughs up a little fish. Oh, she says, looking down at it. Oh, how strange.

Oh god, I say. What just happened?

She lifts the fish to eye level, peers at it close. Shall I put it in water? she says.

I suppose, I say. I have no idea.

Get some for me, then, will you, Ruth?

I find a tall glass and fill it to the top. Gently, she places the fish into the water. The fish sinks, then unfurls. Alive. He's blue with a long swishing tail. I set the glass down on the table and we both bend over to look at him.

What in the world did you eat? I ask.

Nothing today, she says. I haven't eaten anything at all.

That's not healthy, Elisa, I say.

I know, she says.

I begin to worry that the fish is connected to the treatment. It's not impossible. I don't know of any other magic in Elisa's life. Any other reason she might cough up a fish alive.

I call Westley.

He answers after one ring: Hello?

In the background, loud noises, shouting. The sound of a crane and something falling.

Hello, I say. Sorry, are you on set?

Yes, he says.

I'm sorry, I say again. I just wanted to call to check up on you. On how the treatment is working for you at the moment.

It’s fine, he says, sounding surprised. It’s fine. I thought I wasn’t due for a while?

I’m just checking in.

Well, it’s fine.

Has anything—happened? Anything—anything strange?

Like what?

Anything strange with a fish?

No, he says shortly. Nothing strange with a fish. Is that all? I have to go.

That’s all, I say. Thank you.

And for a while, I dismiss this dark thought from my mind. For a while, I believe him.

I am a junior. I am a senior. I am graduated. Elisa gets sort of famous. Westley gets very famous. They are on the west coast. I stay east. Well, I’m still treating. I still have to gather.

Sometimes I go west. Sometimes they come east. Westley buys a lake house here, out in the country, upstate. Sometimes I visit him when he’s there. We drink whiskey on his back porch, watch the sun go down as mosquitos rise over the water, and then I treat his face.

Elisa convinces me to buy a house with my treatment money. I do—oceanside. One pretty thing I never thought I’d have, one among many. We’re happy there, sometimes. But often she’s gone. Often, I’m alone.

Occasionally, Elisa coughs up a fish. Westley never does.

Time slips by.

Westley wants more, so I go diving.

Elisa wants more, so I go diving.

Westley wants more, Elisa wants more, so I go diving.

Westley wants. Elisa wants. I go diving.

The yields are ever diminishing. Still, I gather.

I am twenty-four. Elisa is twenty-four. Elisa is about to get very famous, even more famous than Westley, though she doesn't know it yet, and neither do I. We can still exist outside of the world. We can still walk down the street hand in hand, and hardly anyone will recognize her. And if they do, it's in that slow, hazy sort of way where they lean and squint, second-guess themselves, and end up not saying anything at all.

I remember these days very clearly. I remember one afternoon, I'm on the sofa and she's watching herself in the mirror over the mantle, tracing along her laugh lines and smile lines and the line from when she wrinkles her nose in the sheepish way she does, and *that* line, the first line, on her forehead. I pat the sofa and tell her, come here, and she comes here, and then she says, all tucked into my arms, did you ever think of using it?

I look down at her. I am unsure how to respond.

She reaches up, trails her fingers light over my face. My own laugh lines. Smile lines.

There's barely anything there now, she says.

I'm not in front of a camera like you are, I say.

No, she says, of course not. It's only—

What, I say.

You have no idea, she says. The effect it has. The way people look at you after you have just had a treatment done. It's not just the lines. The lines are only part of it. It changes you, I think. It makes you into something more than yourself. And they can't stop looking at you.

I could never stop looking at you, I say. Treatment or not.

I know, she says.

In the end, I do it myself. The powder and the seawater. Apply in front of the mirror while Elisa watches with her chin on my shoulder. I just want to see.

It's strange I never cared if I was beautiful. I knew I was passable. I wasn't particularly arresting, and I knew I never would be. I contented myself with the knowledge that I was slender and had good hair. These attributes did me well, I knew. I was lucky enough.

But now. After.

Oh, my.

Elisa is famous. She gets a role in a film where a man loves a woman. The film is wildly successful, and now everyone knows her name.

I'm not allowed to walk any red carpets with her. Evidently, I'm bad for press. Elisa's manager explains it to me like this: when Elisa and her costar have premieres and interviews and those odd events where they touch the hands of their screaming adoring fans, there has to be the suggestion, the *possibility,* that they might fall in love, or that they are already in love. This is how Elisa will make more money. Understand?

I understand. Elisa's costar has his own Ruth. Sometimes she and I sit in greenrooms while the costar and Elisa glitter on television, and we talk about the way things were before they got famous. Once, I treat her face. She's a pretty little thing. She doesn't need it.

Westley starts throwing parties. Big parties. He's jealous of Elisa, of her success. He says he isn't, but he is. We're always at the parties, of course. It wouldn't be a party without Elisa. It wouldn't be a party without me.

Well, without my treatment.

I treat a lot of people at Westley's parties. Really famous people. Or people who want to be famous and are not yet, but one day will be. They're sort of ethereal, all of them. Meeting them is like first time I met Westley: they are smaller and larger than life.

At these parties, I am the star. Maybe even a bigger star than Elisa. Shining like her. Shining brighter than her. They can't get enough of me. But it's only because they want something from me. I understand, now, what my father meant, that people will take and take from you if you let them.

I let them.

I'm still treating myself. As it turns out, I can't stop. I get used to the way I look. The way I am younger, smoother, lovelier. That strange moonish sort of glow that lingers on my skin, on the skin all those I treat. Cold and gleaming.

The things I have now. Tailored dresses. Diamond earrings. Velvet furniture in my living room. Plate glass windows and a pool all done in Spanish tile. Black car, sleek and fast. My cupboards—always full. My calendar—overflowing. Beautiful things. Beautiful friends. I am spending like the money will never dry up.

They say you can spot a rich woman if she wears silk in the rain. I am not quite that wealthy, no, but I own more silk than any one person ought to. Sometimes I like to pull out my silk scarves and dresses, spread them over the bed, and just look at them. I take the fabric and slip it through my mother's wedding ring, just like my grandmother taught me.

"*That's how you tell if it's real.*"

Real, real, real.

It is around this time that I start to lose touch.

These are wild days, party days. Maybe we drink too much. Maybe we take some things we shouldn't. But I've never felt so reckless. Wired. Outside in the dark at three in the morning, vibrating with that feeling, that uneasy cool that comes before the day rises in heat, contemplating doing something dangerous.

What, I don't know. But something, something. I want to hurt. I want to feel pain.

Elisa is still coughing up fish. The pond in my garden is full of them. Shimmering blue.

Westley still says, no fish. I still believe him.

I take too many sand dollars.

Memories of this time are delicate. Watery. I try to untangle all of it, to make sense of it, but it seems distant, somehow, like a moon through the haze.

Things I do remember:

Elisa before an interview. Adjusting her left earring, dress flashing, smile bright.

Elisa in the snow. Back alley behind the bar. Soft footprints. Yellow glow.

Elisa at dawn. My finger under her nose. Still breathing.

I get a call from a hospital far, far away. When I answer they ask, is this Ruth? And I say yes, and then they say, we think we have your father. And they tell me his name and his description, and I say yes, it is my father, and they tell me, he's dying, would you like to come?

So I come.

It takes me two days to reach him. There are nurses waiting at the front desk when I arrive. I say, take me, would you take me now, and they look at each other and then at me.

You must be prepared, the first says, for what you will see.

I am prepared, I say.

I don't think you are, says the second.

Just take me, I say, and she nods slightly, holding out an arm to usher me forward.

The hallway to his room smells strongly of fish. I begin to feel fear.

We stop in the doorway. His is the only bed in the room. His eyes are closed. He looks gaunt, starved. I can see his bones though his skin still shines. His bed is surrounded by buckets of water. The buckets are filled with red fish.

Suddenly he sits up and starts coughing. He coughs harder, and then there is a fish. He drops the fish in a bucket and falls to the bed again, exhausted.

Dad? I say.

He squints. Ruthie?

I go to him and take his hand. I came to see you, I say. Where have you been?

Oh, he says. He squeezes my hand lightly. You know. Around.

You could have called, I say.

I know, he says. I know.

What happened? What's wrong?

I think you know.

No, I don't.

I think you do. He peers at me closely. Your face—I can tell you've been using the treatment. It looks wonderful on you. Have you had any fish yet?

I glance around at his fish, breathing fast. No. I haven't been using it for very long.

Well, he says, and he pats my arm. Give it time.

Is this what happens? I say, panic rising. With the fish? It just gets worse?

Yes. Over time. Eventually, it will get worse.

And then what?

This, he says, rueful. This happens.

Dad, I say, and I'm crying now. I've treated so many people.

I know.

How could you let me?

I always thought, he says, I would find the cure.

And have you?

No. But you know, you could try stopping. Just stopping. I haven't tried that yet.

Why not?

Oh, Ruthie. I'm too old to stop. And too late.

After my father dies, after I fly home with his body, after the funeral, I go to Westley's lake house. I show up unannounced. He opens the door, surprised and delighted to see me. But I am not here to socialize.

Show me the fish, I say.

Ruth, he says, how many times. There are no fish.

I shove him, he stumbles, then I shove him again. Show me the fish, I demand.

Ruth!

Show me. The goddamn. Fish.

Ruth—

Now.

He hangs his head, resigned. Fine, he says. All right. I'll show you the fish.

He leads me through pine woods, along a narrow path I have never seen before. At the end of the path there is a pond. The pond is teeming, full to bursting with yellow fish. Just like Elisa's fish, and my father's fish, but yellow. There are so many of them that the pond nearly glows, almost in heat. Fire in the water.

I sink to the ground, head in my hands. We need to stop, I say. We need to stop the treatment.

I can't, he says. I built my career on this. On this face.

If you don't stop, I tell him, you're going to die.

I might die anyway, he says, even if I do stop. Do you know that it would even fix anything? Stopping? Do you know that for sure?

No.

Then I won't. I can't afford to.

Goddamnit, Westley, I say.

It's too loud in my head. I close my eyes, trying to block it out, but all I can see is yellow.

She doesn't want me to stop. When I tell her, she doesn't want me to stop. And I can't say no to her, to anything she wants.

My father is old, she tells me. He's past sixty. He's been using for a long time. We have a while yet. A while before it hits us. Before we die.

So I go diving and I go diving. We go to parties and I treat people. I treat Elisa, I treat Westley, I treat myself. And it is wild, wild, and I know it's wrong and I do it anyway, because I've fallen in love with the money and I've fallen in love with the way I look and I've fallen in

love with the way that people want me, and I need to stop and I don't know how to stop and I'm so tired.

The last time I go diving, it's fall. Grey. A storm coming on. I sit on the edge of the boat for a long time, watching yellow maple leaves float on top of the water. I touch one gently with the tip of my finger, and I watch it sink down, down.

I hold my breath, cross my fingers, and I dive.

I search for a long time. I keep returning to the surface to get air, and then I go down again. The water above starts to get rough. I still search. The sky darkens. I dig into the sand, searching. Every sand dollar comes up a five. No sevens. The rain starts. I search. The rain gets heavy. I search. The sea rolls above me. I search.

And I do not find.

I don't know how I make it home, I only know that I do. And Elisa is fussing over me, rubbing me down, and I'm telling her, they're gone, they're all gone, the sand dollars, I didn't find any, and she's telling me, it's okay, we can try again tomorrow, when there's sun, and I'm telling her no, I'm done, I can't do this anymore, and she's saying, what do you mean you can't do this anymore, and then I start coughing, and I keep coughing and coughing, and she's looking at me terrified, knowing what is coming, and then, almost of their own accord, my hands open, and I cough one last time.

Frog!

The summer before I was fifteen, I got my first period, and then my sister took me to a robbery. I had never been to a robbery before. I would never have dreamed of going to a robbery if it weren't for her. But she made me want to do dangerous things. Or more like, I already wanted to do dangerous things, and Joy was the one who made those things possible.

We were going to steal a drug. Joy often stole drugs. She didn't take them. Well, sometimes she did. Mostly, she gave them to our Uncle Tim, and then Tim sold them to rich kids on the mainland. The irony was that she often stole those drugs from the rich kids on the mainland. Of course, the mainlanders did not know this.

This time, we were stealing a drug called Finite Astra. This was not the brand name. Finite Astra was sort of like Percocet but also not really like Percocet. It dampened pain. It was priced high because of the formula; the formula was not supposed to be addictive. In the end, it was addictive. Everything is addictive. Name me one thing that isn't addictive.

If you took enough Finite Astra, you went into an altered state, and you saw stars.

We spent a lot of that summer stealing Finite Astra. Summer was the high season for this because everyone was getting their wisdom teeth out, and there was an abundant supply.

When Joy got her wisdom teeth out, my mother wouldn't let her take any Finite Astra beyond the first day, even though it was a low dose. Many people's mothers would not let them take it beyond the first day, on account of Colin Sommers, who got addicted, and then later he crashed his car into a barrier down by the wharf, and he died.

The word was, Carrie Ann Fields had just had her wisdom teeth done, and she had a prescription. Joy had been to a party at her house, so she knew the layout. She knew they kept

their medicines in the bathroom cabinet. She knew which ground floor window was closest to the target. She knew how to tease it open, how to slip over the sill.

We wore black. Long sleeves, even though it was June. Gloves so we wouldn't leave prints. As if that mattered—Joy was a Ghost-Cat. She had never been caught. *And if you're the one who ruins me*, she said, *I'm going to fucking kill you, Amity.*

I was the lookout. Joy wouldn't let me go inside my first time, as I was only a Ghost-Cat in training. *You'll work your way up to it*, she said. So at half past two in the morning, I crouched in the bushes, waiting, watching, one eye on the road and one eye on the windowsill. It was cool and quiet and I could hear my own breath. I could hear the blood in my ears. I could hear Joy's footsteps inside, slow and precise and careful. Joy was very good at this sort of thing—sneaking about without a sound. She was light and tiny for her age, and had sharp reflexes and a quick eye. She swore she could see in the dark. I think I believed her. This is why Uncle Tim selected her as a Ghost-Cat.

It only took her a minute, and then she slid out the window, touched to the ground with a soft thump, and shimmied the bug screen back into place.

"Let's go," she said.

We walked home through the woods. Snuck up the back stairs. Went to sleep. The whole thing took less than an hour. I thought it might have been more eventful. I thought I have been scared or at least felt a little alive. But it was fairly lackluster. Almost tedious, in the end. I said as much to Joy and she said I was an idiot.

"That's what you want," she said. "Because if it's not tedious, then you're caught. And if you're caught, you're fucked."

The next morning, we walked to Tim's house to hand off the Finite Astra. Tim lived on the far side of the island at the end of a long, lonely road. His house was large, three stories, and it used to be nice, but it wasn't anymore. The whole house tilted sort of sideways, all crooked-like, and it seemed to be sinking deeper into the ground with each passing year. Most of the paint had been weathered away by storms, and his pool had been filled with so much debris that it was now a pond, complete with cattails and a bullfrog.

Looking at that house, you would never know how much money he held.

As we walked up his driveway, Joy opened the bottle of Finite Astra and pocketed three pills. At my look, she shrugged and said, "This is the cheapest we'll ever get it." And this was true.

Joy never liked to overindulge—never had more than a few. She had a persistent knee injury from running and from taking high jumps out of windows. She liked to take the pills after track meets or after long nights working. She said it helped.

I wanted to slip some of the pills too, but I was too scared to ask. I had no injuries, no reason to be taking pain medication at all. What I really wanted was to take a whole bunch of them and get high, but I understood that Joy would disapprove of this. She liked danger, but in small doses. And only situations she could control. She never wanted to lose her head. She always said, *that's when you get hurt.*

Tim opened the front door before Joy could knock. He reached out and ruffled my hair and said, "Hey, Peanut." Then he put his hand on Joy's back and ushered her inside. "Why don't you go wait by the pool," he told me. Then he closed the door.

I felt slightly put out, but I reminded myself that Joy was the one who knew the ins and outs of working for Tim, Joy was the one who had been doing this for years, and Joy was the one

who, after all, had risked the most to get the pills. So, I wandered out back with the intention of stretching out under the big elm tree, and as I rounded the corner I was met with an unexpected sight: there was a boy in the pool.

He was tall and thin in that stretched-out, reedy sort of way of teenage boys. He wore faded green waders and big orange gloves and his hair was swept back with a headband. He carried a net and bucket and appeared apprehensive. He had paused knee-deep in the pool and could not seem to find the momentum to move further.

I did not blame him. The pool had not been cleaned in many years. A decade, even. The water was dark, almost black, sort of bottomless and sullen. Reeds grew in the shallows. In the spring a film of yellow pollen floated like stars. And each May, the bullfrog awoke from his winter slumber. It was the biggest bullfrog I had ever seen—it was almost the size of a dinner plate, pitch black, and covered in bumps and warts. When it croaked, it was so loud that the water in the pond shivered.

The boy drew in a breath, then took a step. It occurred to me that he might not have been warned.

"Hey!" I called, still at the top of the hill which led down to the pool. "Hey! What are you doing?"

He peered up at me, shading his eyes with his hand. "I'm cleaning the pool."

"You have to watch out. The frog has teeth."

"What? Frogs don't have teeth."

"This one does."

He began to pick his way out of the pool. "Come down here, will you?"

I waded toward him through a sea of uncut grass, praying that I would not pick up any ticks. “Tim should have warned you,” I said when I reached him.

He took me in for a long moment. I took him in too. The jagged lines of his face. His crooked nose. His chapped lips and the purple under his eyes. “I know you,” he said. “You go to the high school. Your name is Amity.”

“Yes. Well-spotted.”

“I’m Thomas,” he said. “Does the frog really have teeth?”

“Oh, yes. And actually, most frogs do.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It’s just that this one has particularly sharp teeth.”

“Well, I suppose I’ve got to kill it.” He looked up at the sun, squinting in a manner that made him look like a little boy. “Tim told me to kill anything I found in this pond. Pool. Pond.”

“You’ll need a weapon,” I said.

He held up his hands. “These?”

“No,” I said. I almost laughed, but I did not want to hurt his feelings. “If you want to do this right, you’re going to need a hammer. Trust me. I’ve done it before.”

Joy was still inside. She was taking a very long time. I did not know what she was doing, and I could not leave without her, and I could not go inside. I decided I would help Thomas kill the frog.

The key to killing a frog is waiting. You cannot come to the frog; you must wait for the frog to come to you. That is what I explained to Thomas, as he was new to killing frogs.

We sat in the shade of the elm tree—he in his waders and I in my bare feet—anticipating the arrival of the frog. I was relaxed. He was jumpy. He was very sure the frog wouldn't show up, and he wanted to get to cleaning the pool, as, he explained, that is what he was here to do.

I rested my head against the trunk of the tree and closed my eyes. The ground beneath me began to shake—a boat was jetting off from the shared dock nearby. From the sound, I knew which one it was: Ezra Haddonfield's, small and blue and light. Red racing stripe. He kept cologne stashed on board to mask the scent of his mistress's perfume.

"Just wait," I said. "He will come."

The sound of the boat engine faded into the quiet, and all was still for a long moment. Then: the frog bellowed. A deep, grating sound like gravel churning. The sound traveled across the pond in ripples. Thomas yelped, and then cleared his throat to appear as if he had not yelped.

"Why are you here, by the way?" he said. "Are you one of his girls?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"A Ghost-Cat."

I opened my eyes ever so slightly, studying him through netted lashes. He appeared distant from me, blurred and golden. I realized why his face was familiar to me—he was the principal's son. He was always arriving at school in the passenger seat of his father's car, all low-down and sulking. He spent a fair amount of time hiding behind his hands. He was older up close. It struck me that he looked pretty strung out.

I closed my eyes again. "I don't know anything about Ghost-Cats."

"Right."

"I'm surprised you know anything about Ghost-Cats."

"I don't. I don't know anything."

“Good,” I said.

To be honest, I didn’t even know much about Ghost-Cats. The identities of the other girls who collected for Tim were kept secret. I only knew about Joy because she was my sister. I spent hours at school looking for girls who were small and lithe like Joy, who ran fast and kept low. I had a list of suspects, but I never knew for sure.

“But if,” said Thomas, “we were to speak hypothetically, do you think—”

“Shut up.” I sat up. I could sense the frog was near. “Shut up. Shut up. Sit very still.” I held my breath. Thomas watched me. He did not hold his breath. His breath was very loud. I tried not to let it distract me.

There was a movement. “There! Frog!” I yelled, and then I jumped forward and smacked it with the hammer. The frog exploded everywhere. I was glad I had not worn my shoes, as I was covered in frog. Frog dripped down my arms and my legs. There was frog soaking into my shirt.

“God!” said Thomas, looking down at the carnage surrounding him. He appeared horrified.

“Oh, don’t worry,” I said. “He’ll be back tomorrow.”

“How could he? He’s been liquified!”

“He always comes back,” I said. “That’s the sort of frog he is.”

“Right. That sort of frog,” Thomas said, but not like he believed me. He wiped green sludge off his face with the back of his hand. “Thanks, I guess.”

“Yeah.” I threw the hammer down at his feet. I could see Joy exiting the back door of the house, waving me down. “You can muck out the pool now. I’ll be back tomorrow to kill the frog again.”

On our way home we found a patch of wild strawberries by the roadside—the kind that are small and sort of gnarled and more seed than fruit but taste like bursts of sun. We gathered them into our shirts and ate them as we walked. Seeds stuck in my teeth. I ran my tongue over my teeth again and again but I couldn't get the seeds out.

"I noticed you got the frog," Joy said, "for the boy."

I nodded, still running my tongue over my teeth.

"Why?"

"Are you kidding me?" I said. "That boy could never kill a frog."

"I guess that's true," she said. "It's been a while since we've been frog-hunting."

"It's been a while since Mom sent us swimming."

"Has it gotten bigger? The frog?"

"Yes."

"Hm." Joy had finished her strawberries. She shook stems and leaves out of her shirt then wiped her hands on her jeans, grimacing as her hand hit against her bad knee. "People are starting to notice," she said, "about the Finite Astra disappearing. Tim gave us sugar pills. So we can replace the pills we take."

"Wouldn't they notice when it doesn't do anything?"

"No." Joy said this like it was the final word. And with her, it often was.

"Okay. Do I get to go in this time?"

"No. Not yet."

That night, we hit a few houses near school. Two wisdom teeth removals, one appendectomy. Tim had contacts, somehow, that told him these things. Told us where to go. Joy

wouldn't let me come in. I waited in the dark, picking seeds out of my teeth, and I plotted how I was going to slip some pills without her noticing. On our way home, we passed Principal Brown's house. I could see a light on up in the far window, and a shadow behind the curtain. Thomas, I suspected.

The frogs were loud that night, the sound high and lost and lonely. I could hear them even when we had closed our back door behind us. These were little frogs, not big ones like Tim's frog. Little ones did not come back like Tim's frog. Nothing came back like Tim's frog. Still, there were too many of them to kill one by one. Used to be the town would take a crop duster to the island every spring—get them all in one fell swoop. Of course, what they were really after was the corn beetles. Save the crops. The frogs were only the aftereffect. That was before they realized what the chemicals can do to you.

My mother breathed in those chemicals. She had breast cancer twice. So did Nell Larson's mother. So did many mothers. And Johnny Terry was born with webbed toes.

But I suppose they didn't know then. At least, that's what they say.

When Joy fell asleep, I crept to her side of the room. Her knee was elevated above the covers. She was breathing slow and smooth. In the light from the window, I could see her eyes twitching very fast behind her eyelids. The disjunction of these two movements made me feel uneasy.

I reached into her jacket pocket, and I took five pills.

The next day, we walked to Tim's house again. When we got up to the door, Tim ruffled my hair again and said, "Hey, Peanut," and then he ushered Joy inside and sent me to the back, where Thomas was, knee-deep in the pool once more. Thomas looked up as I came around the

corner and watched me walk down the hill. He didn't speak. His mouth was set tight and his eyes were pouched and tired, more tired than yesterday.

"Did you kill the frog already?" I asked.

He shook his head. The frog bellowed, then bellowed again. The water shook.

"Then you shouldn't be in the pool. Come on. Get on out. We'll wait." I sat down under the elm tree and patted the ground next to me. Silently, he lifted himself from the pool and came to me, dripping black water. He dropped to the ground.

"I didn't think it would come back," he said. "I thought you were crazy."

I lifted one shoulder. "Well."

"What happens? If the frog bites me?"

"I don't know. No one knows. And do you want to find out?"

"No. Why does it come back?"

"I don't know."

"Hm." He reached into the pocket of his jacket, pulled out a hammer, and handed it to me. "I know you're one of Tim's girls."

I said nothing.

"If you can get me something, I can pay you. He won't sell to me right now."

"Why?"

"It's a long story."

"I want to hear it."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to tell you. Can you get me things?"

I studied him for a long moment, weighing my options. Selling to him would involve lying to Joy, and I was already lying to Joy. Where she was concerned, I didn't like the lies to accumulate. But she was pushing me away, and I didn't like to feel on the outside of things. So: "Yes," I said. And then, "Frog!" and I liquefied him.

That afternoon, I was alone. Joy was running errands—groceries, toilet paper, laundry detergent. Our mother was at work. The house was empty. I decided this was the perfect time to try the Finite Astra.

I had heard around school that five was the number to take if you wanted to see the stars. Too few and it wouldn't work, too many and you'd be in the hospital. Most people who were addicted operated somewhere in between—they called this twilight. Enough that you were jacked up, but not enough that you couldn't function. You couldn't be in the stars all the time. Life doesn't work that way.

I situated myself in the corner of our bedroom with my pills and a tall glass of water. I took them and then I downed the rest of the water, and I waited. I waited some more. Nothing changed. I wondered if I had taken sugar pills by accident.

And then the room began to fade. Black coming on quick. Everything slipping. Complete dark. And the stars, coming out one by one. All around me. Above me, below me. I reached out and cupped one in my hands. I closed both hands around it and the light went out. Opened my hands and the light returned. Open and close, open and close. I laughed. I couldn't stop laughing.

The world was so big. Almost endless. Almost, but not quite. There was an end to the stars—I could see it. A blurred roundness far off, some distant horizon. I wanted to reach it. I wanted to see what was beyond. I tried to get there but found I could not move.

Rooted. Stuck. I started getting lonely. I thought of my mother. I thought of her tight anxious smile and her bangs stuck to her forehead in the heat and the time I saw her crying in the living room in the dark. I held a star in my hands and thought how this had once been my mother. This had once been Joy. This had once been me. And no longer.

It was then I became very cold. I curled in on myself and closed my eyes. Block out the stars. Block out the memories. Don't think. Don't think.

Coming down was the hardest my body had ever been hit. I threw up for hours. Joy couldn't understand what was wrong with me. She thought I had food poisoning. She trashed the rest of the chicken she had cooked for dinner. Good riddance. Never buying that brand again.

The next time we went out, Joy decided it was time to give me Ghost-Cat lessons. We cut through cornfields on our way to the east side of the island, kicking up dust, and she explained to me how to enter a house when you are a Ghost-Cat.

First, it helps if the residents are home. If someone is home, doors are unlocked. Windows are open. Defenses are down, because who would dare enter an occupied house?

Of course, it helps if the residents are sleeping.

You check the doors. You see which ones are open. If none are open, you start with the windows. Living rooms are often at the front of the house. Family rooms are at the back. Sometimes there is a father or a twenty-something kid sleeping in the family room, so be careful. Do not enter through a bedroom.

Once you are in, keep close to the walls. Floorboards near the center of the floor tend to creak. Don't turn on any lights. Breathe as shallow as you can. Move quick and clean.

If someone comes into the bathroom to pee, you can get in the shower behind the curtain.

Try not to jump from high places, if you can. It will wear on you.

Stay low.

Got it? Yes.

I still wasn't allowed to go in.

Each night after we went out, I waited until Joy was asleep to go into her jacket pocket. For two weeks I skimmed off the top of our pills until I had enough, and then I went to see Thomas at his house. This is the first time I had been to his house, though I had been seeing him every day for the better part of a month. He had not learned to kill the frog, so I killed it for him. There was no incentive, really, for me to do so, but I liked having a job. I liked being needed. I was not usually needed. Joy generally impeded any possible opportunities I might have for this. She was always taking care of things before I could get there.

His mother answered the door when I knocked. She was tall and very slim, with the same angularity as her son, except on her it was beautiful whereas on him it just made him appear gaunt. She was wearing a soft white shirt and blue jeans. When she smiled it broke across her face like a light coming on in the dark.

"Hello," I said. "My name is Amity. I'm here to see Thomas."

"Amity, hello." She opened the door wide. "Come in. Would you some fresh bread?"

"Sure. I guess." I sniffed. The house smelled like yeast and baked things. This was new to me. My house never smelled like baked things. Usually it just smelled like dust and cold and whatever Joy would scrape together for dinner.

"Come in, come in," she said. "I'll get you some bread."

Thomas clattered down the stairs, slowing when he saw me. “Hey,” he said. “Hey. Do you want to come up—?”

“I was just going to get Amity some bread.”

“She doesn’t need bread, Mom. Come on, Amity.” He took my wrist and pulled me toward the stairs.

I glanced back at Mrs. Brown. “Sorry—thanks—”

She waved us off, still smiling, but I thought she looked a little lost there, all alone at the bottom of that staircase, arms crossed and hands tucked under her elbows like she had a chill.

Thomas shut and locked his door behind him. “You have it? You have the stuff?”

“Yeah. Your mom is nice.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Sure. So, I can’t pay completely right now, but I’ll owe you. Okay?”

I said, “Okay,” and then, “here.” I didn’t know any better. I glanced around his room—his plaid bedspread, tightly tucked, his bookshelves filled with model airplanes in neat rows, a glass and pitcher of water on his desk, and not a speck of dust in the whole place. “I took some Finite Astra the other day,” I said.

“Yeah? You did? How was it?”

“Kind of nice, for a minute. Then really bad. I don’t want to do it again.”

“Hm. Yeah. Really?” He wasn’t listening to me—he was pouring himself a glass of water and taking a pill. Then another. One more. Twilight.

When I came home, Joy was on the couch, icing her knee. The previous night, she had jumped from a second-floor window. The landing hit her harder than expected. “Where were you?” she said.

I looked around. “Is Mom here?”

“No,” she said. Like, *obviously*. “Where were you?”

“Out. Walking. Nowhere.”

“We have a few places to hit tonight,” she said. “You should take a nap.”

“Is your knee hurting you?”

“Just a bit,” she said. “Nothing ice won’t fix.”

“I could go in tonight,” I offered. “Instead of you.”

“No.” Joy stood up, clearly suppressing a wince. “That won’t be necessary. You’re not ready yet. Come on, now. Dinner, and then nap.”

It was July and Joy still had not let me enter any houses. I kept killing the frog. Thomas was almost finished cleaning the pool. He had dug through the muck to reach the bottom—turquoise tiles shining through the silt. I got him more drugs. He still owed me.

“What happens,” Thomas said one morning, stripped down to just his waders and underwear and nothing else, panting and sweating under the shade of the elm tree, “what happens once the pool is done, and the frog is still there?”

I shrugged. “Someone will have to kill it before we go swimming.”

“Every time?”

“Every time. That’s what we used to do, before Tim let the house go.”

“Why did he let it go?”

“It was too hard, I think.”

“What was too hard?”

“Everything.”

Thomas paused for a moment, stumped. Then, “What about chlorine?”

“Chlorine would never kill that frog. Don’t you know anything?”

“No. I guess not.”

“What is it like? In the twilight?” I had always been curious, but not enough to try again.

Thomas wiped an arm across his sweaty forehead. “It’s like—there are still the stars, but it’s daytime. You can see the sun. It’s very bright.”

“Is it nice?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. It’s hard to say.”

“Hm,” I said. Then, “Frog!”

The first day of August, Tim wanted to see us. Not just Joy—me too. We sat down in his living room. His living room was covered in dust. I focused very hard on trying not to sneeze.

“How are you doing?” Tim said.

“We’re good,” Joy said before I could open my mouth.

“And how is my youngest trainee?” He reached out and ruffled my hair.

I looked at Joy. She was looking at the floor. “I’m good,” I said.

“I heard you’ve been taking care of that frog for Thomas.”

“Yes. I have.”

“You were always the best little frog-hunter, weren’t you? Got him every time. Here—” He reached into his back pocket and tugged out a wad of cash, picked out a twenty, and handed it to me. “A little extra just for you.”

My hand closed over the money. This was the first I'd seen all summer—Joy wasn't letting me near any of the profits. Which, I supposed, was fair, considering I didn't do anything. Considering she didn't *let* me do anything.

She said she didn't trust me to spend it right. Whatever that meant.

But soon, she kept promising. Soon, you'll be ready to do houses on your own, and then we'll both buy our tickets out of here. And Mom too. Right? Right? Okay.

"I have a few houses for you," Tim said, "on the mainland." He ran a shaking hand through his hair. His hair was the color of steel and copper. There was dust in his hair and on his shoulders. Tim's house always rained dust.

Joy's hand rested delicately on her knee. The corners of her mouth twitched downward. I could tell she was in pain. But all she said was, "Okay."

We had a fight on the way home. I wanted to go in. Joy would not let me. I told her, you're hurt. You're a liability. She said, you're a liability, Amity. You're a child.

"No more a child than you," I said.

She didn't say anything for a long time. I watched her as we walked down parallel rows of corn, her face flickering in and out of focus between August-green leaves. Eventually she stopped and pulled me from my row over to hers. Then she took me into her arms and held me.

"I want to go," I said.

Her voice was muffled into my shoulder. "No, you don't."

We took the ferry to the mainland. Joy slept. She was blissed out on Finite Astra—just one, she said, it's all I need to take off the edge. Just one.

I stood at the railing, wind whipping at my skin, and I watched the stars. The real stars, not the Astra stars. The world was open that night. Clean and raw. My hands froze on the railing. Red paint chipped off and settled in the folds of my dark shirt. I shook off the paint and it spiraled away from me, disappearing into the night.

I pulled my mother's jacket tight around me and slipped my hands into the pockets, pushing past the old receipts and tissues and loose change. In my left hand I held a penny. It was cold against my skin. Joy's head fell to her chest and her body started to slither off the bench. I rushed to put an arm around her waist. She slumped into me, never waking.

There was no one else on the ferry. We were alone.

The house was two stories. Slightly inland, up against the creek. Acres of land. Burnt out Chevy in the backyard. The house was built on a hill, and all the windows were elevated. Joy needed a boost to get in. I told her I would go. I told her I *should* go. Still, she would not let me.

"I am awake, now," she insisted. "I am good as ever."

The night was surprisingly chilled for August. I sat under the window, waiting, dew soaking into the seat of my pants, tapping a nervous finger against the heel of my running shoe. I felt on edge. I didn't know why.

A light came on upstairs. My stomach dropped. I heard footsteps. Doors creaking. A thump thump thump—someone coming down the stairs. I flattened myself against the side of the house and tried not to breathe. Silence. Still. Silence.

Joy burst through the window in a whoosh of air. "Go, fucking go!" she said, and then we were both running. I could hear a man yelling behind us. *Bitches.* I could hear the back door opening, and his labored breathing as he tailed us.

A shot rang out. Joy yelped, stumbled to her knees. I pulled her up. We kept running.

We were in a field. We were wet to the waist from creek water. We were shivering and cold and alone. The grass was silver and the shadows were blue. Joy had her hand over her mouth. She bit into the skin. My hands were on her arm, holding my shirt to her wound. Pressing. A clean slice. Lucky. I was covered in her blood. The blood came out warm and then quickly turned cold.

I could hear frogs everywhere. Joy's arm was starting to stiffen. There were frogs under us and around us. I could see them on her. She still bled. There was a frog on her neck. I took the pills from her pocket and put three on her tongue.

Swallow, I said.

Too many pills, she said. *Took one before.*

Swallow, I said.

I can't.

You have to.

She swallowed. Twilight.

Amity, she said, her words half a sob, *it hurts.*

I leaned my forehead against hers. *I know.*

After Cotyledons

For a long time now, I've been haunting myself.

What I mean by that is: frequently, I come apart from my body, and when I am out, I hover nearby, waiting, until I can return. It is like haunting or like splitting. It is mostly like waiting.

How do I come apart from myself?

There are cracks. Tears in the fabric, as it were. I slip through.

I don't know. I can't really explain beyond this.

The first time I tried to tell Lucien how it is, I said: "It's like feeling nothing at all, like watching your body feel, knowing your body feels but you are not feeling, and then when you come back, you can feel the whole world. Do you understand?"

He did not.

When I am out, I can walk through walls.

You don't feel the wall. Not at all. It is like vaporizing yourself—you are apart, the particles spread thin, and then you are through the wall and the particles snap back all at once, drawn with magnetic force to the heart of you, even though you are not real. Even though you are elsewhere. Your body, elsewhere.

Does form exist when there is no vessel? How can there be a center when there are no walls? When I am apart from my body, am I a ghost? I do not know. I do not know the answers to these questions.

Lucien does not rule out the possibility of walking through walls. He says it could happen. He is skeptical, but he wants to believe, for me. That is how good he is. Isn't he good? Too good for me.

Summer stayed long this year. Started early—spring heat. Fires in August. Lingering warmth into October. And then the first day of November, snow. The snow fell at night. Light dust, melting as it touched.

I sat in the bedroom window last night, watched it fall. It would be gone by the time I woke up. Something about this filled me with a fluttering sort of dread—like it was my duty to notice it, like no one else would notice, no one else would know or remember this snowfall.

This morning, I found a patch of snow under the oak tree in the backyard. I woke Sam from his nap, dressed him in his hat and coat and his yellow boots, and I took him to the snow. I put snow into his little hand. "See?" I said. "Snow."

"Snow," he said. "Cold."

"Yes," I said. "Cold."

"Lunch?" he said, looking hopeful.

"Lunch," I agreed.

We had lunch, and then it was afternoon. I put Sam down for his nap—held him in my arms until his eyes closed. His warm body curled against my chest. My baby boy.

Lucien called from work, said he would be late for dinner. I went to the bedroom and slept. When I awoke, I found I had come apart. My body below me, eyes bleared from sleep, arms emerging from underneath the covers, the slow, methodic shuffle to Sam's room to wake him—and I above it all, translucent, apart, slightly shifting, dust in the light.

Then it was evening. I watched my body sliver onions for dinner. I watched my body greet Lucien, kiss him at the door. I watched my body put the baby to bed. I watched my body put herself to bed.

Now it is late. The night is thin and wet outside my window. I have not yet returned. My husband sleeps deeply beside my body. He does not know that I am gone. No one ever does. I ghost my vapor fingers over his lips. I wish I could feel him.

I have rarely been gone this long. The hours wane to morning. I pace back and forth, but still I do not return. I do not return to my body.

When I was young, I discovered that I could pop my arm out of its socket. Dislocate at the shoulder, no pain. I liked to press my finger into the gap that appeared, touch the hollow in my skin. Feel the space between.

I used to do it so much that my arm began to pop out on its own. Often when I was least expecting it. Lifting my school bag. Steadying myself on the stair rail. Handing our nanny a kitchen pan. These times, it hurt. I could feel something tearing. Dull pain.

I stopped doing it on purpose. Sometimes, it still happens to me on accident. Not as often, though. Not like before. Because I stopped. Yes?

The splitting is something like this. When I was young, I felt the first crack open in my body. I slipped through. I floated above myself, watching my hands twist in my lap. Watching myself cry. I left my body, paced the kitchen. A distant door shut with a crack—my mother going, gone. Muffled shouts—my father following. My sister was in the corner, focused on her homework. Times tables. All her answers were wrong. Under the table, her leg shook nervously. The house was silent, just the sound of me crying and my sister writing.

I didn't feel anything. Any sensation. Any pain. At a certain point I felt longing—a longing for my body. I came back to the side of my body, and I returned.

This was the first time.

Coming back was like slamming into pavement after falling from a great height. All my senses returned at once. Every inch of me shot with adrenaline. The noise of my sister's pencil scraping on paper. Clothes rough on my skin. The scent of soup and winter cold and orange blossom shampoo overpowered me. I felt I could see for miles. A wet taste in my mouth—vapor. The last of me returning to my body.

I glanced around the kitchen, and she hadn't noticed. No one had seen me go.

Years later, when I stopped doing this on purpose, stopped leaving on purpose, I figured that the slipping on accident would also stop, but it did not. It kept getting worse. And worse.

In the morning, my sister comes over to drop off files for Lucien. My sister and Lucien work for the same firm. That is how we first met. A party, years ago. She didn't introduce us. She would never do that. She does not believe in pretty things like love.

She finds my body working in the glasshouse. My body kneels in the raised bed, surrounded by seedlings. Sam sits beside my body, playing with a ball.

Before I left, I was teaching Sam about plants. We were sprouting cucumber seedlings in empty eggshells. Messy little trays in the glasshouse next to my orchids and citrus trees. Now, the sprouts are an inch high and each sprout has three leaves—the two rounded cotyledons, those ephemeral seed leaves which will fall as the plant gains height, and then one new trembling leaf, jagged and green with a corona of fine hairs.

My body gently breaks open an eggshell then places the plant and egg shards into a hole in the raised bed. Two leaves. A third unfurling.

"The files are in the front hall," she says.

"Thank you," my body says.

I float above all of it, pacing through the glasshouse walls, back and forth. I walk through my body. Still I have not returned. Still I am stuck outside. Vapor. I walk through my body again. Back and forth. Pace pace pace. I am beginning to feel anxious. It has been too long.

My sister looks at Sam. “The leech is bigger now.”

“Don’t call him a leech,” my body says.

“He saps you dry. He’s a leech.”

I drift over and I walk through my sister. Dematerialize, materialize. Back and forth. She feels cold, but maybe that is my imagination. I trace a vapor finger along the shell of her ear. I wish she could hear me. But she does not even hear me when I am in my body.

Sam starts to cry. I ache to hold him, but I cannot. I try to touch him, but I run through him like water.

My body looks to my sister. “Would you mind—? My hands are covered in dirt.”

She picks him up, holding him askance. A tear falls on her blue Oxford. She dabs at it with a finger like she’s never seen a tear before. She glances up and her expression is blank. “I have to get back to the office, Lisi,” she says. “I have a meeting.”

“It’s Saturday.”

“No rest for the hungry.”

“I don’t think that’s the expression.”

She thinks for a moment, head cocked. “I’m sure I’ve heard it that way.” Then, “Here, take your leech back. I have grown-up things to do.”

My sister thinks I am a trophy wife. My sister thinks any wife is a trophy wife. My sister will never marry. She was raised this way. I was too, but I am not clever enough to work at a firm and make lots of money. The piano was as much as I could manage.

At least music is an intellectual pursuit, my parents said. At least you know things about Bach and concerto competitions and orchestrating Sousa for a high school band. At least you can sound smart at a party, and not embarrass us too much. You'll go back to work, won't you, when the baby goes to school?

I told them yes even though the answer was no. I have forgotten everything I learned about orchestrating Sousa, and I haven't been in a competition in years. All I know is how to practice Ravel and take care of Sam. And anyway, that's all I want to do. And is that such a crime?

It is evening again. One day now since I have split. I go to visit my sister at her house. She lives a few neighborhoods away from me. Her house is grey and cold. She says the grey is soothing. I do not think it is soothing.

I find her in the kitchen, staring into her fridge, all alone. Her fridge is empty save for one bruised nectarine. She picks up the nectarine and then puts it away again. I pass through her, back and forth, back and forth. I want her to notice me, but she does not notice me. I scream but she does not hear. I dematerialize inside her and pummel her ribs, but I have no weight, and she cannot feel me. She keeps looking at the nectarine.

The doorbell rings. She goes to answer it, leaving the fridge open to leak cold air and light. There is a man at the door. He is wearing a leather jacket and his jaw has an edge. He pulls her into a kiss. He keeps kissing her deeper and deeper like he is drowning her.

They have sex on the living room floor. He is rough and loud and she is quiet. She closes her eyes when they kiss. He does not. Eventually I am embarrassed, and I turn away. I look at her pictures to distract myself. Most of them are of her with people from work. There is one of her shaking hands with a billionaire. Mother and Daddy take the mantle. In the corner there is one picture of me. We are at the shore house and I stand with my arms around her. My hair and her hair tangle in the wind.

When they are done the man puts on his jacket and leaves. The fridge is dinging faintly in the distance. *I'm open I'm open I'm open. Close me.*

My sister lies on the floor naked. Her living room has vaulted ceilings, and this makes her body appear very small. She doesn't move for a long time.

I go back home.

When I was younger, I used to split all the time. On purpose. Any time I was feeling low, or sad, or scared, or bored. Any time I wanted to not be in my body. It was like releasing pressure from a valve—my vapor rushed out and expanded. The band of tightness in my chest relaxed. I was open.

I liked the high of coming back, too. Blood singing in my body. Everything loud and fresh and new. *I* became new.

But then I was afraid. I was afraid of the times when it happened on accident. These times were sudden, violent—I tore away from my body, the ground left me, everything slipped away and I couldn't stop it. When I split on accident, coming back didn't feel as nice. It was disorienting. I felt delicate and bruised. I felt sick.

Morning again, and my body is throwing up. I think my body is pregnant.

I can tell. I could tell before I left. The slight swell of the abdomen. The grey face and strained eyes. My body does not take well to pregnancy. I do not glow.

The bathroom is blue in the dawn. My body is half-naked, bare legs on the tile floor, head in the toilet. Lucien appears from the bedroom. He murmurs soft words and gathers hair away from my body's neck. He kisses the top of her head.

Eventually, she stops throwing up, and he leaves for work.

"Call me," he says. "Take a test, then call me. Then call the doctor."

"I will," she says.

He smiles and tucks her hair behind her ear. So gentle. "Okay."

He still does not know I am gone.

When I was pregnant with Sam, I was sick all the time. Bent over the toilet, throwing up water the second it hit my stomach. Lucien used to take off work to stay home with me. He sat on the bathroom floor next to me and braided my hair away from my face. He sang to me. He put his cool hands on my skin.

"You can go," I kept saying. "I'm fine."

If he left, I could split from myself. I could be apart from the sickness. From the pain. I almost wished he would leave. But then—

"Lisi-my-Lisi," he said, "I want to be here, with you."

What a foreign concept.

And then, of course, I could not split away. My throat burned from bile and my stomach heaved even when empty, but I had to stay. To hold on to this moment of attention. This moment

of love. I had to soak up every second because he was going to leave. This wouldn't last forever. Nice things don't last forever. People don't stay. He wouldn't stay. Right?

He did stay.

Nobody ever held me when I was sick, you know. Mother, Daddy. My sister. They kept as far away from me as they could. Opposite wing of the house. Shut the door gently. Click the lock. Don't let the air out. That infected air. Don't let her get me sick.

Anyway. This doesn't have anything to do with anything, I just think about it sometimes. I have a lot of time to think now. It's all I can do.

My body takes a test. It is positive. She calls Lucien, then the doctor. Then she wakes Sam, feeds him breakfast. They go to the greenhouse to tend to the plants. She holds his hand. The seedlings have four leaves now—two cotyledons, two true leaves.

It is said that cotyledons—the seed leaves—aren't real leaves. Cotyledons exist in the embryo, that part of the seed that sleeps until wakened by sun and water. Sometimes there is one seed leaf. This is a monocot. Sometimes there are two seed leaves. This is a dicot. After the cotyledons comes the true leaf. The true leaf never existed in the seed. It only comes after the plant is born.

I always thought it was unfair to say that cotyledons are not real leaves. Just because they existed before. Just because they go so soon. Are they not alive? Do they not take on water?

I am now unsure of these criteria—after all, I no longer take on water.

Sam waters the plants with a tiny green watering can. My body watches. The watering can slips through his fingers, and my body catches it quick before it falls.

I dive against myself, through myself. Back and forth. Pace pace pace. I cannot get in. I have always made it back before. But it has never been this long. And this time feels different. Anxious. I want to get back. I need to get back. I scream but no one hears me. I thought I would be back by now.

In the afternoon I go again to visit my sister at her house. I am hoping this time she will hear me. While I am there, the man in the leather jacket brings my sister drugs. She takes something that makes her eyes go glassy and then roll back into her head. She splits from her body—her vapor curling out like smoke from a kettle—and then she is with me in the astral plane.

She is surprised to see me. I am surprised to see her.

"What are you doing in my hallucination?" she asks.

It is strange to see her this way. Translucent, like me. Shifting and shimmering. Slightly gold in the light. She holds her hand up in front of her face and appears startled when she can see through it.

"I came to talk to you," I say.

"No. Go away, honestly, Lisi. This was supposed to take me away from everything. This was supposed to make it all go away. This isn't what he promised—"

"I have to talk to you," I say. "I'm stuck outside myself. Like I told you about before. I know you remember. I told you. I can't get back—"

"I really don't care."

"Please, listen—"

"Lisi, no."

"I think I'm pregnant."

"God! Isn't it always this bullshit with you. Me, me, me. You and your husband and your precious baby. Other things matter, you know. More important things. Even in my hallucination, you can't help but talk about yourself."

"I'm begging you—just this this one time—just this once—I need you to listen—"

"No!"

"Why?"

"Lisi." She laughs. I think I can see the shape of her laugh. It sits between us. "Is it really that different when you're not there? It's not like you had substance in the first place."

I am quiet for a while. It is hard to find the words. Finally, I ask, "Who is this man? Why is he bringing you drugs? Why are you taking them?"

"Lisi. Shut. The fuck. Up. And get out of my fucking hallucination."

I study her face for a moment—the hard-set blankness of Daddy mixed with the neurotic lonely eyes of Mother—and there is something about her expression that is flickering, breaking.

I go.

Another morning. There have been a few mornings since that first morning. I am beginning to lose track. I float around the house, reading the notes I wrote to myself before I left. Invitations to consciousness. Notes that said things like *Hello* and *Look up* and *Come back to Earth* and *Come back come back come back* and *Remember what you have waiting for you here.*

They are still there, peeling away from the walls. My husband wakens and makes his way to the bathroom. Light comes through the east windows and illuminates one of the notes. He touches the note. Flattens it back against the wall, then looks to the bedroom, smiles.

I pace through him, back and forth.

Lucien, Lucien, Lucien. Please see me.

Lucien knew, when he married me, how it was with the splitting. I told him very early on. I was honest with him. He was honest with me.

He told me about his school debt and about his first wife, and about how she was messy and droll and how she liked sugar and punk rock and cocaine, and how one day she left him and he never saw her again.

I was not at all like his first wife. I was quiet. Reserved. A dreamer. I liked gardens, and long walks through the country, and rain. In college I studied music education—back then, my sister used to say that I was majoring in motherhood with a concentration in staying at home. She was cruel, yes, but perhaps not inaccurate. When Lucien met me, I was living in a hole-in-the-wall above a failing Italian restaurant, conducting piano lessons from my living room and losing concerto competitions with the vague sense that this would not last forever. That soon, something or someone would come to take me away, and then my real life would begin.

And he did.

When I first told him about the splitting, he was not a believer. Still he is not a believer. But that night, listening to me, he was interested and kind. He wondered if I had ever seen a psychiatrist. I said yes but did not offer more information. I asked if this was a dealbreaker, this thing. He said no. I was crazy and I was charming. He liked that. He liked me.

My Lucien, he has always been gentle with me. I think he understood—understands—the way things are. The way the world has always been a little too big for me. The way I get lost. The way I struggle to hold on.

Garden with Sam. Lunch. Nap time. My mother arrives for tea.

They sit in near silence—my mother and my body. Cramped together at one corner of the long dining room table. Chairs turned toward one another. Two small white plates in a dark sea of mahogany. Sam runs around her legs in circles. She does not shoo him away like she normally would. Instead, she looks at my body intently. Peers very close.

"Pregnant, again?"

"Yes," my body says. "You can't always plan these things."

My mother frowns almost imperceptibly. "You can, actually."

"Well," says my body.

She shakes her head. "Promise me, Lisi, that when this is all done with, you'll think about going back. If not to performing, then at least to the school to teach."

"When *this* is done with? My child?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake. Let's not get caught up in the language of it. You know what I meant. I'm just trying to look out for you. Trying to make sure you don't get stuck here. I certainly paid enough for your education. You might as well make something of it."

"Fine."

"I'm happy for you—that you have the boy, and the new one coming. You know I am. But I just wish, darling, that you had kept performing."

"I told you a thousand times, Mother. I was only going to keep losing the competitions. I had to stop. I couldn't have gone on that way. It was wearing me down."

"You could have tried harder."

"No. I couldn't have."

"Well." She folds her hands in her lap and looks away. "At least you have him."

"I don't know what that's supposed to mean."

"To take care of you."

My body blinks. "I can take care of myself."

"No. That was never your strong suit. This is the difference between your sister and you. She doesn't need anyone. She never did."

"I can take care of myself," my body says again.

She sighs. "You wouldn't have any of this if it weren't for him." She looks around the room, and then sighs again.

The thing is, I know she is right.

Another week passes. I float. I wait. I pace. I walk through walls. I watch myself sleep. I watch Sam sleep. I walk through Lucien. He does not feel me. I walk through my body. It does not take me back. I am separate, separate.

I keep thinking about the summer before I was to be a senior in high school and my sister was to be a senior in college. We spent our last August at the shore house together. I was practicing for fall auditions— Prokofiev No. 2 for my show piece, and then a little Chopin nocturne for lyric contrast—and my sister was locked in her room studying for the September onslaught of case interviews.

I did not see much of her. She did not see much of me. Mother and Daddy stayed in the city, for the most part. They were working. No time for their shore house. No time for us.

I tired of the Prokofiev. The pace and difficulty were unrelenting and I despised the necessary conditioning exercises that came with performing the piece. Scales going up and scales

going down. Eighths. Sixteenths. Put the sixteenths in rhythms. Put them back in time. Practice the strange jumps and intervals over and over. Same measure a thousand times.

Instead, I played my Chopin. Same lilting song. Notes lifting and carrying, darting through the cracks of the old wood house. Deceptively simple. But nocturnes are not about power, about showmanship. Nocturnes are delicate. Nocturnes are dreams. And it is not always so easy to play a dream.

I spent the whole summer wishing I didn't have to practice the Prokofiev. I wished I didn't have to audition in the fall. I wished I knew how to handle my nerves. I wished I knew how to be strong. I wished I weren't scared of everything.

One morning, a soft knock at the door. I opened the door to an empty stoop and a package trapped in the mouth of our mail slot.

My sister raced down the stairs to see who was there. She asked, all hopeful, is it Mother, and I said no. I showed her the package. She studied it over the stair railing.

"It's from Daddy," I said. "I think it's for my birthday. Does this mean they're not coming, do you think?"

My sister tugged the sleeve of her sweatshirt over her hand and used it to rub her eyes. She yawned. "I don't know," she said. "It's nice anyway. Someone appreciates you."

"I appreciate you," I said.

She frowned, then quickly neutralized her expression. "I don't need that from you," she said, and left.

I felt myself begin to split. Accident, this time. Slip through the crack. Up above now. World spinning. Ten count—world set right again. Up the stairs and through my sister's door. She's lying on the bed with empty open eyes and my body is playing Prokofiev below.

I watch her until she falls asleep.

Tonight there is a party at the house of Lucien's superior. One of the higher-ups on the chain, a few above Lucien. It is a birthday party. Everything is silver and gaudy glittering. Low pink light. My body is in green velvet—dip in the back, swooping neckline. He has his hands on my body the whole night. Can't let go.

I am above. I watch as he kisses her on the landing, up the stairs, in the darkened hallway. In the blue glow of the track lighting his skin is luminous. Her hair has come apart from its twist. He has his hands in her hair. Strands falling through his fingers. Confetti comes loose from her hair and his hair and their clothes. The confetti drifts and they lose track of time.

It is strange to watch them. To see him with his hands on her body. On my body.

They came downstairs and Lucien leaves to get a drink. My body waits for him in the crowded living room, all out of place, glancing over her shoulder, crossing and uncrossing one ankle over the other. There is a tall mirror in the corner. I watch her watch herself—breathless, like wind caught in motion, radiant with heat, mussed and beautiful.

My sister is at the party. She enters the living room, slender and elegant and tailored in head-to-toe black. She watches my body watch herself in the mirror, then she takes a sip of her cocktail and leaves. I follow her to a back room. In the back room she opens her little black purse and inside the purse there are white pills. She takes them. Closes her eyes as they set in. Her vapor begins to leave, but it does not leave all the way. She is stuck—halfway in, halfway out. She exits the back room. Her vapor trails from the top of her body like a ghost. Like a flame.

I chase after her down the hallway. Catch her by the stairs.

"Hi," I say. "Hello."

Her body and her vapor turn to me in fluid motion. They jump. "*Fuck,*" her vapor says.

I am seeing her in double. Two sets of eyes. So blue. One smoke, one true.

"So," her vapor says. "You're still out."

"Yes," I say.

Her heads both turn to the living room, then back to me. "What in the hell are you wearing back there?"

"It's a dress," I said.

"Barely." Her body takes a sip of her cocktail, but her vapor does not move. The effect is disorienting. "You're a mess," her vapor says.

"That's a bit rich," I say.

"At least I'm discreet."

"Sure, you are. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Everything. My meeting went badly today. I lost a client."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you aren't."

"I am. I am sorry."

"Fine. I don't care. It doesn't matter."

"All right then. I've been waiting to talk to you again."

"I'm sure I don't have anything to say."

"I don't want you to say anything. I just want you to listen."

She shakes both her heads. "No."

"Why?"

“Because I don’t care. And anyway, you should be happy, shouldn’t you? Another kid. It’s what you wanted.”

“I am happy. I know I am happy. But I am stuck and I just need—I need you to promise that if I never get back, that you will look out for them, for Lucien, and for Sam, and the baby.”

Finally, I got it out.

“God,” her vapor says. “You were always so selfish, weren’t you?” Below, her body starts to sway, like maybe it is going to fall. Her vapor peers down at her body with detached interest. “Well,” her vapor says. “Shit.”

“I asked you,” I say. “I asked you about the man. And before that. I asked you about—so many things—and you never wanted to talk about anything. You never wanted to—”

“Oh, Christ, Lisi, it’s not like it matters now.”

“Fine. Fine. It doesn’t matter, then. But please, I am begging you. Please. Help me.”

“And what would you have me do, Lisi?”

“I just want to know—they will be okay without me—”

“I can’t.” Her mouth is a line and her eyes are solemn. Her body still sways beneath her, eyes fluttering. “I would if I could. I don’t know how. I don’t even know how to help myself.”

Her body falls. Crumples into itself. Cocktail on the carpet. Her vapor looks down at her body from above. “Hm,” her vapor says.

“What did you take?” I say.

Her vapor raises a shoulder. “I don’t know.”

“You didn’t have to hurt yourself like this.”

Her vapor floats close to the head of her body. Inspects the chest, rising and falling, rising and falling. Gentle breath fans the curls tumbled over her jawline. “We were raised like men, do

you know that?" her vapor says. "We were raised like men. Bootstraps. Ambition. Brave face. Steady. Keep steady on the course. Keep going up. You can only keep going up."

"I know," I say. "I remember. I was there."

"I'm sorry," my sister says. "It wasn't our fault, but I'm sorry anyway."

I want her to say more then, but her image begins to ripple, to fade, and then her vapor returns to her body, entering through her mouth. My sister's eyes open. She is back in her body.

December. It is snowing outside the glasshouse. Inside it is warm and dry and green. The windows are covered in frost—cold glowing white frost from floor to ceiling. My body wanders the raised beds, watering cucumbers and citrus.

Two days ago my body planted zinnias and already they have sprouted. Zinnias will germinate as soon as water hits them. They are quick to awaken. Their bloom time is long. Good cut flowers. Outside, they will flower until first frost, but then, as they are annuals, they will die.

Their sprouts are small and very green. Two cotyledons. Dicots.

I began to drift away from my body. I have been doing this more often lately. Wandering the gardens at night. Walking into the neighbors' kitchens, watching them fight, watching them kiss. I even went so far as town. I floated into the Flytemoore Academy and watched a music teacher give a private lesson in my old studio. She was explaining key signatures. She didn't do very well. The student looked more confused than when they began. I think I could have done better. Of course, I am not a music teacher anymore. I am not even a human.

Sometimes I see my sister. It depends on the day. Depends on the drug. She is not often happy to see me, but I go anyway. It is what sisters do.

I wander through the gardens down to the river. Yesterday the river froze—a veined skin stretched tight over rushing currents. Blue ice. Black water.

There are geese who have waited too long to migrate. They are desperate, now, in the cold. Flying as fast as they can toward the sun. I can hear them overhead. The light is dying and they need to find a place to rest.

The geese come in for a hard landing on the river, and the soft thumps of their feathered bodies set the ice to singing. Do you know the way the ice sings? The high hollow sound it makes before breaking. The hollow sound before you fall.

They do not fall.

Downstream, a fox thinks he will try to cross. Four small steps, the ice is howling.

When he falls through, I think about how all I can do is to watch him drown. I think about how maybe that's what Mother and Daddy would do. They would watch him drown.

He catches on a branch. Feet scrabbling. Nose against the ice. Gasping for air.

Sometimes, when I was still in my body, I listened to the ice singing at night. The moaning, the crying as it shifted. It kept me up. I couldn't get my heart to slow down. I sat at the window and listened. Then I fell asleep with all the lights on.

The snow stops. Everything is white. The sky is a shell waiting to be broken.

My body is growing heavy now. The cucumber plants are two feet tall and the citrus are ready to harvest, and I am still apart. I dive against myself. Desperate. Still, I cannot get through.

My body is happy. I can tell. She smiles. All the time. Lucien smiles too and kisses her. They move Sam to his new bedroom down the hall and repaint the nursery. I dive and I dive.

Mother and Daddy come by with a rattle and a little stuffed rabbit. Mother is wondering how long, do I think, will it take me to recover from the second one. How long before I can get back to teaching? I dive.

My sister comes by in the early morning and leaves a yellow blanket on the front steps, folded neatly, no note. She glances around at the air as she leaves, walking quickly down the path with her hands in her pockets. I dive.

My body is in the greenhouse, watering her plants, harvesting citrus. The Zinnias are blooming. She cuts a red flower and I dive. I dive. I dive.

Phoenix

For a time I had one of those roommates—you know the type—you have straight out of college. Friend of a friend. Don't really know her. Smokes out the window, one leg dangling over the edge—top floor of a four-story walkup, but she doesn't care. No fear. She's an artist, studied at Pratt. Thrift store wardrobe, leather jacket. Leaves her dishes piled high in the sink. Night owl, in and out at strange hours, her friends are all artists with weird haircuts. But she pays half the rent for your shitty apartment.

Her name was Phoenix. It wasn't really. In real life. But for you, for this story, it was.

And anyway, isn't that what you said? When you met her? That she looked like a Phoenix. And I never knew how you meant it—if you meant the paint stains and pastel hair, the unmistakable marks of a legacy eccentric, or if you meant more the nature of her, her peculiar glow. The way her smile rose—unexpected and blinding—from a most ordinary and unremarkable face.

x

I knew you would leave me before I even met you. Just like I knew you would trip over that rug on your way into Symphony Hall. Just like I knew you would stop short at the sight of me behind the front desk. Just like I knew you would write your name and number on the small half of your ticket stub—the half I took back. Just like I knew you would come to need me more than anyone you had ever needed in your life.

I never tried to hide it from you. I don't know why—I always hide it. I hide it from everyone. But perhaps it was because I could see how much you would come to mean to me. Perhaps it was the way you leaned in when I talked. Your dark hair, sharp chin, easy smile. Your slender nervous hands. Perhaps I wanted—for once—to be honest.

So I told you. Straight up, first date: "*I can see the future*."

And you laughed. Of course.

I told you: "Tomorrow, your boss will pull you into his office. No Christmas bonuses this year. You'll go to a café for lunch and try to order a blueberry muffin, but they will be out, so you will choose chocolate instead. Then, on your drive home, your mother will call to tell you that your brother is getting married."

You left pretty quick after that. But then two days later you were at my doorstep, because it was all true and you were drawn to me. You needed me, and you didn't even know why.

x

Phoenix was barely around when you started coming by. She was one of those people who was always out, no matter the night. She'd breeze by the kitchen, braless in a pink silk dress, smoke clinging to her skin, and she'd say things like:

"I'm off to shroom with Zacharias—don't lock up when you go to bed."

Or, "There's a kink party across town—I'll catch you in the morning."

Or, "We're going to bathe in paint tonight. Don't wait up."

And the next day, usually in the afternoon, she would waltz through the front door, slightly lilted in her gait, hair pulled back tight and a small smile on her face. I would peer at her over a cup of tea and ask:

"How were the shrooms?"

"*Illuminating*."

"Did you have fun at the kink party?"

"*Mostly it was just a sharing circle*."

"How was the paint-bathing?"

"*I've got a print of my naked ass on a canvas, and it is breathtaking."*

And then she would drift into her room, shut the door, and sleep for the next fourteen hours, leaving me to wonder what a kinky sharing circle looks like, and whether an ass-print could really be breathtaking.

The thing is, I was never really able to read her, was I? One of the few people I've ever met who remained completely dark to me. Except for that one thing. The big thing. The thing I never told her about.

x

In the beginning, your favorite activity was to test the limits of my powers.

The first question, of course, was of the lottery. Did I know the winning numbers? And of course I didn't. It doesn't work like that. If you were going to win, I could tell you. But I could not tell you a number. A number is not a future. A person is a future.

I tried to explain it to you. I had only ever explained it to one person before—Betty, my childhood best friend. Of course, she had been gone for years by then. So long since I had tried to tell someone. I did the best I could:

"When people walk by, I can see the future clinging to them like wet clothes. It is unmistakable. I know the future like how you wake up and know it's Sunday morning. It just is."

You wanted to know: "*Will I ever be rich*?"

"Not rich, per say. But comfortable. You'll own a boat."

Betty had asked me about money too. I don't know what it is. I think people get especially worried about money when they've never had enough. They long to be comfortable. Everyone longs to be comfortable.

And the other inevitable question—"*Can you change anything*?"

"No. No I can't."

"*Did you ever try to change anything*?"

"Yes. Oh yes. I tried many times. Too many to count."

And I couldn't do it. Not the big things. A man that was meant to be a hit by a bus would be hit by a bus, no matter if I pushed him out of the way. A different bus would get him at the next crosswalk. I could tail him all day, pushing him away from buses—and I *have* tailed him all day, so many times before—but the universe will always bring him to the same end.

The small things, the little things, I could do something. The truth. The truth is always a choice. Yes, I ate your dessert. Yes, I am running late. Yes, I lied about that thing, and the other thing. Telling the truth doesn't change much, I guess, in terms of life or death. But it can be nice, you know. It can be good.

x

Phoenix started going out at normal hours. Dinner hours. Movie hours. Sometimes she came back at midnight. Sometimes she didn't. I didn't know what she was doing. I didn't ask, and she didn't offer the information. We weren't close then—not yet. I thought she was too wild, and I don't what she thought about me. Probably that I was too square. If only she knew.

One morning, pre-dawn, those early violet hours, I woke up to the sound of retching. I slipped into my robe and padded to the bathroom. She was on the floor, head in the toilet. Her face was grey, and her hands were cold. I sat next to her and took her slow pulse.

"Phoenix," I said. "Hey, Phoenix."

She coughed and her eyelashes trembled. "I'm alive."

"What happened?"

“I got stood up. And then I drank a lot.”

I rubbed her back. “Yeah. I can see that.” I walked to the kitchen and returned with a glass of water. I held it under her nose. “Here. Drink.”

She took a sip of water and then immediately threw it up again. Her voice was slurred, her gaze out of focus. “Why do people keep standing me up?”

“I don’t know, darling,” I said. And I really didn’t. She was so intimidatingly cool—so mysterious and impulsive and bold. She wasn’t the type of girl you stood up. At least that’s what I thought.

Phoenix rolled her head to look at me. “It shouldn’t be this hard, you know. To find some boring fuck and put up a picket fence.”

“I didn’t know you wanted a picket fence.”

“Louise, let me tell you—” And here she paused to throw up. “Everyone in this whole goddamn world wants a picket fence. A picket fence of the mind, you know, or a picket fence of the—picket fences.” Her eyes closed. “Just cause I’m like, like, a free spirit or whatever, doesn’t mean I don’t want—”

She had fallen asleep. I stayed with her through the early morning, my fingers at her wrist every quarter hour, timing the beating of her pulse against the second hand of her cracked wristwatch.

x

After the night in the bathroom, Phoenix started to invite me to things. Gallery openings, bar trivia nights, themed house parties where everyone dressed as vampires or dead presidents or great classical composers.

She started coming to the Symphony on the nights I was subbing in the flute section. She sat with you up in the nosebleeds, so far away she had to bring that old pair of opera glasses just to see the stage. I would let the both of you through the back entrance afterwards so you could join the orchestra at the buffet.

Sometimes my father came too. Sat right next to Phoenix and borrowed her opera glasses. He was so proud of me on those nights—in my concert black up there with pros. Though he never understood why I stuck with the front desk job, why I never tried to audition anywhere else. How could I explain to him that I didn't need to audition anywhere else—I just needed to wait for the second flute to die?

She liked you a lot, Phoenix did. Said you were funny. She started inviting you to things too. You liked these outings. Nights out with Phoenix were strange, exciting—and you needed that break. A break from your job, from your boss, from real life. Right? That's what you called it—your world. *Real life*. I always tried not to take offense.

Maybe if your father hadn't left, if you and your mother hadn't been so poor, if you hadn't been forced to worry about money so much at such a young age, you might have been some kind of artist. It was part of the reason you were attracted to me. Part of the reason you enjoyed Phoenix so much. We were everything you couldn't be.

We all went to a theme party together—it was a murder mystery, and everyone had a part. I was the crotchety grandma, you were the creepy uncle, and Phoenix was the mystic aunt. Half the attendees were young actors. Everyone was deeply in character the whole time.

In the backyard, drunk under the strings of half-busted fairy lights, you clung to my waist, your pupils wide in the dark. "How did we get here?" you asked.

"I don't know," I said.

You kissed my neck, then pulled away quickly. “I think I’m supposed to be your son.”

“Hmm. I don’t remember.”

You kissed me again. “The incest has already infected your brain.”

“Incest doesn’t work that way.”

“Shows how much you know,” you said.

“Hey!” someone shouted across the yard. I think it was the redneck cousin. “Get your tongue away from Grandma, fucking perv!”

Your head fell to my shoulder in silent laughter. “We have to get out of here.”

I agreed: “As soon as humanly possible.”

The Christian aunt appeared next to the redneck cousin, shaking her crucifix in our general direction. “God spurns you for your forbidden love!”

“Holy shit,” I said. “Let’s go.”

You threaded your fingers through mine, lurching us toward a hole in the wooden fence. We breached the wall, breathing wildly, then collapsed into the grass by a tilted stop sign.

“You hear her?” you said, grinning sideways at me. “Our forbidden love.”

When I kissed you, it did feel forbidden—something I was giving to myself that was wrong, terribly wrong, but something I wanted more than anything I had wanted before.

x

Summer—your brother was getting married. We traveled to Illinois for the wedding. I could barely afford to skip work, but you begged me to come. Well, you couldn’t show up alone, could you? Because of your brother’s fiancée.

She had been your girlfriend, once, a long time ago. You were just kids, then. Dinners with the parents, kissing in the barn, sneaking out at night to go skinny-dipping in the creek. You

never slept with her. One never does, with a childhood love. It would be too strange, wouldn't it? Because in your mind, she's forever fourteen, sun-streaked hair and knobby knees, in those fragile weightless years before she becomes who she really is.

You kissed her—once—just before the ceremony. Short, heated, open-mouthed. I knew you would. I also knew you would tell me after, head hanging in shame.

Because the thing is, she really loved him. Your brother. He was real. He wasn't a memory. And that's what you were, what she was. And you needed that kiss to realize it was truly over. Time to swallow the memory.

In your mother's garden, after you told me, and after I forgave you, you laid your head in my lap. I stroked your hair as the evening heat faded into June stars.

And you finally asked me the question. The big question, the answer to which every single person on Earth wishes to know, but only I know for sure:

"*Do you and I ever end*?"

I told you the truth, but only part of the truth: "I will never leave you."

The small soft sigh when I said that. The look of relief on your face.

x

Let's take stock:

Your father left when you were twelve. My mother left when I was ten.

Your grandparents died early. My grandparents never wanted to meet me.

Me: one brother lost to the army. You: an uncle to the air force.

My ex-boyfriends: five. Your ex-girlfriends: seven.

Me: Betty—best friend, aged fifteen, dead. You: José—best friend, aged twenty, dead.

I knew from the beginning that they all would go. You didn't. Which is worse?

x

Winter, again. One year of us. The second flute finally died, I got her chair, and then you asked me to marry you. I said yes.

Soon after, a curious thing started happening to me—this near-constant aching in my chest, a feeling like my lungs were filled with fluid, a sense that the world was narrowing on me, pressing on all sides until I felt I might burst.

One of the girls in the back stand of the violas was a therapist's daughter. I talked to her in the wings during rehearsal breaks, both of us chugging water and wiping sweat from our foreheads, cooling ourselves from the heat of the main stage.

"What if, hypothetically," I said, "I could tell you what was going to happen with every person in your life—if they would leave you—when they would leave you. What if I could see the end from the beginning?"

The girl cricked her neck, frowning. "Is Jonah cheating?"

"No."

"I wonder what might be contributing to this particular line of worry—is this something you think about often?"

"Yes."

"Why do you think you are so afraid he might leave?"

Because I know he will. "I don't know," I said.

"What do you think would happen if he left?"

Nothing. Nothing ever happens when people go, except that ever-growing ache of knowing you have lost something that cannot be found again. "I don't know," I said.

"Well," she said, "let's put it this way. You'll lose him one way or the other. We all lose each other eventually. That's not something we can control. But no sense in worrying about that now. The only thing we can control is what we are doing in the moment. Be where your feet are, yeah?"

It wasn't the answer I wanted to hear.

I went to the doctor to see if he might have something different to say. I told him I was feeling anxious. I told him about the heavy lungs and the pressing in of the world.

He asked as he always does, checking off boxes on a chart, any street drugs lately? And I said no one would sell to me even if I wanted to, even though that wasn't true, because Phoenix had always offered to share whatever it was she kept in the white dusted insides of empty Altoid tins. Then he sent me to the psychiatrist, who prescribed me sedatives which I didn't use, because I was too scared.

Phoenix picked through them afterwards, admiring the dosage, and I offered them to her but she didn't take them. She was clean at the time—she'd discovered lucid dreaming. She said it might help me to reach my dead. That's why she was doing it. Plus, so she could fly.

She showed me how to start. At work I snapped rubber bands on my wrist like she told me and asked am I dreaming am I dreaming? No, I'm not dreaming. Weeks flew by and eventually, when I asked myself the same question in my dreams, I was able to stop and tell myself: *Yes. I am dreaming. But I am in control.*

And then I could fly. I could morph into a hawk, stalk prey in the desert. I could visit my mother and make her apologize for leaving me. I could swim in the Mediterranean. I could return to my childhood home, trace my hand along the banister as I climbed up the stairs to my room,

and my room would still be pink with little stars on the ceiling. I could hear you say you would never go. I could do anything I wanted. I was in control.

x

We—you—liked to play a game called future-watching. We'd go to the park on a Sunday and sit close on a split-wood bench under the great oak. You would point at people who walked by and I'd tell you their future. You guessed, first. You were always wrong. Then I told you the truth.

A scruffy man with a green duffel bag ran by at top speed.

Your guess: Police chase. Drugs in the bag. Police will catch him, he'll do time.

The truth: They will catch him, but there aren't drugs in the bag. The partner has the drugs. But they'll put his daughter into care, and it will break both him and the girl.

Woman in jeans and a blue jacket, rolling gum between her teeth. Wedding ring. Small toddler—she walked him holding his hand. She looked up to the sky as she walked.

Your guess: New mom, she'll cheat within five years, somehow still make out like a bandit in the divorce.

The truth: Two more kids, no cheating, fifteen years and she's head of the company, twenty more and they retire to Italy, happy.

Old man with white white hair. And his shirt was untucked. Ice cream in his left hand; melted down his wrist.

Your guess: He'll die within the year.

The truth: He's got ten years. He's a fighter.

One day you asked me, "Does it ever weigh on you? Knowing these things?"

Your hand was in my lap. I traced along your tendons, across the hills and valleys of your knuckles. Your ring finger, empty then, but soon to hold the silver band with my initials.

"I try not to think too hard about it," I said honestly. "If I did, I would probably die."

"Is it hard to trust people, knowing how things will turn out?"

It was spring. Leaves unfurling, cherry trees bursting, magnolias sweet in the air. A mother duck led her babies into the pond. Half would be dead by the end of the week—prey for hawks. Well, that's why she had eight. It's a numbers game.

The truth is, I don't ever trust anyone. I've never met a person I knew would stick around. Except for my dad, maybe. He's not going anywhere for a few more decades. Then it's a couple heart attacks and *pfft,* dead.

But I couldn't tell you that. So I lifted your hand to my mouth, kissed it, and told you, "I trust you." The biggest lie. But a white lie. A good lie. A lie of love.

x

Our first year of marriage—

Morning coffee in the sunroom. Counting down the days until you would leave me. Quiet nights in the den. Wondering what she would look like. Noisy summer barbecues on the lawn. Wondering if you had already met her, or when you would meet. Installing the new hummingbird feeder by our bedroom window. Wondering if you would love her more than you loved me.

I can't always read the full future. The image of the woman you would leave me for was never more than hazy. Some things, some people, don't want to be read. Maybe something in your body knew to conceal this particular event from me. Maybe it was something in the universe. I don't know why I couldn't see. It certainly wasn't for lack of trying.

Sometimes I stared at you so hard that it made you look up. You could *feel* me staring.

"What?" you would say. "What is it? Do I have something on my face?"

"No," I would say. "Nothing."

"Whatever I did, or am going to do," you would say, "I'm sorry." And then you'd take me into your arms, hold me close.

It's strange—that feeling of loving someone so much that it aches to even be with them. So stupid, really, to be hurting in that moment, when I still had you, when my head was still resting on your shoulder. But the magnitude of what I stood to lose—it was almost too much to stand.

I kept lucid dreaming. It was becoming somewhat of a problem. I did it too much, for too long. I would sleep for hours, like I was drugged. You were worried for me. But Phoenix encouraged me to keep going. She had been talking to her mother in her dreams. I told her I was speaking to mine too, even though that was a lie. I spent half of my time as a hawk, circling the trees, wind in my feathers—and the other half I spent talking to dream-you.

"This is good, this is good," Phoenix said of my mother. "This is how the healing starts. This is how we learn to forgive."

You weren't too sure.

One night, I was screaming in my sleep. You couldn't wake me up. You shook me and slapped my cheeks and yelled my name but I didn't open my eyes. And then, finally, after too long, I woke up. I was shaking. Cold all over. Almost in tears.

After I calmed down you asked me what had happened, but I wouldn't say. I told you I didn't remember. And of course that was a lie.

Well, here it is, the truth:

Some shadowy hallucination, hand over my mouth, knife at my throat. He leaned close and whispered in my ear. “You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I do,” I said. “I do know what I’m doing. This is my dream. I’m dreaming.”

He pressed the blade flat against my windpipe, harder and harder until I couldn’t breathe.

“Stop,” I whispered, “stop.” I willed him with all my might to go away, but I was losing control. He twisted the knife and it cut deep into my throat. Blood everywhere. Everything was fading. I couldn’t feel my fingers. And then black.

x

That year, Phoenix came over for dinner often. At least once a week, if not twice. She was no longer someone I didn’t know. No longer just a roommate. She was a friend.

Sometimes she brought her boyfriend. He was a bassist in the Symphony—they met at one of the afterparties. He was big and tall and jolly, and he was very good at telling stories, of which he had many. In his younger years, when he’d still had it in him, he traveled across Europe as part of a jazz band which had accumulated a small but religious cult following. Every time they visited, he had another story for us about a bar fight in Iceland or getting stuck on an island off the coast of Italy or playing for an audience of one in the remotest town in Romania.

The four of us grew closer. We had dinner parties. Their house, ours. We played parlor games, argued about politics, played music too loud in the garden. Sometimes Phoenix and the boyfriend and I would mess around with sheet music I dug up from the basement, a kind of weird, unbalanced trio—flute, bass, and Phoenix’s husky alto.

Occasionally you added half-hearted percussion. Most often you just watched. A willing but envious audience. When you were small, you begged your mother to let you play in the

school orchestra, but she never had the money for an instrument. She barely had money to put food on the table. You didn't blame her, you claimed, but I think you did.

But you know, some nights we were almost happy—those few golden hours when I could forget my future and you could forget your past. A tall order, of course, but now and again we managed it. Remember?

x

Spring—you got the promotion, just like I said you would. You took me up after hours to see your new office. The hallways were dark, the lights dimmed in the stairwells. We passed a janitor by the reception desk. We said hello and you asked him about his kids—Sadie and Sal. They were both playing baseball this season—Sal had a sprained wrist, but Sadie was showing off for scouts.

"Good for her, good for her," you said. "What a champ. I've been rooting for her."

I didn't know that you knew this much about other people's children.

We said goodbye to the janitor. You led me through the glass door of your office and flicked on the lights: wood floor, leather couch in the corner, standing desk and a potted plant by the window. You spun a slow circle with your arms wide. "Here we are—higher floor and bigger office—the rat increases the size of his cage. But would you look at the view."

I tiptoed to the window, peered down at the sleepy evening traffic of the city.

"I like it," I said. "I like your plant."

"Well, it's all right. At least now we can afford to send our kids to Harvard."

I plucked a leaf from your potted plant and rubbed it between my thumb and forefinger. "I don't think our kids are the Harvard type."

"Maybe they're baseball players, like Sadie."

"No, I think they're artists. I think they go to art school."

You drew me into your arms. "Then we'll send them to the Harvard of art school."

"Yes, we will."

"What do we have first," you asked, "a boy or a girl?"

I swallowed hard. "Twins," I lied. "We have twins."

x

The boyfriend broke up with Phoenix. It was sudden, out of the blue (at least for Phoenix—I had known from the start), but he claimed it had been a long time coming. That's how we knew he had another woman. He asked her to move out of the house, so she came to stay in our spare room until she found something else.

She and I got drunk that first night. On our backs in the grass, stars blurring above us, turned in towards one another so we could speak in whispers. This was not a conversation to be had in the light, in table voices. These things were meant to disappear with the night.

"He said I asked for too much," she told me.

"Did you?"

"It was an open relationship," she said flatly. "He could fuck other women any time he wanted. And he did. The only thing I wanted was for him to stay. But I guess even that was too much."

"I'm sorry, love," I said.

"You know," she said, "it's not even really a question of him, or the ones before him, or anyone in particular, really—it's more just the question of, like, what the fuck is mortgage insurance, and do I need it, and if so, how do I get it? You know? Like—I didn't want to have to figure this out on my own." She fell silent a moment. Then, quietly, "My parents were twenty-

three when they fell in love and got married. By the time I came around, they hated each other. I guess most people do. But they didn't have to do this shit alone."

x

Late summer—you were mowing the lawn when you stepped into the hornet nest. They swarmed you, stung you pretty bad. You went into anaphylactic shock. Hands at your throat, skin turning purple, thin wheezing breath. I drove you to the hospital myself—faster than waiting for an ambulance.

You were so scared. Real fear in your eyes. At a red light I drummed my fingers against the steering wheel, my heart beating fast. "Come on, come on," I said.

"I'm going to die," you whispered.

I looked over at you. Your face was swollen, your skin tight and red. Your hands were blue by now. But your eyes were still your own—deep brown, wide-set and ringed in dark lashes. "Don't worry," I said gently. "This isn't how you die."

Oh, the look on your face when you heard those words. I wanted to take them back, swallow them whole, but the damage was done.

In the months after, I asked myself why this could have come as a shock to you, this notion that I know how you will die. After all, I had told you about the promotion, and the boat, and retiring to Santa Barbara. Maybe it was some kind of mental block—you didn't want to think about the end. Or maybe it's just that men don't like for their wives to be smarter than them. Well, I hardly know.

The light turned green and I shot through the intersection, outstripping the Buick in the right lane in seconds. You were silent beside me, retreating deeper and deeper into yourself. You were quiet the whole ride to the hospital. You were quiet when we checked you in, when the

nurses rushed you down the hall in a wheelchair because you were too faint to walk, when the doctor gave you the epinephrine, when they hooked you up to the IV for more drugs, when they finally let us go home. No words.

You went to bed immediately, your body turned away from me, shoulders hunched into your chest. Hurt hanging in the air.

And that was the true beginning of the end.

x

You know, I know why you needed me. You told me why you needed me. You were an accountant—you liked to bet on a sure thing. And I was a sure thing, wasn't I? The surest of them all.

But you never knew why I needed you, other than that I loved you. Love you.

Here's some truth, because I am telling lots of truth today:

I can't see the future in myself. It doesn't work like that.

I could see my future in you. I could see it in you from the moment you walked into Symphony Hall. My life and your life, intertwined. I had been in the dark for so long before I met you. And then there you were, and I could see again. I could see me in you. My brown-eyed mirror.

When you finally told me, I knew it was coming. I just had no idea it would be her.

A few months after you left, I ran into her at the grocery store. It was awkward, of course. Understandably. But the way she looked at me—the expression on her face—she knew. I knew she knew. You told her.

And that is the worst thing you've ever done. Worse than lying to me. Worse than sleeping with her in our bed. Worse than breaking my heart.

x

In my dream, I woke up. I got out of bed. I dressed and went downstairs, got in the car, and drove to Dream-Phoenix's house under the cover of pressing grey clouds. The clouds followed me the whole way. They sank toward the Earth, swirled around my car, captured me in the black wet, but I switched on my headlights and I could still see.

I parked out front. When I knocked on her door, Dream-Phoenix answered, rubbing her tired eyes. "Hi, Louise," she said. Her voice was warm and soft with sleep, like a little girl's. Even in my dream, even though I willed her to do so, she did not invite me in. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to warn you," I said.

"Warn me?"

"You're going to go blind tomorrow."

"What? Why?"

"Because you will."

"How do you know that?

"I see the future, remember? He told you. I know he did."

Dream-Phoenix crossed her arms, glancing to the side uncomfortably. "He did tell me. I'm sorry he told me. It wasn't his secret to tell. And that's what I said to him, after."

"That's why you can never tell a secret," I said. "Because if you tell even one person then you're fucked, aren't you?"

"I guess so," she said. "Sometimes people keep secrets."

"No," I said. "They never do. That's why I've never told anyone about you."

"About me going blind?"

"Yes. Because then they might suspect."

"What might they suspect?"

"Me. They might suspect me."

"But you're not the reason I go blind, are you? Are you, Louise?"

"You were my best friend, you know. And you took him from me."

Her hands reached out to me. I didn't take them. She dropped them back to her sides. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to. I really didn't."

I reached behind her for the door handle and carefully closed the door shut. She stumbled onto the front stoop. Her feet were bare and the bottoms of her flannel pajama pants brushed against the concrete. "Listen, Phoenix," I said, backing her against the door, delicately pinning her between my arms. "Don't be scared. I promise this won't hurt a bit. It's just something I have to do, you understand?"

Dream-Phoenix nodded faintly, her arms coming up to protect her face. Fruitless, of course. She did understand. This was what was owed.

I blinked one, two, three times, a dream spell. My arms grew heavy with feathers. My feet gnarled into talons. I flexed my wings. I snapped my sharp beak.

x

In the morning, you called me from the hospital. Doctors were examining her, trying to understand, failing to find the reason why. You wanted to know if I knew. If I had always known. Was I really that fucked up that I would keep that from her? That I would have let her sleep into the afternoon day after day, all the while knowing that her colors would be taken from her? That she would never see again?

“I resent the accusation,” I told you over the phone. “You have some nerve. You know I could never read her. I told you that a thousand times.”

I could hear you deflate on the other side of the line. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I’m an asshole. I know that. It’s just—it’s the strangest thing. She said she saw you last night in her dreams.”

I sat up in bed, drawing the covers up to my chin. The hummingbird feeder outside our window swayed in the wind. “It was only a dream.”

“I know. I know. I’m sorry, Louise. I know.”

x

In my dreams I always go back to that rain-soaked night when I photographed you with a slow shutter in the dark—for the holiday card, I said, but really I wanted something of you to hold onto for when you left me. Your eyes were lowered and you posed with folded hands.

Sometimes I think about all those mornings when you were in bed next to me, skimming the morning paper and waiting on me to wake up, but I was lost in my dreams trying to reach you. Lost, lost, lost, trying to find some version of you that might be able to give me answers, that might be able to explain to me the constant quivering fear in my heart. The fear that has lived in me always.

After that night with Phoenix, my dream-control has been slipping—I can’t touch things like I used to. Not anymore. I can’t fly. I can’t reach you. I don’t know why. Last night in my dream, my fingers passed through you. I said to you, I don’t think you’re real.

You said, I’m not real, you’re not real, none of us are real. Stop trying to pretend otherwise.

But I know that’s not true, because you’re real somewhere. You’re just not real in me.