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DINNER AT EIGHT

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Anastasia M. Berkovich

May 2017

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DINNER AT EIGHT

English

Missouri State University, May 2017

Master of Arts

Anastasia M. Berkovich

ABSTRACT

This creative thesis is comprised of six short stories of fiction in various styles and lengths, as well as a critical introduction wherein I discuss the various influences on my work, ranging from Charles Baxter and Karen Joy Fowler to Doležel and John Gardner. All of these stories share a theme of family and loss. Each story also grapples in some way with changing times and places. I have endeavored, by using rhyming action, repeating images, and melodrama, to give each story a great sense of emotion, a feeling both specific to the story but connects to the wider reading experience throughout the collection as well.

KEYWORDS: short stories, short story, literary, family, literature

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Jennifer Murvin, MFA
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
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By

Anastasia M. Berkovich

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INTRODUCTION

An unanticipated joy from learning about craft and theory is finding words to describe forms of fiction I have long admired but until now found myself unable to articulate. I have enjoyed reading authors whose stories relate to big picture themes and who are able to imbue so much emotion into their stories through the use of images, motifs, and precise language. My favorite stories are ones that leaving me thinking long after I finished them. I read a short story in August, “The Not-Needed Forest” by Diane Cook. I still lay in bed thinking about the twist at the end and how she left clues throughout the whole story. I remember the feeling, the gut punch, the wave of emotion I felt when I finished the story. A subject I find myself returning to repeatedly is family, and I notice how other writers use various types of families in their stories, such as Karen Joy Fowler building the portrait of a family around an expedition in her short story “What I Didn’t See.” In this story, she uses the narrative technique of rhyming action, the repetition of an image to develop meaning, to complicate the story’s themes of trust, loyalty, lust, betrayal. I attempt a similar approach in several of the stories within this collection, most notably “Vagabones.” I also attempt to engage with family conflict while avoiding melodrama as defined by Charles Baxter, and also seen in my story “Dinner at Eight.”

I come from a large family myself, on both sides. I have Irish Catholic roots, German also; I have Russian and Okinawan. My family is large and tight-knit, boisterous yet loving. But I never really wanted to write this history. For one thing, I have been writing fiction, not non-fiction. I did not know how to write about my family without

actually writing about my family; I was not sure how to fictionalize our lives. I turned to other main ideas instead; first I tried writing fantasy. I have loved fantasy, particularly young adult, from the time I could read. Writing fantasy is quite difficult, and I quickly learned I did not have the chops for it. In my first fiction class, an honors class with Dr. Richard Neumann, I wrote what was the first chapter in what I assumed was going to be a young adult fantasy trilogy. I would not say it was “awful,” just that it trafficked in tropes such as a girl kept prisoner who is secretly a royal, a handsome friend from her childhood that helps her escape, a wicked step-mother who stole her throne. I decided to abandon ship entirely and try something else with my writing.

I tried for something more realistic, though I still avoided family, in my writing. For my next fiction class, I wrote a story about a couple who meets at an airport after some time apart, only to find their relationship was not salvageable. It still leaned towards the young adult genre—my characters were teenagers, if I recall correctly—but it was not burdened by so many genre tropes as my earlier story. It had some merit, but was still not a well-functioning story, hardly anything was in scene but was told in summary and the characters while not caricatures were still flat when they needed to be round. For my first advanced workshop, I continued floundering around for what it was that I wanted to write about, subject wise. I did not find anything conclusive but then for my independent study and my second advanced workshop, I started working with magical realism.

I had wanted to write magical realist stories for a while. Magical realism can be defined as a story that works under a metaphor, in which nearly everything mirrors the “real” world, except typically one, though sometimes more, fantastical element. They were some of my favorite stories to read; I particularly liked those of the writer Aimee

Bender. It seemed like maybe this might be my niche. I wrote some really interesting story ideas during that time, though they all suffered the same problem: I could come up with these ideas—of a wild woman, a family that acts like ostriches, a dump where people come nightly to revel in nostalgia, a woman who turns into the sun—but I could not really pull off the execution. Nearly everyone would say the story was interesting but it lacked a cohesive narrative. The plot in particular was either nonexistent or flimsy. I'd often insert myself as a character, a woman coming home to find the weirdness happening. All of this added up to a good story in concept but which for the above reasons and more, was not a full story yet. The fun and interesting idea got lost in my storytelling. The story about the ostriches suffered because the whole plot revolved around a woman (a character whose traits were basically my own) returning home to find her family has started acting like ostriches. The story needed more engagement with the metaphor—that some people will do anything to avoid conflict—as well as characters who are not just me. I read so many magical realist texts in an attempt to figure how to pull off an extended metaphor effectively but, despite writing magical realist stories for three straight workshops, it still was not working, even as I entered graduate school.

For my second semester graduate workshop, I decided to try something different. I left behind young adult, fantasy, and magical realism and decided to write about something I knew. I had misheard the lyrics to a song; instead of “vagabond” I heard “bag of bones” (I can't recall the name of the song) and it got me thinking. I thought about how my dad never really recovered from the loss of his mother and how all of us humans carry around bones of one kind or another with us. This was the basis of my story “Vagabones,” which is about a truck driver whose mother has passed away a year prior to

the events of the story and who is still carrying around her bones. It plays with the ideas I mentioned above, while also paying homage to southern gothic writer Flannery O'Connor, one of my favorite writers. The story was a success. I remember Professor Michael Czyzniejewski writing that it was "firing on all cylinders," and it is still by far the standout of this collection.

It seemed the subject family was might be my niche. I could find ways to be inspired by my large family without actually writing about them. Here was a story inspired by my father, but also my grandfather, taking place in the town next to my hometown, while playing off the iconic O'Connor story "Good Country People" (in both stories, a leg is stolen). I decided to explore, too, the different kinds of families that can develop and the deep connections that are made and unmade between people. After all, that is what my family is made of: relationships. It is the understanding of how my relationships within my family work and how the relationships in my family function that color my stories. For example, the aunt in this story refuses to give up on the main character, calling him and inviting him to stay with her so they can heal together. My family members never give up on each other. My niche is exploring and seeking an ever deeper understanding of people and humans and what makes us "us" through the lens of family. While revising "Vagabones," I compared the story to a story by another beloved author, "What I Didn't See" by Karen Joy Fowler. In "What I Didn't See," Fowler uses rhyming action "actions or dramatic images that cause the hair on the back of our necks to stand up" (Baxter 113) to develop and expand her theme. This story is told from a woman looking back on some gruesome details of an expedition to see gorillas her and her husband went on years before. I sought to use a similar pattern in "Vagabones" to

draw a better connection to the bones my narrator carried around and to the feelings like grief and regret that he refused to acknowledge.

Charles Baxter and Milan Kundera speak on the technique of rhyming action, as well as the writer John Gardner. While each uses a different word or phrase for the technique, they all complement and expand on each other's theory well. Kundera explains symmetrical composition as "the same motif at the beginning and at the end" (52). When rhyming action is achieved, a reader sees an image at the beginning of a text and sees it again at the end, but the meaning has changed. Gardner explains how this technique works by describing how an "element [calls] to element through the novel, form crying out to form" (192). When an author spends time with an image, the reader will expect to see that image again. The images chosen that the writer choose to repeat have the ability to invoke feeling in the reader, particularly when the reader has made their way to the end.

This idea of returning to images played a large role in the revision of my short story "Vagabones." Although this is a story about a man who carries his mother's bones around, in the first version of the story, the bones were not introduced until page three when the narrator's aunt explains how his mother's femur and tooth cannot be cremated. The idea that he carries the bones around with him wasn't introduced until the next page and the story was only ten pages long, mostly dialogue. But I realized that for the image of a man carrying his mother's bones around to work, it has to be introduced early in the story and then returned to in new yet ways, to get that varied meaning. When I revised the story, I moved the mention that he carries the bones using the phrase "a bag of bones for a vagabond" to the first page, in the second paragraph. This early introduction gives

the reader the image at the very beginning of the story and allows the reader to ruminate on that image throughout the story, much as the narrator himself does.

I also sought to include more mentions of the bones throughout and for the narrator to ponder what they mean to him. In the first draft of the story, the narrator, Mark, was obsessed with how creepy it was for him to carry the bones. He thinks, “It’s creepy but sometimes it gives me comfort.” The problem here is that the creepiness is already there and in fact, the mention of it only serves to narrow the emotional effect to one word: creepy. We get it; he keeps the bones. The part more pressing in the story is how they give him comfort and why he needs that comfort. In a more recent draft, Mark thinks about the bones more often and ruminates more on why he keeps them. When thinking of why he might carry the bones with him he says “I’d think of how Mom would use them, how they were just a part of her, her body, something foreign made into her. I wondered how she wondered about them, if she was hyper aware of the false bones or if she just accepted them, forgot them.” The point of rhyming action in my story is to be continuously drawing a parallel between the presence of the bones and the absence of the mother and how that makes the narrator feel. With this emotion gradually building throughout, the reader feels the climax— when the bones are stolen— far more strongly. In “What I Didn’t See,” Fowler introduces and returns to multiple images—of gorillas, of women—and each time the reader is driven closer and closer to her meaning, how cruel humans can be and how nature can be so human, closer and closer to the heart of the narrator. What I love about this story is how the images of the gorillas and women are brought about again and again, but every time they come to mean something different to the narrator: first she is afraid of them, then she sees how human they are, and finally she

is appalled by how humans savagely killed the gorillas. A favorite moment of mine is when the narrator encounters the gorillas, herself naked, and chooses not to kill them because she finds them more human than she imagined. She describes that she saw “something so human it made me feel like an old woman with no clothes on” (Fowler 184), which is exactly what she was—the gorillas made her feel like herself. She then says “I knew it wasn’t right—to kill him merely because he was more human than I anticipated” (Fowler 185). The narrator is overcome with emotion that the gorillas were far more human than she imagined, and she found herself unable to do anything but stare and be exceptionally aware of her own situation—a naked old woman, as she says herself. The feeling, returns when the narrator’s husband tells her of the slaughter, giving his justification that he saved the porters from blame. He justifies his actions by saying that he was saving others from undue scrutiny (Fowler). The two moments function as a reversal. The wife saves what she sees as human, as does the husband, but in different ways. That is precisely what makes the image work; the reader sees it earlier, notes it, then sees it again in another manner, thereby creating a new meaning. In this case, it is no longer sympathy the reader feels for the gorillas alone that is in play, but rather a more complicated feeling emerges, whereby the reader feels that same sympathy, also for the husband and the porters, yet still acknowledging the horror at the fact of the missing, possibly murdered woman. It is this complication that gives the story more depth, rather than just a repeating image of gorillas.

This complication between feelings brought on by images of the gorillas ties into what John Gardner has to say about rhyming action in *The Art of Fiction*. He says, “We are moved by the increasing connectedness of things, ultimately a connectedness of

values” (Gardner 192). He describes almost exactly what Fowler is doing. We see the image of humanity, of the shared connectedness of humans, and also how that relates to values and how it shifts from character to character.

It seems to be that rhyming action works best when the reader forgets what it is that is rhyming; or rather, when the reader sees it all at once, a sudden illumination. As Baxter says, “The return to a starting point is only a discovery if you’ve forgotten where you started out from in the first place” (113). Baxter also says, “The image or action or sound has to be forgotten before it can effectively be used again. Rhymes are often most telling when they are barely heard, when they are registered but not exactly noticed” (114). A good example from this in “What I Didn’t See” is the carrots. Upon my first reading of the story, I did not notice them at all. It should be noted that perhaps this is due in part to my development as a writer—I did not know to look then as I do know. But I posit that a good deal of it is owed to Fowler’s writing. Here is a much more subtle image than the gorillas in the form of the carrots and flowers. The carrots are first introduced as a passing detail as the company moves up the mountain. The narrator notes, “We saw glades of wild carrots and an extravagance of pink and purple orchids” (Fowler 179). Later the narrator sees the gorillas eating wild carrots and notes how human it looks (Fowler 184). The image takes on more meaning as it is presented multiple times, but it never is overbearing. The images serve as a refrain and a connection between the narrator and the gorillas. It is also a refrain of what the narrator did see, later juxtaposed with what she did not see. It takes on more meaning from other refrains in the story, too, such as the “sweet-natured vegetarian” phrase used first by Archer to describe the gorillas and then by Beverly when she speaks of herself. Archer describes the gorillas as “harmless and

gentle, if oversized and over muscled. Sweet-natured vegetarians” and reappears again when Beverly describes herself as “more a sweet-natured vegetarian” though also adds that she does eat meat (Fowler 174, 180). Here Fowler continues to use more subtle images throughout to build meaning into her narrative and into the larger image of the gorillas.

For my story “Vagabones,” the deeper meaning of the narrator’s complicated relationship with his mother before, after, and during her death, comes through as the narrator is processing through it all himself. In further revisions, I have added more about how the narrator feels carrying the bones around. The reader accepts that he carries around bones because the narrator presents the information as being normal, to him at least. In the first draft of the story, the only mention of the narrator Mark’s deeper feelings is on page nine when he thinks, “I never had held them reverently before, but now seemed as good a time as any.” He doesn’t realize the bones’ importance until right before he learns that they have been stolen. But the key is to show the reader their importance even as Mark is slow to realize their meaning to him. The bones come to mean something different with the introduction of Jim, the antagonist. He puts a monetary value on them, telling Mark, “I’d probably want to sell them, but I could see why you would hesitate.” The bones represent money to Jim, an object to sell. The stealing only works because the two men understand the bones differently, and the reader struggles along like Mark to fully understand the differences and why Jim stole the bones. This duality functions in similar way to “What I Didn’t See.” While in Fowler’s story the reader is rewarded by connecting the dots between the carrots, flowers, gorillas,

etc., in my story the reader knows what is important—the bones—and the reward for their reading comes when the narrator realizes what was clear to the reader all along.

“Vagabones” has developed into the story I am perhaps most proud of. By looking at my life and finding what was important in it, I was able to write a story that grappled with certain ideas about family and remained an entertaining read and absorbing read.

My next story was a domestic fiction about a woman who falls out of love with her husband and in love with her co-worker. I was motivated to write the story in an attempt to better understand adultery, or to humanize it. It leaves me sick to think of that ultimate betrayal, and I tend to demonize rather than seek to understand. So I wrote a story from the perspective of the adulterer to force myself to understand where she might be coming from. That story is “Left-Hand Man.”

The next story I wrote was “Dinner at Eight,” which is likely my favorite story I have written. This is the story of the apocalypse and one family’s reaction to it. I am still writing about family, in the form of a first-person collective, but I am also going back to the magical realism I tried so hard to pull off early. The metaphor now is the comparison of the grandparents’ death—the glue holding the family together—to the world ending, at least the world of this family, though made literal in the story. The world functions as the “real” world, the only differing element being the apocalypse. The apocalypse is meant to symbolize the death of the grandparents. The grandmother and grandfather held the whole family together and after the grandfather died, the family didn’t know what to do. But the grandmother’s death was slower and gave the family more time to say good-bye, which I showed in the story as the family’s willingness to accept their apocalypse fate.

In this story, I strove to create an alternative view of the apocalypse, one in which a family chooses to spend their last moments together, rather than looting or other stereotypical disaster world behavior. Inspired a phrase uttered by my father: “Only the apocalypse could bring them together” while talking about his siblings, how they lived all over the world and rarely all came together at the same time. I endeavored to create a fictional world in which traditional apocalypse melodrama is pushed aside in favor of a more intimate portrait of a family. In order to better understand how to continue to build this world and how to best stay away from the so-called apocalypse stereotypes while still building a solid story, I turned to Lubomír Doležel and the general order discussed in his theory text *Heterocosmica*, coupled with Charles Baxter’s notes on melodrama.

A good place to start is who and what are allowed in the fictional universe. “Dinner at Eight,” while involving the apocalypse, is ultimately a story grounded in a reality similar to our own. However, it still needs necessary rules and players. An interesting point from Doležel is that “a general order controls the entry of constituents in to the world: only those entities that comply with the general order are admitted” (19). Doležel explains the “general order” as infinite possibilities of laws that govern a given fictional world; he gives the laws of the actual world as one possible example (20). In thinking about my idea behind “Dinner at Eight,” a general order or law of the world would be an almost cavalier attitude about the apocalypse. The “general order” was that the apocalypse was coming but all would remain calm. No drama, just life as close as “normal” as possible. I had this narrative going where the main character (in an earlier draft before the first person collective point of view) calmly went about her business when faced with the idea of the apocalypse. It seemed to be my way of establishing how

this story was different from other stories. It also fit in with my metaphor—the grandma is slowly dying, so the family has time to make arrangements and to say their goodbyes, they need not panic. The same, then, is true for the apocalypse on the other side of the metaphor. Just as the grandma’s death is accepted, so too is the end of the world, at least for the constituents of the world.

When thinking of the typical apocalypse story, I tend to think of narratives that show a dour world, one full of melancholy, and characters that typically try to fight their fate or else are struggling to survive in a new world. Other features include a general discord, looting, pillaging, and dissolution of society, if not all at once, then slowly and over time. My favorite stories in this genre create more of a mix; Karen Thompson Walker’s *The Age of Miracles* is a good example of a healthy mix of trope and originality. I did not want the focus to be on the world or on what it was that caused the apocalypse. Particularly in other medias, such as television shows like *The Walking Dead*, the focus seems to be on how characters fight the oncoming threat or else try to mitigate it. I thought it might be interesting to have a family accept the end of the world, which seemed to allow more of an emphasis on this family and how they work, rather than how the world around them worked. I did describe how other people were reacting to the news but kept the focus on this family and their town and the active choice they made to remain calm. It was important to say that others were behaving in the more desperate manner to better underscore the family and their town’s attitude; not every family can cope so well. All of the characters behave in this similar manner, with this cool attitude; they all ascribe to the general order I have created.

When I made the shift to a solely first-person collective voice, I created a family that acts as a whole. The unit of the family became the focalizer, and, in doing so, the narrative moved towards a more cohesive social force, or at least that was my intention. Doležel describes how, in multi-person fictional worlds, “Interaction occurs between individual persons or between groups. Groups organize into institutions to pursue intricate forms of social acting” (32). The group that forms and dominates in “Dinner at Eight” is the family. The family serves as the institution that coalesces and develops the general reaction to the apocalypse—they establish the “general order.” But it is perhaps more helpful to view this family in a one-person world. The family, while composed of distinct parts or people, function much more as a whole cohesive unit. Not only that, but their primary opposition is with the Nature force, here manifested as the apocalypse and as death. The family is also isolated, by way of a steep mountain road, from any larger societal group. Doležel, in describing *Robinson Crusoe’s* one-person world, states that the N-force “metamorphosed into an animate, supernatural partner in quasi-interaction” (4). Here is a good example of how “Dinner at Eight” may work as a one-person world. As in *Robinson Crusoe*, the N-force in my story takes on an almost supernatural meaning, certainly a metaphorical meaning. It is the end of the world yes, but by losing both grandparents, it may also be the end of their family as they know it. Not only that, but it is the force that drives the family together and which creates in the appearance of a singular person. By turning away from the opposite of the desperate apocalypse actions described earlier, I established a family that was okay with the end coming near and sought to make it a happy occurrence almost, one to celebrate together, as a whole, just as some may choose to celebrate a loved one’s life lived, rather than mourn his/her death.

This brings up Charles Baxter's comments on melodrama, as it is melodrama of a sort that I sought to avoid.

Baxter's notes on melodrama in the essay collection *Burning Down the House* have helped me to make sense of my influences—this idea of a family going so far as celebrating the end of the world and how a family and the smaller societal spheres they inhabit could remain calm in a disaster situation. He says, "The avoidance of conflict in such fiction has to do with a phobia towards melodrama and its popular degradations... This refusal is a luxury of writers in a rich hegemonic culture" (Baxter 138). "Dinner at Eight" has that hegemonic world, ruled by this family that refuses to succumb to the pressures for a society to fall apart. Baxter suggests that in this calmness, there may be a fatal lack of conflict. The world is set up, the rules are given, as are the constituents, but no conflict remains to drive the story. Instead of avoiding melodrama, it seems I have avoided any drama at all. While Baxter does mention how avoiding "conflict" could work in some circumstances, it did not in "Dinner at Eight." The family is poised for potential conflict (apocalypse), but a lack of panic/action in this story leaves the reader wanting. Baxter talks earlier in this same essay about how the reason melodrama is so prevalent in Western art is to do with the contemporary political climate, all around the world, where violent, large-scale conflict is often seen (133). It was precisely this tendency that I wished to avoid. Rather than show the dissolution of society, which might be expected, I wanted to show creation instead, choosing to focus on a family and how they come together, a reversal of sorts.

The obvious problem here then is an utter lack of conflict. While a disregard to the "popular degradations" of melodrama is fine and even warranted, the drama, the

narrative must come from elsewhere. Baxter says in defense of melodrama that “As a form, it conveys to any story a quality of urgency—a sense that the stakes are very high. Melodrama not only compels attention but sustains it” (137). Melodrama is a necessary component to drive a story and to create a deeper reaction in the reader. By eschewing any melodrama connected to the oncoming apocalypse, I eliminate the natural stakes therein, and I must create stakes elsewhere in the story, and melodrama of a different kind than the apocalypse—such as that within a family—may prove a worthy inclusion. They are the “constituents of the world,” the ones who “comply with the world order” as described earlier. The focus, too, needs to be on the metaphor, and on building the metaphor while not giving too much away, such as in Kevin Brockmeier’s “The Ceiling.” He gives the line referencing the story’s origin myth of Chicken Little, and he gives clues to the wife’s affair, all of which helps to build the dual meaning of the story (the sky literally and figuratively falling). It can be taken literally and metaphorically. The same must be true for “Dinner at Eight.” I have left crumbs for my readers as well—a line about how it seemed the world would end when the grandfather died—without taking away from the dual meaning of the narrative.

It seems writing about family is exactly where I need to be. Whether it is through the lens of a man coming to grips with the only family he has left, or a family both mourning and celebrating the life they have lived, this subject matter is where I thrive. Whenever I read other people’s writing, it seemed like they already found their niche early on—my best friend has been writing magical realist stories that function well and are entertaining for much of her career—but that I can’t compare myself to them. I can only rejoice that I have finally, finally found what works for me. I read Elizabeth

Gilbert's *Big Magic* and it had a profound influence on me. One part that stood out was how she said, if you truly love writing and are doing it for the right reasons, then you would be happy to write every day for the rest of your life, regardless of any publication or commercial success or lack thereof. I am greatly looking forward to writing for the rest of my life, getting better and better as I go, and learning more about myself in the process.

VAGABONES

Mom's dead. I wish she weren't, of course, but life's a bitch. If you smoke your whole life, nobody can be surprised when you to get cancer. I wasn't there for her last breath.

It's been nearly a year now, and I haven't been back home, not since her funeral. She was cremated, but they couldn't burn a metal tooth and leg so I kept them, a bag of bones for a vagabond. I've always kept myself busy, but I've been keeping myself even busier since Mom's death. I own my truck, and it's easy enough to pick up jobs. When I first started, I never really left the Midwest, but now I've been all over. Mom's bones have crisscrossed the whole of the United States now. It's like she can travel all of them. It gives me comfort.

My aunt called me when I was a little outside of Kansas City, the end of a particularly long haul. I sent her to voicemail. I'm not supposed to be talking and driving anyway.

"Mark, I'm calling to see if you will be coming home soon. It's been too long. You can't run forever. Look, I get it, and I'm not going to lecture you or anything or say any more empty words. Just come home and visit, okay?" she said. She seemed exasperated. I used to stay with her whenever I had a break and went to Indiana to see Mom. I have two nieces and a nephew and their raucous play was a great alternative to the stiff hospital and my wheezing mother. I wouldn't mind seeing them again. She was the one who called me to tell me about Mom. I was on the road, always. I sent it to voicemail. I guess I should say that's my habit.

“Mark,” she said, “you need to call me back. It’s about your mom.” She ended with that, but called back a few minutes later. “You need to call me, *now*,” she said, only that. I ignored her. Someone can’t be dead if you don’t know, yeah? No, not true. She called again, “Mark, your mom has passed away. I’m sorry. Call me,” she said, leaving the last message not ten minutes after the first. I’m sure she just wanted to get it over with. I called back. She said I had to come down and make arrangements.

I found a way to cover my next trip and drove down to Indiana, where Mom was living in a hospital. It was the nicest that the government could afford, which was actually pretty nice. She was well taken care of; she had food and comfort, and other than how sick she was and the fact that she was dying, she was in a pretty good place. I guess she is in an even better place now.

Mom is dead. Most people don’t imagine that their mother will die young, but I guess most people also don’t have a chain smoker for a mom. That kind of stuff will easily do you in. She made me stop when she first found out about the cancer. The doctor said if she was healthier then she might have been able to fight it. Mom was a diabetic and not a fan of eating healthy or exercising, but she tried, at least at first. When it became clear that she would need more than being a healthier person, she gave up. She was admitted to the hospital indefinitely last Christmas, and the doctor said she wasn’t going to make it much longer. The cancer had spread; she went to live in a hospice. But Mom must’ve been a trooper because she stayed there nearly another year. I knew it was coming, but that didn’t help anything. My aunt had said I should take some time off to spend with Mom and family, but I told her I couldn’t.

Mom wanted to be cremated, so that's what happened. My aunt wanted to have a ceremony, anyway, wanted me to speak some words and such, but I didn't want to. I sat in the back and watched as others spoke kind words about Mom. She was always such a great person; she really knew how to bake a cake; nobody could smoke a pack like her, eh? My favorite line was "She's in a better place now," as if they could know. Isn't the point that no one can know? Later, my aunt came up to me.

"You should've talked," she said. "Why didn't you come up?"

"These people are strangers. Why should I talk to them? They don't care," I said.

"You sound like a petulant teenager. Get over yourself. We all miss your mom," she said. I guess she was right. I hadn't seen her in several months and had been avoiding all these people, all these feelings. I was getting to be old, just over thirty, a man with no home who was always on the road. Yeah, I wasn't a teenager anymore and should act like it.

"What about the ashes?" I asked.

"What about them? We could bury them, scatter them, or keep them in an urn," she said. "Up to you, really." She seemed callous, but her eyes were brimming with tears. It seemed like she just really wanted this whole thing to be over with. Too much feeling, too much emotion. Her and Mom had likely already said their goodbyes and been done with it. They were tight, closest two people I ever saw. Mom always had her sister by her side. Me, I never had anyone to stand by me.

"Let's scatter them," I said. I couldn't bear the thought of keeping them around, but I also didn't want nothing to happen to them. A proper sendoff might be nice. My aunt said we could use the meadow behind her house. That way I, and others, could come

and see her. She would be like the flowers and trees, which seemed like some hippie shit, but I liked it.

My closer family members gathered the next day to scatter them in the meadow. I wasn't entirely sure it was legal, that there must be some environmental law there but we all grabbed a handful and let it lose. I watched as my handful slipped to the ground, only a little catching in the wind. It all seemed to make a pile, a little mound. I had the strange urge to kick it but resisted. The ashes, her ashes, reminded me of the cigarettes that killed her. The nasty things that took her breath, turned her lungs black. I guess they did take her, made her into them. Maybe this was what they should show kids to get them to quit—my mother turned into what it was that killed her. But it was also kind of beautiful, that irony and simply to see my mother out in the meadow again. It was nice to see that Mom was a part of nature. I think it all helped us, in a way.

My aunt was holding the now-empty urn. "There's one problem, Mark. Her gold teeth and metal femur remain. It might be a good idea to sell them." She was concerned about how I made a living. So was Mom, when she was still healthy. They were a lot alike, really, but not too much. They fit each other like puzzle pieces, one's deficits fitting into the other's strengths. They looked like they could be twins, and I sometimes found it hard to look at my aunt, once Mom got sick.

"Yeah, I'll take care of it." I grabbed the urn and led the slow march into the house. My cousin had warmed up some of the casseroles left by well-wishers for us to eat. It was a quiet affair, and I left as soon as possible. My aunt tried to send me home with some of the casseroles, but my truck wasn't really outfitted for them. Besides, they were one more reminder of my mother that I didn't really want around.

I kept the bones, though, her teeth and her femur. Mom shattered her femur bone when I was younger and needed a metal replacement. I was too young to really know what was going on, and, even now, looking at the bone I couldn't place it. Mom never really talked about it all that much, but she was keen to talk about her gold teeth. She always turned it into a joke, making people laugh. I think she lost them in a fight, but I can't be sure. Anyway, it seemed as though they were my bones now. They were obviously not the right size for me but it still felt like they were me, in the sense that they were mine, yeah, but also the sense that I am my mom. She's always been a big part of me, and I know I've always been a big part of her. It's just right that we are together. I can't imagine that anyone else in my family would've wanted them, and it didn't seem right to sell part of Mom. Sure, she's moved on now, but it still didn't sit right with me. I took them with me when I left my aunt's house that day and have kept them with me the whole time since.

I started to feel hungry so I got off the road in search of a diner I saw on a billboard a couple of miles back. The town is called Peculiar, and it seemed like a nice place to raise a kid. Not the kind of place that I would like to stick around, though. There was a large lot a little ways off the highway, so I parked there and looked around. The diner I saw on the billboard was across the highway. It's the main road through the town, which isn't saying much. The diner seemed to be a bit of hopping place, several cars parked outside, but I could still easily cross the road. It's a small town, and the sun was already preparing to set—most people were probably home with their families. I always liked that about small towns, how the whole place seems to shut down at the same time. Everyone seemed to be on the same page, which was a nice switch up.

I walked into the diner. It was a nice place, with an old-school neon sign that shone bright. Deb's Place, that's its name. Deb was my mother's name. As soon as I walked in, I could smell the grease. It was comforting, though my mother never really cooked. I guess the smell of grease just harkens back to the old days when humans had to eat lots of carbs and fat to have enough fuel to work. I sit around all day, so I don't really need as much. Doesn't ever stop me, though I've tried to be healthier lately. Might as well have a cheat night, though.

I sat up at the counter. "Cup of coffee, please," I said, to no one in particular.

"Coming right up," said one of the waitresses. I expected her to say something endearing, like honey or sweetie, but maybe they only do that in movies. I guess I did want some comfort from strangers after all.

A guy came and sat next to me. There were several other seats, empty, far away from me. I'm not sure why he wanted to talk to me, but I wasn't really in the mood. I was thinking about my aunt, my mom, the bones in my car. They always seemed to come right after each other, Mom then bones, bones then Mom. They came as a pair to my thoughts.

"Hey," he said, "try the fried catfish. It's the house specialty."

"Yeah, sure." I kept my nose down, trying not to really engage with the guy. This is why I usually just keep to the truck stops. Guys there tend to get when you want to be alone and when you want to talk. It has to do with knowing people like you, I suppose. These diner folk aren't the same kind.

“I’m Jim. But people around here call me Jimmy. You’re not from ‘round here, are you? I can tell. So where you from?” Jim said. I was never a fan of the name Jimmy. Knew a guy back in high school who just ruined the name for me.

“Not here,” I said, hoping he would avoid the conversation. Instead, he launched into a long monologue about himself and this town. It was interesting to hear. He said it’s always been a small place, mostly only drifters coming through, but he’d been here his whole life. It was a nice little story and made me happy I didn’t have to talk. The waitress came by, and I ordered the catfish, and Jim did the same. He kept on, talking about how most people worked at the plant a ways down the road but they had to let a bunch of people off recently, him included.

“Time’s are rough,” he said, around a big mouth of catfish, “but we’re doing the best we can. It’s just me I got to take care of, but some of the other guys got families. It’s harder for them.”

“I could help,” I said, not sure where I was going with it. “Truck driving is a pretty good gig. Not sure about the family guys, but for us singles it’s a nice way of life.”

“Well I’d welcome any help you can give,” Jim said.

I opened up a bit after that. He wasn’t so bad a guy as I thought. He got shitty lot in life, too, and we shitty lot guys should stick together. I ended up spending the evening with him, and we walked over to the local bar after our dinner. I picked up the tab, since I’m a little better off and he could use some help. The waitress didn’t seem impressed and muttered something as she walked away with my card. Whatever, I think, must have some sour attitude.

I got drunker than I meant to at the bar. Jim was always ordering us another round before I was even done with the beer I'm nursing. I hadn't been drunk much since Mom passed, but I wasn't surprised that with the alcohol came thoughts of the bones. It wasn't like I ever tried to keep them out—in fact, I could sometimes hear them rattling if the ride was particularly bumpy—but that I had never really felt their presence so strongly. Actually, it was more of an absence; I wasn't used to not having them by my side. Even with the alcohol, I managed to keep all the bones and Mom thoughts to myself.

Seemed like people around there knew him. I wasn't surprised, as it's a pretty small town, with not a lot of people around. He was loud and boisterous, the opposite of me. I kind of liked it, kept all the attention to him. I'm not sure why, maybe the alcohol did get to me, but I started to open up to him talk about Mom. I told him that I kept her bones, and he said he wanted to see them. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything, but he was telling me all these interesting stories about himself and his town, so I thought I should share something, too. I'm not sure what it says that the most interesting thing about me was that I kept my mother's bones in a bag under my car seat. Jim didn't seem to care.

We walked out to my truck, and I let him in. It's one of the bigger ones, with a cabin attachment. Mom had a little bit of money for me in her will. Since I'm her only kid, I got what she had. I think she'd be happy to see the place.

"I keep them under my seat," I said, as I grappled around looking for the bag. I traded it for the urn a while back. The urn was too formal, too dead.

"That's a funny place. Why not keep them locked away?" Jim said.

“Who would want my mom’s old teeth and femur?” I asked. Jim seemed pretty interested, which was cool, really, because I would’ve imagined that it would freak him out. But we were both drunk, so that sure had something to do with it.

Jim said they were cool, asked me why I kept them. I couldn’t really answer him. I’ve asked myself that question often over the past months. I never really took them out and looked at them, but I thought about them sometimes. Whenever I’d be driving and my mind would wander, I’d imagine them under the seat of my car, hanging out. I’d think of how Mom would use them, how they were just a part of her, her body, something foreign made into her. I wondered how she wondered about them, if she was hyper aware of the false bones or if she just accepted them, forgot them. I could be corny and say that it’s like Mom is here with me.

“I don’t know,” I said, “I didn’t know what else to do with them.”

“I can’t blame you,” Jim said. “I’d probably want to sell them but I could see why you would hesitate. I would, too,” he added as an afterthought.

“It’s getting late,” I said, “Do you have a place to stay?” I don’t really have anything to offer him, but it still seemed nice to ask. It seemed as though his home life, devoid of a traditional family, was rough. I wanted to help the poor guy. Plus he was drunk and couldn’t drive himself anywhere. I couldn’t drive him, either, since I drive a truck, and they aren’t allowed on many roads. The only other option, then, was to let him stay with me, either in my cab or in a hotel room, and I was more comfortable with the former.

“Do you mind if I crash here?” he asked. I had to say yes, since I offered it up. I told him to take the bed, and I would sleep on the bench. He objected, said he would take

the seat. I thought it rude to make him sleep there, but he persisted. We spent the night that way, and he was gone before morning. For some reason, it felt like a bad one-night stand. I was hungover the next day, and wondered if that was what had happened. It wasn't, but I had a bad taste in my mouth all the same.

I decided to call my aunt. She sent me to voicemail. I guess I deserved it. I left a message, saying that I would come home. I missed them, wanted to see the kids, and wanted to bury Mom's bones in the backyard, after all, if it was okay. I wasn't planning on adding that last part, it just came out, but it seemed like a good thing to do. For some reason, after showing the bones to Jim, I realized that I didn't really need to be carrying them around after all. I still couldn't sell them, like he suggested, but I could do something proper with them.

I grabbed a breakfast and coffee and headed back onto the highway. I hadn't meant to spend the night, but I was already ahead when I pulled over, so I was then technically on schedule. It wasn't good that I had been drinking the night before—if anything were to happen, then I would be in deep, deep shit—but it was a short drive, and I trusted that I could make it just fine. All the same, I was worried, so, when my aunt called me back, I sent it straight to voicemail. I really couldn't be taking any risks, not then.

I got to the drop off place for my cargo just on time. I called my aunt from there.

“Hey, it's good to hear from you. I think that's a great idea,” she said, “to bury the last of your mother here. She loved it out in the field, and it'll be a good place for you to come visit.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate it. I’ll be home soon, in a couple of days. Tell the kids I said hi, okay, and that I’ll see them soon. I miss them, and you,” I said.

My aunt laughed at that, promised she’d pass on the message. The call ended, and I reached down to check on the bones. I never had held them reverently before, but it seemed as good time as any to start. I couldn’t find them right away, as they weren’t in the same little crevice they always are in. I got out of the cab, stretched down to look around. I got a bit of a girth, not much, but enough to make it difficult. I searched and searched. I lifted things around, moved everything, took all the random shit out, and took a broom handle and ran it along to see if I could find anything. I couldn’t.

I tore it all apart. All I found was the receipt from the night before, from the diner. I didn’t notice it at first, but there, in the little space below the “thanks for stopping in” was “sorry” scrawled in an unsteady hand. Sorry. It was all I had left to bury.

The diner and bar and Peculiar were only thirty minutes away. I didn’t have any cargo and no pressing initiatives, so I headed that way. I reached the diner right before the lunch rush.

“Hey,” I called as I walked through the front doors. The waitress from last night was there and didn’t look too surprised to see me.

“I thought you might be back here, was hoping you’d want to stop by on your way out. Where’s Jim? He ain’t hurt you or nothing, did he?” she said.

“No, but he took a bag of my mother’s bones,” I said.

“Bag of your mother’s bones?” the cook called from the kitchen. The waitress raised her eyebrows.

“It’s a long story, I suppose, but when my mom was cremated, her gold teeth and metal femur were left behind. I was going to bury them, but now they are gone. You think Jim took them?” I asked.

“Jim? That’s the man. You got conned son, simple as that. I’m sorry he took something so personable, but there it is,” the waitress said.

I shook my head. Who would’ve wanted to take my mother’s bones? Jim did say that he would’ve sold them, but I couldn’t imagine he would’ve taken them to do just that. He seemed like a nice guy and didn’t take anything else—not my phone or my wallet or anything. But then he did say he was in a pinch, desperate for any little bit to help him. Jim took my mother’s bones, likely to sell them to make a profit, anything to help, I guess. I was furious that someone I trusted had betrayed me, but then how could I have trusted someone I barely knew? They were gone. That was it, and all I had to show was a crumpled receipt.

I went back to the diner. “Hi, honey,” the waitress said, “why don’t you sit down and have a lunch, on the house?”

I sat, and she brought out a lunch. The cook suggested I call someone, file a police report. I didn’t want to do any of that. The guy, they said, was desperate. He had been down and out on his luck for a while. Something about a plant being shut down, and benefits disappearing. Jim had told me all this while we talked, had already laid out all the reasons he would steal from me. Maybe he knew the whole time and was trying to get me to understand. Or maybe he was trying to justify the act to himself. Either way, I don’t blame him. I didn’t really feel anything but I guess I just couldn’t believe it. The

diner started to fill, and the waitress left me with alone in my thoughts to go take care of other patrons.

I decided to face facts. Mom's bones were gone. I'd probably never see them again. But I guess that was all right. They could go anywhere in the world. I was happy for Mom to crisscross the United States with me, but now she could go even farther. Maybe her tooth and femur would be turned into some jewelry, worn by a banker in Stockholm or madam in Amsterdam. Maybe she would become part of another person; maybe her bones would help another person just as they helped her. Mom could be anything and everything; nothing could hold her and her bones back, not anymore. In life, she was always having to look after me, or work, or take care of her family; all things she loved to do, undoubtedly, but all things that held her back from what she really wanted to do. She took me on some trips when I was younger, nothing fancy, just to Branson and Chicago, but not the cool part of Chicago. Now, though, her bones could take all the trips around the world that she never could have. Her bones could go to New York City in Christmas, just like she always wanted, or they could end up in Tierra Del Fuego, helping ranchers shear sheep. She always wanted a quiet life after her busy one. Maybe her bones could find that, even with her gone.

No amount of searching and fighting and drinking and running was going to change that Mom was dead. Having her bones changed nothing. All it meant was that I was some guy with a metal femur and two gold teeth in a bag under the front seat of his truck. It's not even a good hiding space, honestly, I shouldn't have been surprised that someone would take them, and I shouldn't be surprised that Jim jumped at that opportunity. Good for him.

FLOODPLAINS

We were young then, you and me, reckless in our movements, not a care in the world, nothing but each other. We would hold each other close, rock together, be together, in the bed, in the shower, under the sun, under the tree, behind the fence, anywhere, everywhere. We lasted a couple years like that before the flood, that great flood, one everybody'd always warned would come, before everything changed.

The sun would shine down on us, and you were always so quick to drink it up, always wanted to spend copious amount of time outside. I'd always hated it, the humidity feeling like a brick was thrown on my chest. The heavy air suffocated me, all the water from the river rising into the air, bringing heat and mosquitos with it. Yet I would still run around with you, ready to follow you wherever you were going that day. We were children, you and me. I can see now that we were never going to work. We would go down to the river, bathe in its waters, then run like hell back to our trailer. And when I said enough, you came back with me. We'd go back home, make some drinks, and enjoy the shade. The AC unit was old and broken down, but it was enough for us. We never complained about the need for less clothing.

Maybe we should have worried more about our shitty little home, but we didn't know then. It was only the two of us; we didn't need anything more than what we already had. We made do with the seasons, adapting to their patterns as needed. Summer was for flimsy clothes, running around, getting dirty. Winter was for extra layers, finding all sorts of ways to stay warm.

We would fight. I'd start screaming at you, and you'd match my pitch and raise it another octave. We'd keep going until the cops came. Do you remember our fight just a few days before the flood? You came home late. You were supposed to pick me up from work, take me back home. I was working at the Food Giant, and typically you'd come and pick me and we'd drive and drive, far away all the stupid bosses, customers, all the shitty bits of life. We didn't have any particular plans that night, but I was in hopes you'd have come up with something, or we could've come up with something together. But I had to walk home that night, growing madder with every step.

You walked through the door, drunk, and I was ready for you. Where had you been, what had you been doing? Why didn't you pick me up? Why weren't you home earlier? I knew the answers. You were at the bar, that broken-down piece of shit. Probably with your loser friends, the ones always trying to get you to quit your job, be a lowlife like them.

"I'm sorry," you said. Kept repeating it. But I didn't want no apology, I wanted a fight. A fight-like-crazy fight, where we'd just have it out, air out all our grievances. And we got close. You started in on me after awhile, about how I didn't let you do nothing, how I was always nagging you, some more sexist bullshit. "You don't even want me to have fun." Those were the words that came out of your mouth then like some lost little teenager. I was about ready to dive in, ready to make you pay when you shushed me.

I was fit to destroy you. But I noticed the news on the TV too, then, the talk about the flood. We lived in the bootheel of Missouri, right on the Mississippi River, about as close as you could be. If we went down from our trailer to the river and looked out, we would see Kentucky. The weather people were describing the coming flood, one of

Biblical proportions. Said something about how it was time, about historic rain levels. It was raining that night. I was still angry, hadn't forgotten what you had done, but I grew goosebumps then, thinking about how poorly we would fare if the river really did break over its banks. Our little trailer wouldn't last. Our love wouldn't last. I took a bath in our tub, the one place I kept to myself. We had a tub and a shower, an oddity among trailers, but one of the main selling points of the place. You always used the shower, and sometimes I used it but the bathtub was always my favorite, my space, away from you. You tried to join me in there a few times, but I wasn't really up for it, and, besides, there wasn't enough space, anyway. I ran the bath and sat in the hot, nearly scalding water, and wondered about what would happen to us, and how much of a say we really had in it. But we knew it was coming; the weathermen had been warning of the next big flood for years, promising that someday the river would overreach its boundaries. Why was this time any different? It wasn't, we try reason, but we were subdued, ending our fight. I might've held onto a grudge still. We reasoned against all hope, trying to find ways to stay.

We loved that river. It was our river, and we refused to move away from it. It wasn't like we were on the banks or anything. We at least knew better than that. Don't you remember the town that built a mall right on the bank, on all that unstable ground? The river rose there and nearly swept it away. The side of the bank opposite was a cliff. They were asking for trouble, but certainly we weren't. Sure, we had the closest lot to the river, by a long shot, but it was still enough of a distance not to worry, right? We always asked that question, always adding "right" on to the end of each sentence. But we weren't far enough away, and the old man on the news told us as much. Said we needed to get

away, *now*, before the worst came. You said something about hitching up, moving up river just a little bit. But what would we hitch the trailer to? We didn't have anything to move it, nor did we have anywhere to move. What was the worst that could happen? We had nothing to fear. We had each other, and that was all that mattered.

The worst turned out to be a horrible, wretched flood. It rained for days and days, and yet we still didn't leave. We should have left after that first day, when Bobby, our neighbor, offered us room in his truck. It would've been tight with his wife and kids, but we could've made it work. I know now that we should have done that. I know we should never have tempted fate. But still we stayed. You didn't want to be with Bobby, with his kids, said we must be able to figure something else out. "We'll figure it out." I believed you. We didn't get into the truck with Bobby, and he drove off without us, hopefully to some good, dry place for him and his family. No, you and I stayed. We stayed—not for long—we told ourselves; we said we'd leave just as soon as the rain let up a little bit, just as soon as we could find a way. But we knew weren't going to make it out. Just as we knew the rains would never cease, we knew we'd go with them wherever and whenever they took us.

The worst came on the third day of the rain. We were sitting in the living room, as we did most days. The TV was off. We had lost signal the day before, so instead we sat there, me working on a crossword puzzle, you paging through a book, neither of us paying any much attention. I knew the end was coming, that something bad was bound to happen, and I think you did, too. I was scared, for you, for me, for the dogs. I had them close beside me, right on the chair. Spot, the little Chihuahua mix, and Max, the pug mix. I loved them, you knew that, probably more than I loved you, though you mightn't have

known that then. I thought as I was sitting there, though, about who I would save. If it came down between you and them, who would I save? It was hard, and it made me distraught that I wouldn't automatically save you. Wouldn't you automatically save me, too? I would think so. But the fact that I even questioned it provided my answer. No, I would take the dogs and run with them. I'd try to save both of you, but you, being a man, would have been able to save yourself more easily than those two, least that's what I told myself.

Maybe everything had grown too easy; maybe we had stopped caring. I was so angry with you before the flood, but maybe I was just trying to find any kind of emotion to hold onto. We started out young and filled with dreams, and grew into each other. But at some point we grew back apart again. Maybe that's why you were staying out more and I was working more. We didn't want to be together anymore, but we didn't know how to be apart. That night irrevocably drove us apart, and I'm not sure I'll ever forgive myself for the way it happened. We should've talked sooner, should've worked it out, should've paid attention. But we didn't.

The water started rushing towards us. We pretended for as long as we could that everything was fine. It wasn't. I could almost feel it, a sixth sense; I knew that morning when I woke up that it was going to be the day that all those old men had warned us about for years but that we never listened to. Hell, I think I knew as soon as Bobby pulled away in that truck with his family that this was going to be it. This was going to be the time that the river finally took back what was its own. The waters were rushing all around us and I knew our little trailer wouldn't make it. We started yelling at each other, only it wasn't like our usual fights. You weren't angry at me, and I wasn't mad at you, not then,

though I would be soon. We were just trying to figure out what to do, how to survive. I remembered how people got up on their roofs the last time, how down South everyone went up to their attics when the Mississippi broke its banks, how they took axes up with them to slash open their roofs. But we don't have an attic, you said, and would the roof alone do?

We didn't have an axe, either, and one look out the window told us that climbing out there wouldn't work either. The water was coming down hard, and the flood was churning. It was best to stay inside. We went to the bathtub, thinking that was our best bet. That's where you went during tornadoes, so surely it would work now. What came after I don't remember as well. I grabbed the dogs, fast as I could, held them tight as I climbed in. They squirming, but little, so I was able to keep ahold of them. You ran around grabbing God-knows-what. Right as you made it over to the tub, you turned around, running to grab one more thing. It was the blanket your mama had made you, and I'm sure you wanted to save it, to use it to save us, too. Whenever we went to the tub for the tornadoes, we always grabbed blankets and sheets to cover us with. I'm sure that's what you intended. But I won't ever know what was really going on in that stupid head of yours. You never made it into the tub. Maybe if you had, everything would have ended up okay. Maybe if you had been in the tub with us, you wouldn't have been right there when the roof fell in, and it wouldn't have hit your head. I could've run to you then, but what good would it have done? It would have only doomed both of us.

You were there and I was in the tub and the rain came and the water turned and we were swept away, God knows where and God knows how far. I talked to God a lot then more than I ever had before. It was clearly an act of God that got us in that situation,

whether it was our love or the floodwaters, and only Him that could get us out. I prayed for you, for me, for the dogs, for Bobby and his family. I recited all the prayers I could remember, the Hail Mary, the Our Father, Hail Holy Queen, all of them and more. It was funny how I could remember all that then, how quickly all that I had tried to ignore came rushing forth right then. I found myself huddled down, clutching my two babies to my chest and remembering my first memory of the Church. We went every single Sunday and often on the weekdays, too. Everybody was desperate for that salvation. I was young, too young to know what was going on and too young to stay awake for the whole ordeal. I curled up on the pew, the hard wood cutting into my back, and laid my head down on my mother's lap. I was curled up then, just as I was in the tub, except then I was clutching to my raggedy doll and praying that I would get my lunch soon. I would have gone back to that time, then, any time before, just to make sure that you and I would not have been there then during that flood. What I wouldn't give to go back, to make us leave. We were too complacent.

Time passed, and we were separated. I must've passed out at some point. I woke to the sound of the dogs barking like crazy. I couldn't hardly move, but I could see over the top of the tub, and there was a boat a ways off coming over to save us. The dogs continued barking until we were safely on that boat, and from there we were taken to the hospital. I was severely dehydrated and had some other damages but most of my pain was psychological. I left you, I let you run around instead of getting into the tub, and when the roof fell over there, I didn't run to make sure you were okay. I stayed where I was knowing, I'd be safe there. I could have found ways to rationalize it all to myself, that it wouldn't have made any sense if I had ran over there to you, but I knew why I stayed,

why I didn't run to you, why I considered the dogs as more important than you. But we don't think straight in disaster times, do we? It wasn't really that I thought the dogs were more important than you, just that they needed more taking care of than you. I didn't know what I should've done, so I didn't do anything.

I was in the hospital for a while, at least a week. It was a good thing, as I didn't have anywhere else to go. They found you, unconscious but alive. You were sent to the hospital, first to mine, then to another, when it became clear you needed more help, more than the regional hospital could give you. It took me forever to find you. We were never anything official, and no one knew to call me. But I still looked for you. I got put in a house, somewhere for people to go when they were looking for something more permanent. The government helped me get set up again, gave me some money to get another place. I requested to move up to the place where you were, and they granted it. I found an apartment close to the hospital and got a job at a local diner waitressing. I hated it, always had, but it would do.

I visited you as often as I could. When I was in the hospital, they let the dogs stay on the bed with me—they said it encouraged me to get better—but this hospital wouldn't let the dogs in. I came and read to you and cried. I cried so much. I wanted to blame you, and I did, but I couldn't help but blame myself, too. I had a few books that people had sent to me, things to help occupy my time while I recovered. They weren't anything you would've liked, but you never got better. Your family came down, stayed a bit with me before moving semi-permanently into a hotel. They wanted to take you with them, back to where you came from, but I couldn't bear to see you go. Eventually, though, they took you. I didn't really have any say, any right, but they were still kind, asked me if it was

alright. Of course it was alright; you were so much better off with them than with me. You needed more care than I could ever give, and they would be able to take good care of you, really help you, though the doctors said you would never be the same. You died shortly after they moved you. Your brain just couldn't work anymore. I went to your funeral, stayed in the back. I said a few words when your family asked me to, but my grief was not their grief. No, because I was the one who left you.

Sometime after they took you with them, I went looking for that bathtub. Our little trailer was ruined, but nobody ever did get around to clearing it. I saw where you fell. I saw that exact spot, and no matter how hard I tried encourage the fuzziness of my memories I couldn't get rid of that one. I saw you running around, grabbing that goddamn blanket and then falling, the ceiling coming down. I see it replayed in my dreams all the time, and I sometimes see it even while I'm awake. Our little home was destroyed, just like the rest of our lives. There was nothing left to salvage. We always were on shaky ground—we knew that. I could see bits and pieces of things, the dresser where you kept your sweaters, a few of the different places we made love, but nothing was worth taking.

I continued to look for the bathtub. I imagined that it would have been left aside, a castaway from the flood. But I did love that tub. It was out of place in our shitty little home, a relic from a bygone era, a clawfoot tub. I found it, eventually. I found a tub with claw feet, stained and roughened, at a spot that could have been where I was picked up. I took it back with me, fixed it, and put it in the house I was making for myself. I moved out of the apartment about a year after you left. I found a cheap place that I could fix up, make my own. It's mine, all mine, everything that I could have ever wanted.

LEFT-HAND MAN

The Ferris wheel made its slow revolution and Harper stood staring out at the city, lights lit up against the setting sun. It was beautiful, she knew, something to experience alongside someone you love. She felt a hand press into the small of her back and she leaned into it, arching and turning her back to look up at her lover. His lips met hers.

“I love you,” Harper said. Liam kissed her again, harder, and Harper was surprised by the fierceness, the immediacy. She pressed into him, not wanting him to stop, wanting to show him that she could feel and exhibit that passion, too. As the wheel began to jerk back into motion, Harper pulled away. Liam followed for a second, bending down further, before he jerked back up.

“It’ll all be different when we get back down,” he said, pulling away.

“Yes, I know,” Harper said.

It was their first kiss. Perfect, sweet. She hadn’t planned to kiss Liam when she got onto the little gondola with him. It was winter and the crowds were small and somehow they ended up alone. It was a slow night, the manager had said, and allowed the “lovebirds” a ride to themselves. Of course they weren’t lovebirds, of course they shouldn’t be alone together. Harper was married to a sweet man named Ed, whom she had once loved a great deal. Here she was, kissing another man. Who does this, she wondered, how could she?

She wondered if she should apologize to Liam.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I shouldn’t have.”

“Then I’m sorry, too,” he said.

Harper felt the pressure of an imminent cry press against the back of her eyes. The wheel stopped and the two got off. She was wobbly on her feet, clutching Liam's arm to steady her.

*

Harper and Liam both designed playing cards. They worked for a large company in Seattle. Harper was an artist, a painter, who designed the images featured on the cards. Over the course of working at the company, she had developed a specialty in digital painting, though it wasn't strictly necessary for her job, and nothing would ever replace the feeling of a brush in her hand, the way the watercolors would bleed and blend; no matter how hard she tried, the color would ultimately do whatever it wanted. She loved that, and it wasn't something she could get in the programs she sometimes used for her work. Fortunately, she was able to continue to using watercolor painting for her work. She was lucky to have a job that allowed her to do what she loved, and gave her good insurance, even for her pet.

Liam was a graphic designer. His job was to take the original artwork of Harper and others and compress it into the size of a playing card. To Harper, he had one of the toughest jobs out there. She knew that people were assigned to shrink her art—obviously this had to be done—but she wasn't usually involved in the process. Liam came to her though for help one day and dragged her into the other side of production.

"Excuse me," he had said, ever polite, "Could I ask a question of you?"

Harper did not like to be bothered while working. Who did? But he was cute and seemed nice so she obliged.

"Sure," she said.

"I'm Liam," he said (everyone were name tags and she could easily see his), "I'm working on getting your artwork onto a card and well I wondered if you wouldn't mind altering part of it," he said. Harper considered the situation. It wouldn't really put her out; she could honestly say it didn't make her angry. As part of working for a company, she knew that her artwork would be changed, probably without her knowledge. She also knew that she didn't own any of the artwork she created, the company did. Harper had a friend who worked at a technology company, who had multiple US patents. But none of them were in her name. Harper at least got her signature on every card featuring her artwork.

With all that in mind, she agreed to help him. It'd be a nice break from the art she was working on, which she found a little stuck on. He explained the problem: she had drawn an image of this magnificent bird creature with huge wings (as had been decided amongst the design team) but when the time came to turn it into a card, one of the wing tips was getting cut off. Half of the graphic design team thought it was a necessary evil, better to have a clipped wing than nothing, but the other half wanted to preserve the integrity of the piece.

"Well, so, I was wondering if it would be possible for you to come and take a look, maybe help us to get it all on there. Obviously you wouldn't be repainting the whole thing but rather just help us make the best card with your artwork still rendered well," he finished in one rush of breath.

"Sure, I'll come down and take a look," she said. She was happy that he had come to her after all. While it would always be her signature on the end card, others she knew had changed the image without ever consulting her. It was part of her job.

She went down to his offices and ended up spending the rest of the afternoon there. Her digital painting, a hobby, really, something she just did for fun, was a big hoot down there. Many of the designers worked in similar ways. They exchanged tips and operations info. She enjoyed working with the team so much, that she continued to work with them. She started consulting Liam, and the rest of the team, before she started working on a piece, to insure it would work well for the card. The two teams did work together, just not as closely as Harper was starting to. Harper found that she and Liam worked well together, had a similar eye for detail.

She was surprised to find that she enjoyed working with him. She had grown accustomed to working with her husband Ed. He was an architect, an artist of a different kind. Sometimes, especially when they were younger, they would sometimes create art together. A favorite past time of theirs was for Ed to create the bones of a building, draw it all out, then Harper would paint over it, using light water colors, so the lines still stood out. Or, they would do the opposite, with Harper first making a watercolor landscape and Ed drawing over it. It was some of Harper's favorite artwork she ever created. But after a while Ed stopped wanting to collaborate, and if he did, he always wanted to show Harper how to do her painting. But that violated what made the artwork so great; that they trusted each other to do well with the different parts. So they just stopped making art together.

*

It wasn't a date, though it was the first time the two spent anytime together outside of work hours. Liam had called Harper to ask a question about a project the two were working on, but Harper found herself unable to give him a good answer. She met

him up at the office and they had worked together on a different artist's project. Harper had become a go-to in consulting on any problems that might have occurred during the transition from paint to card process. She was helping that team just as much as her own team. After they finished the work, declared themselves done for the day, they had decided to go out for dinner. Though Harper told herself it wasn't anything, she had trouble denying that she felt lots of feelings where Liam was involved, some of them feelings she hadn't felt since she'd married her husband.

They had gone down to the pier, where they found a place at restaurant though they had no reservations. It was a fancier one, one that had sprung up when Seattle became a more mainstream place. Harper felt out of place. These were the kinds of places that Ed loved to go to. All modern with lots of angles and lines, a distinct lack of coziness.

“This place doesn't feel right,” she said.

“No, it doesn't. Plus, if my neighbors food is any indication, it's not much.”

Harper smiled. “Let's walk down to the pier and grab a hot dog, see about riding the Ferris wheel.” Harper was happy to learn that Liam was thinking the same thing.

*

Ed had met Liam once at a work function. It was a celebration of a job well done. Harper's company often hosted parties, as a way to promote a good employee culture, and the company was consistently ranked as one of the best to work for. By the time the party came, Harper and Liam had collaborated on more than a dozen projects, which is more than most. The way things would often work out, Harper had no real control over what happened to her art after she handed it over. This often didn't bother her, as she

trusted the company she worked with, and, ultimately, it was always her name and signature on the card. If they needed something changed, they would ask it of her and she was free to decline. But for whatever reason, Liam and Harper were able to work together better and slowly, without meaning to, they started working on more and more projects together. They were a known duo at the company. If Harper had to figure out a reason for it, it must've been that they just understood each other. Each knew how the other worked, what drove them to create art, so they were better equipped to trust each other. If Liam made a suggestion to Harper, she would be happy to listen, and she knew, had seen the proof, that Liam would do the same should she suggest something.

Ed and Harper walked around the party together. Ed hadn't ever really been to a company party with Harper before; it wasn't his kind of thing. She never pressed him to come but this time was different, as she would be accepting a reward for her work. When she mentioned it to him, she could see that he, at least at first, wanted to decline. But there was no fight, he agreed to come, and they were there. When Harper and Ed were first married, they fought fairly often. Never over the serious stuff, of course, but just a squabble here or there. Everyone Harper talked to said it was normal, an important part of a healthy relationship, in fact. Nobody gets along all the time, anyway.

But lately that had changed. Things they used to fight about—who's turn it was to take out the trash or change the kitty's litter, or whether they should get an ottoman for the couch (Harper wanted to put her feet up)--were now non-issues. Either Ed went along with it or Harper did it herself. More than once she had imagined that this should have made her happy, fighting less, but something didn't feel right. They weren't connecting like they used to and Harper had begun to feel an absence in her heart. This party was a

big deal for her, as she had now worked at the company for ten years. She certainly hadn't been at the company the longest, but she was still proud and happy to work for them, and still thrilled that she had a job she enjoyed where she could do exactly what she loved. In art school, Harper never dreamed of being able to do so. In fact, she was never sure of what she would do. Most people assumed that she would teach, but Harper wasn't keen on the idea. Everyone seemed to think that Ed would get a job and she would follow him; after all, there's a bit higher demand for architects than artists. But they had found their way to Seattle and to wonderful jobs for both of them.

Liam walked up beside Harper at the party and said hello. Harper could feel the smile that bled across her face. She couldn't help it; she was always happy to see Liam. He smiled back, and she saw him glance at Ed.

"Liam," she said, "I thought you weren't coming."

"Nah," Liam said, that smile of his reaching eye to eye, "I didn't have anywhere better to be. Why would I miss a party to celebrate you?"

Tom, one of their bosses, came up. "Look at this," he said, gesturing to Harper's right and left, "Harper with her left and right hand man." He chuckled. Harper beamed. She was at a party to celebrate her, after all, and she was surrounded by the people who loved her best.

"Left hand man," Liam said, "I like it." Still that smile.

"Has a nice ring to it," Ed said, a little quirk to the side of his mouth.

"I haven't introduce you two," Harper said, and proceeded to introduce her husband to the man who had grown to be the most important man in her life. They seemed so different to her, these two men she loved. One her new collaborator, the other

her life-long partner. Left hand man, it fit, she thought. He was always right there beside her, not quite the most important man in her life, but close nonetheless. Again she was struck by how much she loved them.

"I love you," she said, to both of them at once. It was bit awkward. Neither knew to whom she was referring. Liam said nothing, just smiled, but Ed said "I love you too" after a couple beats. Harper's smile remained, she was still happy to be there with both of them.

She wasn't the only person being celebrated that night but her boss called her up to give a little speech. "Thank you so much," she said, "I'm so happy to be here. This company allows me to do so much and has introduced me to so many people who I love dearly." She looked to Liam. "I hope to be here for ten more years and ten more after that. Thank you!" As she looked over at her little gathering of people, where Liam, Ed, her boss, and other coworkers stood, she sudden realized just how much she loved Liam. Too much, she knew.

*

The two took a slow walk around the pier. Liam held on to Harper's hand as they walked, not talking. Talk wasn't necessary. Instead, they walked, each seeing the world around them through their own lenses. Harper saw the way the clouds changed colors along the horizon and, for the first time, imagined how she would write them, rather than paint. She would write how the colors bled, how the sky seemed to create a new color as the other colors met each other. It reminded her of a palette, how the paints start to blur together if the artist got lazy or, more often, caught up in her own work. These were some of Harper's favorite moments, where the colors bled was where she found her inspiration.

Often, she would change a whole painting; start over, just to incorporate one of the new colors.

The waterfront was less crowded than normal. It seemed as if the world were conspiring for the two of them to be alone together. It was a colder night than normal and it was getting late but Harper chose to ignore all of that. She wanted instead to focus on this moment, to savor it.

“We can’t stay out here forever,” Liam said. Harper ignored him.

He stopped walking and pulled Harper’s arm so that she had to face him. She looked up at his eyes.

“We can’t stay here,” he said.

“No,” Harper said, “No we can’t.”

*

A magnolia tree grew outside Harper’s house when she was young. Her family was in North Carolina; they were there for nearly five years, the longest they had ever stayed anywhere. The tree was split into three separate trees, nearly, beginning at the base. It was easier to climb that way. She would spend hours outside, up in the tree, jumping from branch to branch. She could recall the one time she fell out. She had, earlier, been painting on the magnolia leaves. Harper knew them to be the perfect canvas; waxy, dark, stable, and a beautiful color. A dark green that added a layer of dimension to her little paintings. Even at ten, she knew that she wanted to be.

As she finished one painting, gingerly setting it beside her to dry, she reached up for another. But she wasn’t paying attention. She found the perfect leaf, the darkest green she had ever seen, and she reached up for it, but her fingers only brushed against it. She

stood, on the small, skinny branch, and stretched her body so she could pull the leaf down without ruining any part of it. She got her leaf and broke her arm. Her mom banned her from climbing the tree after that, but every time her mother turned around, she was back up.

The tree was split in all different directions, as magnolia's grow. That's what made climbing them so easy. Harper could easily step onto one limb from the ground and work her way up ever higher. The branches were close enough too that she could sit across a couple of them, balance herself perfectly. Harper could see she was struggling to balance. She loved her husband and best friend, but she found herself slipping. The branches weren't close enough together and she found herself falling.

*

Harper called a cab and told the driver to take them back to her house. She wanted Liam to see where she lived. Ed was out of town, attending a conference for work. Of course they would end up alone together while Ed was gone. It started to rain as the cab made its steady way across the city, from the waterfront to the suburbs. She considered her actions. What she was doing was wrong, she knew. Even if she didn't feel as much of a connection with her husband, even if she had grown to love this man more than him, she was not acting appropriately. She was an awful person. Harper had never even talked to Ed explicitly about what bothered her. It seemed like she had just bottled everything up and now here she was, taking a man she loved home that wasn't her husband. She knew she was supposed to feel bad and God did she feel bad, but she was also so happy. Despite the pain she felt and the struggle she knew was in front of her, Harper was happy in that moment, full of love. It was pouring as they made a mad rush to her front door. Of

course it would rain. Of course she would drop her key. Harper found herself suddenly nervous. She took a deep breath, and picked up her key.

*

Once, when they had been married for six years, Ed and Harper took a day trip to watch the Mariners play. Harper loved to watch baseball and she had grown up watching the Mariners. Despite her family's many travels and the team's many setbacks, her mother remained a steadfast fan, and she taught Harper to be one too. Even when they were living in North Carolina, her mother still found a way to keep up with all the games. She wholeheartedly refused to list another team as her favorite, not even as everyone else jumped on this team or that's bandwagon.

It was a perfect day. Harper had noticed that Ed was withdrawn, worried about a project at work. He loved going to baseball games too, though for a different reason. He was always looking at the architecture, how the stadium was designed. He was an architect at a large firm in Seattle and he was constantly examining the ways buildings, parks, cities were arranged and developed. On one of their first dates, Ed took Harper to a garden, beautifully laid out, and described to her exactly why it was so beautiful, how much thought had gone into painting it in exactly the right way. Harper imagined the two of them as different sides of the same coin. He knew how to arrange structures and nature to help them reach their beautiful potential and she knew how to capture that beauty so it would last forever.

This day at park, though, was different. Ed wasn't his normal self. He was looking at the stadium, thinking out loud how he would change it. He wasn't examining the upper stands for structural integrity. It seemed to Harper that he was out of place.

"Why don't you tell me about why the stadium looks this way?" she asked him.

"If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times," Ed said, not angrily though a little exasperated.

"The best part of coming to the games is you spouting off all your knowledge," Harper said.

"No the best part is the hotdogs," Ed said. Harper laughed, but Ed didn't appear to be joking. He had always been a solemn person, but Harper was always able to make him laugh. Two sides of the same coin.

"Do you want to go down and take a picture by the fountain? The spray might cool us off a bit. It's so hot," Harper said, still trying to reach through.

"I'll take a picture of you by the fountain," Ed said, as he gathered up his drink and walked towards the fountain. Harper followed and dutifully smiled and posed in front of it, and the spray did cool her off. But she couldn't seem to cool Ed off. Her right hand man was turning away from her, cutting her off, and she found herself thinking of her left hand man, wondering how he would have reacted. Liam might not have enjoyed the game—she wasn't at all sure if he liked baseball or not—but she knew he would want to go along with what she wanted. Maybe he doesn't like baseball, so they would come for several innings, get cheap seats then walk around instead of sitting so high up, take pictures with all the cool things, but leave before it got it was too much. Compromise.

*

By coming to her house, they had made a decision, one that Harper committed herself to fully. She unlocked the door, and then turned to look into Liam's face. Liam, a solid decade younger than her; Liam, who seemed to understand her, parts of her. She

reached up and kissed him, lightly; wanting to make sure he knew he could still walk away. He kissed her back, softly at first, matching her, then suddenly ferocious. He, too, had made his decision.

She led the way from the front door, down the hall; pass the sofa, through the door and into her bedroom. Where before Liam seemed intent, focused he was now more timid, shy. Harper led the way, off with his clothes first and then hers, then onto the bed, where they fell into a steady rhythm, matching the sound of the rain hitting against the window.

THE USURPER

The first time Andrea came to spend the night, it wasn't so bad. We enjoyed talking to her; she seemed nice and interested in what my sister and I had to say. I didn't really want a new mom. I was pretty happy with what our family had come to be. It was my dad, my younger sister, and me. I didn't need anyone else. But I guess Dad thought we did.

She brought her sons with her, and they brought along one of their favorite TV shows to watch. Game of Thrones, a bit too old for my sister and I at twelve and thirteen, but Dad let us watch it anyway. I'm not sure he was paying much attention at all. I couldn't follow it all. Andrea's sons, Micah and Josh, had brought over the season they were currently on, the third one. They were probably around sixteen, so they were allowed to watch more than I was able to. I suppose that's what the difference of few years makes. I couldn't follow the show well, but I was interested. Dany was my favorite. With her long blonde hair, like my mom's, and her insistence on doing the right thing. That night with Andrea and her sons was pretty uneventful. Dinner, watching the show, nothing not normal. And they were all nice enough.

I searched the Internet for more about the show after they left. I wasn't sure what I was looking for at first; I didn't need to find episodes, as my family's cable already provided access to them. But I stumbled upon the forums, where fans talk about everything they find interesting in the show, where they go to talk about what they think will happen. I also found pages about all the characters. I scoured every single one I could find about Dany. She was supposed to be close to my age, at least in the books, and

she was originally married to a Khal but he died after a witch cursed him. She still loved him though. Her plan was to take back the crown, to be queen.

One of her compatriots called the king, the one who killed her brother to take the crown, a usurper. He had taken away her rightful place. I thought that's what Andrea was, the usurper. She took my throne from me. She came that night with a basket of sweets for us—chocolate for me and gummies for Mary—and it charmed us into liking her, so we wouldn't know what was really going on.

I didn't think anything important was going on that night, but The Usurper (that's her real name, that's who she really is) and my dad had decided to get married. It didn't shock me, at least that they would get married; what shocked me, what angered me was that they didn't even ask me.

The Usurper took us to the mall one day. Dad was there but she told him he should scram, leave the girls to their own devices. I was scared; I didn't know this women. I knew how these things go. Get the adversary alone and poison them, take them out, get them out of the way. By this time, I had read more about the series and I knew how The Usurper would act. I knew she was bad business. I still didn't know that she was supposed to marry my dad then. Mary asked to go to Claire's.

"Of course! I was just about to suggest it," she said, with a radiant smile. I knew not to trust charm. That's how they reel you in, get them to trust them. I knew how to resist.

"Maybe we could look at the earrings," Mary said.

"You're not allowed," I said, "Dad said so."

"Your father won't know what we won't tell him," she said and winked at the both of us. Already she was lying, leading us down a dangerous path. I wanted to scream and run away to in the opposite direction, but there was no way I was leaving my sister alone with The Usurper, even if she couldn't see how awful she was for herself. My sister was like Sansa Stark in the first couple seasons of the show. Later she grows stronger, develops more of a backbone, becomes smarter. I hoped the same for my sister. But at that moment, she was just like Sansa being lured in by Cersei—she didn't see that this woman was bad business, that she didn't have our best interests at heart.

The store was full of dizzying colors. One wall full of various different bags, the other covered in jewelry, and every space in between covered with various other tchotchkes. I wasn't a big fan of the place, but Mary loved it. She ran around the whole place, grabbing everything in sight. I lingered behind, near the door. I didn't really like the store anyway; it always gave me a headache.

"Emily," The Usurper said, coming towards me. "If you find something you like, I'd be happy to buy it for you." I didn't want anything, nothing that she could offer me.

"Okay," I said. But I played along with her game and picked out a little bear with a heart on his stomach. Mary got a two packs of stick on earrings. We met up with Dad at the food mart, where he had a couple shakes for us and some fries to share. Mary and I sat together on one side of the table while they sat close together on the other side. I didn't like it. I wanted to go home.

But The Usurper was always at our home now. If she left, it must've been whenever Mary and I were at school. Mary loved her, talked about her all the time. They were best friends. The Usurper was co-worker of Dad's, had worked with him before my

mom got sick. I guess we might have seen him around before but I didn't remember any specifics.

But I was always closer to Dad than I was to my sister. He left Mary with The Usurper one day and he and I went to spend the day together. We went to all my favorite places; we got a burgers with all you can eat fries, went to the park, visited a pet store, then got ice cream, the kind they mix in front of you. I knew something was up. He always acted this way whenever he had some big thing to say. A similar scene played out when Mom was dying. He took me a similar trip, full of what I loved to do then, and broke the news to me. After he tried explaining how she wasn't ever going to get better, we went to the hospital to see her and I sat on her bed and cried. She died a week later.

We were walking around together when he sat down on a bench.

"I want to talk to you about something," he said.

I didn't really respond; I was still eating my ice cream.

"We're getting married," he said, explaining how he had proposed to her, how she had said yes. I finally learned what was happening that night she came over. "Her two sons will love with us too," Dad said.

"I don't want any boys in our house," I said.

"But I'm a boy," Dad said.

"You're different," I said.

I immediately started planning my resistance. Mary wasn't going to be of much help. She had not developed to that point yet. I thought about asking The Usurper's boys for help. They were nice enough, but were hardly around anyway. They spent all their time with their own dad. They reminded me of Dorne, who were in the South in Game of

Thrones, always trying to stay out of everything. Or maybe they were like the Free Cities, a part of their own world that didn't really need to be a part of ours. Either way, they wouldn't have been of much help. I didn't have a good idea of what to do; I just knew I wanted my family to be the way it was, just the three of us, but only because it couldn't be the four people I wanted it to be.

Weddings were always a bad thing in Game of Thrones. People had a tendency to die. I didn't want The Usurper to die, though. I wasn't cruel and I didn't even really hate her that much. I just didn't want her in my family. I wanted her gone, away from us. She could live her life, just not here.

I decided to stage a huge scene in which to declare that this union was not to be, that The Usurper was bad and had no place in our house. It had to take place at the wedding, though preferably before it. I was supposed to be in it as a bridesmaid alongside Mary and The Usurper's sister. I wrote all my plans down in my diary. I detailed exactly how everything would go down. While Dany had her dragons to invade and conquer, I had nothing of the sort. All I could do was tell my dad how I felt.

"Don't marry her," I said. Defiant. I didn't need dragons to get my dad to listen, at least that's what I thought.

I didn't know the look he gave me. It was one of the worse things I'd ever seen. It wasn't so bad as when Mom died; he had looked dead then, almost, too, and cried in giant heaves that shook his body. His face was always screwed up and he was always still talking to her, to Mom, asking her what to do, why it had to happen, and more that I couldn't always hear. But his pain was never directed to me then, as it was now. I was the one causing him pain.

"Why can't you just let me be happy?" he said, almost in a whisper. He put his head in his hands for awhile. When he looked up again, ages later, he told me to face facts, that he loves The Usurper, that she loves him, that they both love me. His face earlier had said enough. I gave up, threw in the towel.

Things did not get better. The Usurper wanted to take over everything. She changed how our house looked, changed how Dad acted, how we dressed and what we wore. I started seeing Dad less and less. It was like he wasn't even living with me.

MOM'S NOT COMING HOME

“Mom’s not coming home,” Sasha says, and I believe her, because she is younger and I no longer want to be the older sibling, the one who has to carry the weight. Mom’s not coming home, she knows, I know, so we might as well make dinner.

I go to get the ingredients to make meat loaf, a family favorite. Just the thing to cheer us all up. But dad says it’s a better idea to order pizza.

*

Sasha is sitting at the kitchen island, playing some game on her phone. I just got off the phone with dad, who hasn’t heard anything from mom, who has been gone for the whole day now, having told Sasha and I this morning that she was leaving for good. Reality hasn't set in yet.

“Want to watch Star Wars again? If we start it now, mom might still be able to catch the ending,” I say.

“Mom’s not coming home,” Sasha responds.

“What do you mean?” I ask. I’m suddenly quite nervous.

“She said she’s not coming back.” Sasha turns away from her phone. “She said so herself. I’ll get the DVD ready if you get the popcorn.

I wonder at why I always feel the need to protect her. Maybe she doesn't need someone always there to watch out for her. But Mom's gone now; how will that change us? I get the popcorn. We start with *A New Hope* and get through *Return of the Jedi* before Dad comes to tell us to get ready for bed.

*

We stand at the window, watching mom as she slowly backs the car out of the garage. She wakes us up early this morning, says she has a surprise. Not really a surprise though, but maybe part of growing up is learning that not all surprises have to be happy.

*

I stand at the kitchen counter, cutting onions. The red ones always made me cry more, especially when they are organic, which Mom always insisted we buy, because they come from the soil and are thus more susceptible to chemicals. I never knew how much they stung. Mom was the one who would cut the vegetables, help Dad make dinner. But she's not coming home, so now it's up to me. I guess Dad could do it all on his own, but I don't mind helping. Dad's browning the meat and Sasha is working on her homework, practicing her times tables, and later I will tell her to set the table for our tacos. That was always her job, and today she can be a grade-schooler just like all the others, with a whole family.

*

I reach out to pull Sasha's hair into a bun for her dance recital. She is due on the stage in less than ten minutes and I'm sure it will take all of those for me to master this bun. I thought it would be fine with a normal bun but one of the other mothers alerted me to the fact that it was in fact not a *dancer's bun* and that I would in fact have to redo it so that she looked more like the other dancers. I refuse any help from the mother. I don't want them to pity me or think that I couldn't do this on my own. I see the way they look at Sasha and I, and I don't want her to notice, so I wrangle her hair on my own. As I stab pins into the monstrous beast I've made of my sister's hair—a beast that I will have to untangle after the recital—I think of our mother. She's not coming home, not

now, not ever, and certainly won't be at the recital tonight. I wonder if she knew how to make a dancer's bun? I can't recall her ever making one but I was never backstage to see her working with Sasha anyway. I always sat out in the audience with Dad.

*

Sasha turns away from the window. "Do you think she meant it?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say, because it seems like the right thing to say. I think she means it, that she isn't going to come back, come= home, and I think Sasha knows it too, but maybe didn't want to put it into words.

We traipse back upstairs, back to where Dad still sleeps. I take Sasha back to my room, because my bed is bigger and I have a TV. We watch morning shows in silence together and pretend to be asleep when Dad gets up.

*

Dad says we are a whole family, even without a mom. He says that doesn't mean that we are somehow lacking, that we somehow are missing something. I tend to agree but Sasha's been hung up lately on him finding a new girlfriend. I'm not sure where she got the idea but I fear it might be the kids at school. She's teased, I know, and I wouldn't be surprised if they targeted her for this, too. I tell Sasha to not let the words get to her, not to pay any mind to anything they say but I know it is so much harder than that, so I pull her close, give her lots of attention so she knows she is loved regardless of what any of those kids say.

I worry about Dad, though. If he finds out that Sasha is teased, then he might do something rash. I cover any signs up as best I can, knowing I am the best suited to deal

with this. He isn't very good with feelings, never has been, but someone has to step up. Since Mom's not coming home, I guess that means me.

*

Mom is sick for a good long while, and the doctor takes forever to figure out what is wrong. First she bounces around between the two hospitals in town. She goes to the emergency room in one but is told that she'd have to pay upfront because they didn't accept her insurance there, which confuses us, since that's where her general practitioner is.

She finally gets in, and the diagnosis is grim. She has cancer and it is spreading. I'm too young to really understand the diagnosis and Sasha is only a baby. Mom has to start doing chemo, and but she tries to resist it. She wants to "explore her options" but Dad counsels her that it is the best possible thing for her, that it will make the cancer go away sooner, and she can spend more time with us, her family, her kids.

*

Dad sits in line to pick Sasha and me up from school. I'm sitting on the curb, not part of this school, having walked over from the high school to wait. Sasha's in line with her friends, chatting, when I see a boy walk up to her group. He looks as young as her but it's hard to tell when kids are this young. He shoves her, conveniently when the teacher wasn't looking. I walk up and grab Sasha by the hand, take her to Dad's car. She is stoic and doesn't cry. I put her in the car, then walk back to the where the teachers are. I tell them what happened and they promise to look into it. I'm sure Mom would have gone right up to the little boy and given him a piece of her mind, but I am not her. She's not coming home, so I will do things my way. The little boy is standing to the side, in line

with the other students, acting like he never would do anything wrong. I get the feeling that he's used to this whole charade—he knows he'll get away with this because he always gets away with it—I hate him for it and hope my sister never ends up like him.

*

That first day is rough. Mom leaves Dad a note, presumably so that we won't have to tell him, but he makes us play back that morning to him at least a dozen times. He makes us tell him how she gets us up, promises presents, and instead tells us that she was going to leave. Mom must have packed her bags the night before, filled her car up with gas, because she is totally ready to go. She is gone so fast, Sasha and I don't even have time to really register it. We don't cry, not really, not until Dad makes us keep telling him the story and we realize that mom's not coming home.

We can't figure out what she meant by the surprise. I guess it was just a way for her to get us up and out of bed, but we would've done that anyway. We love Mom, always have, always will, and we are happy to help her. But she doesn't see that. We would've done anything for her, even leave our Dad, but she never gives us that option.

*

It's Sasha's birthday and we are having a dual birthday party, her and I, because our birthdays are only separated by two days anyway. Dad's making the dinner, meatloaf, and I am left to make the dessert. Sasha has some friends over and I thought it would be fun for them to frost the cupcakes themselves. Sasha is being sassy, difficult with her friends hanging out around her. She keeps demanding that I let them have the cupcakes now, before dinner, before they have even cooled. I say no, they can't. Mom's not

coming back, and I don't know what to do. I always find myself asking what she would have done, what she might do if she were here.

"Mom would give me the cupcakes," Sasha says.

"I doubt that," I say, trying to ignore her.

"Yes she would. She always made birthdays special," Sasha says, "She always let me do whatever I wanted."

"No she didn't," I say, "You don't even remember what she was like." I knew I shouldn't have said it as soon as I did. Sasha surely does have some memories of our mom but I suppose they most not be as clear as mine are, since I am older. Most children play house, act like moms for a few hours until they are finished, then they are cared for by their mothers. But Sasha and I don't have that luxury.

Sasha starts crying, and Dad lets her and her friends eat the cupcakes. None of them eat any of the meatloaf, so Dad and I eat it by ourselves.

"Happy Birthday," he says.

*

Mom's cancer eventually goes away. She does extensive chemo and undergoes several surgeries. The prognosis is grim but she is tough and healthy, doesn't let it take her. But our family still has a rough time of it. We can't keep the information from Sasha. She is only five, so she doesn't really understand, but that makes it worse. She doesn't understand why Mom has to stay in the hospital and can't keep from crying every time we go to visit her. That always makes Mom cry, which makes Dad cry, so that my whole family is a blubbing mess.

I never cry, though. I am ten and can make enough connections but even knowing that my mom could die, that she was literally fighting for her life, can't make me cry. Maybe I am too concerned with appearances, even at a young age I am hyper aware of the looks the nurses give my family—the way they pause at look at us—no doubt thinking everything is worse than it really is. Maybe I just didn't want to cry. I feel guilty when my family cries and I alone have dry eyes. Maybe something is wrong with me. I try to cry but it just gives me a headache.

*

It starts to snow. Dad puts chains on our car, buys new snow shoes for Sasha and I. Her's have a whole bunch of Disney princesses on them, while mine are a plain brown color, practical. Dad starts taking us to school, has to move his work schedule around so he can drive us to school in the morning. He says it's far too cold to be sitting out waiting for the bus. Mom's not coming home, so Dad has to balance everything as best he can. He'll drop us off at school and then I'll get us on the bus and we'll walk the short distance to the house. Maybe we'll have some hot chocolate once we get there.

*

Mom isn't one to let anyone stop her from anything. She knows what she wants, and she wouldn't stop until she gets it, or else she decides she wants something else more. She spends about three months in the hospital, fighting her cancer, or “the cancer” as she calls it, refusing to attach it to herself. It is an enemy, a combatant that needs to be executed. She wants to be free of cancer and she gets it done.

But she changes after that. She is almost another person. No more PTA meetings, no more carpool. She talks more of balance, of how she doesn't really need to go to every

single meeting or game, did she, no she didn't. Dad doesn't notice a thing. Sasha loves every second of it. She wants to go along with Mom on all her new adventures, wants to tag along to every little place that she goes. But I had just turned eleven and am deemed old enough to watch her at home by myself.

*

Mom's not coming home, so I make us some hot chocolate, then some coffee, too, because if I'm old enough to take care of myself and my sister then I am old enough to drink coffee. But I hate it, so I pour it out into the sink and drink the hot chocolate with Sasha, cuddled up with some blankets on the couch. Maybe I don't have to be the adult after all, maybe I can be a kid a little longer. If being a grown up, means drinking coffee, then I am out. I don't like the role I have to play. I don't like playing mom. I want to just be an older sister, and so that's the role I play. I let Sasha drink as much hot chocolate as she wants and don't worry about whether it will rot her teeth or not.

Dad comes home a little later with pizza. He says he had to stay late at the office to get some work done, so he can afford everything for us, like pizza. Sasha had fallen asleep but wakes at the smell of warm food. Dad suggests a movie marathon and I decide not to remind him that we have homework to do, chores to be done. It's not my place. He puts the first DVD in the player.

*

Mom leaves just after her and Dad's anniversary. I don't think it was of any importance. It is just a convenient time. Or maybe she is upset with Dad's gifts, or maybe she is mad that Sasha and I don't get them anything special. We make them a card, sign it

with our names, write “made especially for you” on the back. We thought it was special enough.

*

I look in the mirror and remind myself that Mom’s not coming home. It is easier for me to just say it for what it is—she’s gone and she doesn’t want us. When she first left, that morning that she woke us up, I was hoping that she would take us with her. I heard about how one parent would run away with the kids, take them away with them, and they would never find them again. I really wanted that. We could run across the country together, see all the great landmarks and never have to be around the same people again. I wanted to go with her on her adventures just as much as Sasha did. I hated her for leaving but I hated her even more for not taking us with her. If it was Dad who left, he would undoubtedly take Sasha and I with him. But then he wouldn’t ever leave. But I’m not so sure I want to go anywhere with Mom; I just want to be away from here. That’s what scares me even more. I don’t want to be like Mom.

*

I sit at the kitchen table, finishing my homework. I am working on Math and Sasha is working on her spelling, and I help her a bit from time to time but mostly we sit in silence. I don’t hear Sasha the first time she speaks, but then she says it again.

“Mom’s not coming home,” she says. It’s a fact.

I look up from my work. She’s got tears in her eyes and her chin quivers. I slide over to her, pull her into a hug.

“Maybe we can just order a pizza and watch a movie tonight.”

*

Mom is at Niagra Falls, taking the boat trip that gets everyone soaked. She's hiking the Grand Canyon, riding on a donkey for the most dangerous part. She is visiting New York for Christmas, London for New Year's. She's walking along the Great Wall of China. She swims in the Indian Ocean, in the Pacific, in the Atlantic. She sees the ruins of the Berlin wall, stands between what was once West and East Germany, just as she stood at the Four Corners in the United States. She walks the line between who she is and who we think she is and she's not coming home.

DINNER AT EIGHT

The apocalypse was coming, all the broadcasters, officials, everyone was saying, in two weeks. It was a meteor set to do us in. We decided to have a nice dinner, the kind we would have at Christmas, on the day it was supposed to happen. We thought it better if we were all together when it came; our family and friends all gathered together to celebrate a life well led.

After the announcement, the one that first spoke of our impending doom, it seemed as though society would fall apart. The news was still broadcasting then, and it seemed like many places had simply given up. They turned to looting and pillaging, as if a yet-still far off threat suddenly took away any and all civil decorum. We watched as footage showed towns burning, cities in ruins, and still we had two weeks before the meteor was supposed to come. We watched as a brother shot his sister over a melted bag of ice, what was just a half filled bag of water. We didn't want that to happen in our little Northwestern town, in little Augur, Washington. But we were lucky, close to both the sea and the mountains; we knew we had resources others did not. Our town was different from the others; as soon as the President's address ended, our own mayor stepped into the newsroom to say that we would stay on the way we had. We still had two weeks to go—we owed it to our children, and ourselves, to persist in such a time. So we did.

Originally we thought it best to keep the kids in school, but ultimately it was better to have them at home. Sally, the principle, same one for almost two decades now, sent home a letter with all the students; "We are so happy to have taught your students," it said, "We hope the very best for you going on." Eternal optimism, that Sally.

We tried to keep up with our previous lives too. Work at the family shop had picked up. We ran a shop for active gear, catering mostly to tourists coming through to see the sights. Now people wanted to get out and enjoy nature before the end came. Our shop was called Wild and Rugged Wilderness Gear. Gramps named it, though Grandma always wanted to change it, said it was too wordy. Gramps said it got the point across. He had started the shop up just a few years before he passed away. It didn't make much money but he enjoyed the work. It was nice enough to finally have some business. Gramps loved the store, loved that he was able to share his love of the outdoors with all the tourists who came through to hike the mountains, walk the trails, ride their bikes, kayak, all that. After he died, we all told Grandma that she should shut it down, that it was too much work for her to do alone. Cousin Chelsea came back then to help her out and while it worked well for her to be working there, the shop still never amounted to much. That is, until right before the end when people wanted equipment to go out and explore nature or else for help to survive. Chelsea closed down the shop and sold everything to people instead of allowing them to rent, as Gramps had previously run. Since the business was mostly tourist run, it's not like they could take all the gear back with them. No use holding on to it. We all loved the outdoors as much as the rest of the town, and we would much rather be out there enjoying it, then inside the shop, settling bills and other necessary business activities. She was able to use the money to buy food and other supplies, anything that was still left, to help the family.

The day after the announcement, Grandma suggested we send out invitations to our dinner. We used the fancy stationary from Grandma's office, the kind she would use to send thank-you and little thinking-of-you notes, and we spent an evening together

sending out invitations to all our family members, asking for RSVPs so we knew how many to cook for, how many places to set, all of that. It was lucky that Grandma had decided to use the old-fashioned ways of communication—just a week after the announcement and everybody was trying to call everybody else and almost nobody was getting through. It seemed like the world was starting to shut down even before the actual end, even with our town's pledge to keep on as normal. The postal service was slower, of course, as many a mailperson had decided to abscond, but others stepped in, knowing how important it was for people to be able to communicate with their loved ones or even their not-so-loved ones at such a time as this. When we went to drop the invitations off at the post office, Grandma made sure to bring along a couple of pies for the brave men and women who kept on with their jobs. She gave them invitations, too.

As the days went on, preparations for the dinner went smoothly. Most of our family lived close enough by. Many, it seemed, had already decided to head this way after the announcement. A few were able to get through the phones to tell us they were coming, while others sent along notes. But many others were travelling too which meant that the roads could become dangerous. The roads around our mountains were already dangerous, though, so our folk could make it work. They were used to having to dodge different obstacles, watch out for animals and the like. Other areas were not so lucky; from the weekly broadcasts, lessened from daily so that the broadcasters could be with their friends and family more, it seemed many places were bottlenecked, and no one was able to get through. Still other places had turned into what seemed like war zones. People were afraid to leave their homes, as gangs had cropped up to steal from anyone who crossed their paths. Many people turned to terrorism to get through to the end. We found

it incredibly sad; we hurt that people thought they had so little to live for. Maybe we were the exception.

It was just Grandma and Chelsea for a while, it was them who sent out the invitations, but other relatives started showing up soon enough. A bunch of aunts and uncles, the ones with grown children, let us know they planned to come as soon as the news said the end was near. They wanted to help take care of Grandma now that it all finally mattered. We were happy to see them all around again, and it had been years since we had seen many of them.

Aunt Alex and her brother Marty arrived first, with still over a week until the end, and we put them to work taking care of the chickens. Because the end was so near, we had decided that it would be best to put them all down, to seal their fate so they didn't have to worry about what was to come. We also needed the meat for the dinner. Alex and Marty grew up at the farm and while they had been away for a fair amount of time, the old ways still lingered in their minds and soon they got over their squeamishness and joined us in taking care of the farm and closing up shop, so to speak.

We took good care of the animals, showed them kindness in the end, just as anyone else would want. We had the few chickens to take care of, plus a couple pigs. We also needed to pick all the vegetables we could, to pickle and preserve, to use for our little gathering. We couldn't bear to let anything go to waste. It was all to be part of our final celebration; the land and its inhabitants as much a part of the guest list as the people.

Grandma and Gramps, being the superstitious people they were, lived mostly off the land. They survived through the Great Depression and they knew what it felt like to go without. They never wanted us to feel that way, and they believed they could trust the

land more than any bank or government. Plus it was simply a big swath of land, with plenty room to have a garden, animals, and still enough to enjoy for oneself. It wasn't hard because they lived up on a hill, on a patch of land surrounded by forest. The road that led up to the house was steep, one way, and potentially perilous, but beautiful. The trees were high up all around and green throughout most of the year. It kept them isolated from other people but close to nature, which is exactly what Gramps wanted. He always took the kids out to trap, hunt, and scavenge together. He learned a lot while he was stationed overseas, and he endeavored to teach us all of what he knew. It was all very useful when you were out for days and needed to carry only what was absolutely necessary.

We loved the little hill we lived on. The children all imagined that it was a mountain, same as the ones that surrounded the land. We were sure Gramps played a role in our imagination of it. Distinctions are less necessary when you're young, particularly the distinctions between a rather large hill and a mountain. The difference was that we could climb to the top of the hill to get to our grandparent's home but it would take us a longer to climb to the top of the mountain.

Gramps was a big part of our lives. He taught us everything we knew, made sure we were always well fed and well loved. He never got angry with us, never yelled or shouted. Instead, he always treated us as intelligent beings. He put us up on his level and when we did wrong, as we often did as children, he would have a conversation with us, not telling us exactly what we had done wrong, but rather guiding us to an understanding of why our behaviors were wrong. It helped us to better understand the world and our place in it.

When Gramps died, it seemed like the world was going to end. We were all pretty old by that time, all grown up, no longer children, but it was like our heart was ripped out of our chests. We didn't know how to go on without him. It was odd—we had all moved on with our lives, away from Gramps and Grandma's ranch so we knew how to live away from our family—yet the moment we heard the news, everything crumbled. He died quickly, at least, a heart attack while he was out chopping wood. He was eighty, strong and healthy, but still fell victim to that old enemy in the end. We gathered then, too, leaving behind what other lives we had built to stay with each other for a couple days, to gather strength from each other, to find a way forward without Gramp's larger than life persona around us.

We pulled out all the fine china, all the nice linens, and all the fancy dinnerware. We took it out with still a while to go, wanting to make sure we had it all ready for when the big moment came. We didn't think we would be able to find it all, wondered if there was even enough for everyone. It surprising how much we had, considering that every other dinner never featured any of this, not even the more important dinners, like when Gramps and Grandma celebrated fifty years together or when Grandma announced she had cancer, the kind that would let her live for a little while but that would eventually kill her. She told us to be happy that it was the slow kind, as it meant more time here with us. But we wondered, weren't completely convinced. But she said everything should go on as normal, that we shouldn't change anything because of her. Eventually we believed her.

Grandma shared almost everything with us, holding back nothing, not love, not food, not warmth; everything was in service of our family. But perhaps her wedding china was the one thing she kept for herself. We couldn't blame her, knowing that we

likely would have broken it, should she ever have taken it down. Much of it was up in the attic, which quickly became more and more ominous.

Even though we knew that the meteor would hit nearly all at once, that it wouldn't matter if we were high or low, we didn't want to be too close to the sky when it did happen. We took all the old trunks out and down the stairs, everything Grandma said was important or might be of use, and started going through it. All the fancy chinaware was there, and so were many family mementos, like a silhouette of our great-great-grandmother. It looked like one of those old plastic necklaces that we used to be obsessed with, except infinitely more fascinating, because it was real and it was a relative. It also wasn't plastic and it had that distinctly vintage feel, the kind that could only come from actual age, that couldn't be manufactured or bought. Grandma told us her story—that she had the silhouette made to send to another man but he never made it back from the war and she held on to it, not even giving it to her husband. She kept it for herself, for her former lover. It was a memento of their love, even though it was only she, not him. But it was a memory of the time, the way she must have looked when she was in love.

We told Grandma that she should keep some of these mementos and share them with our family during our dinner. We all agreed that it seemed like the right thing to do during this time, to reminisce about all that had been, all that could have been. Plus Grandma knew all the stories to all the little trinkets that she kept. Every little item had a grand story to accompany it. Sometimes we wondered if she was making it all up or if she really knew everything. But we didn't really want to know. She knew everything that we needed to know and that was enough for us. Alex, Marty, and Chelsea sifted through them, picking the better ones to include since we wouldn't have enough time for all of

them. Chelsea picked the silhouette, a memento of love that could have been, and a portrait, one that we had never seen before. It was tucked away behind an old mirror that Grandma kept up there. She almost chose the mirror, too, but decided that the faces had more stories to tell than a reflection. Marty chose a few of his old toys—some racecars and an old teddy bear because he could remember them only as feelings but hoped Grandma might be able to apply certain memories to them. Alex was taking too long, so we left her up there to sift through it all on her own.

Cousin Jill arrived a week before the dinner, along with her three sons and little girl. It was about this time that even our little town succumbed to the impending doom. The school had long ago shut down, the businesses were starting to get all boarded up. Not much left, but the people were still kind, still looking out for each other, just staying home now. We had stocked up early on anything we might have needed and had long since retreated to our mountain-like hill, too. Cousin Jill and her family were a sweet bunch, though a little young to really understand what was happening. When she and her husband heard the news about the apocalypse, he left her, said he couldn't stand to end life as he was currently living it, wanting to go out with someone he loved. We invited her in as soon as we heard that news, but she opted to stay in her home until the schools were closed. At first they were open, to keep a sense of normalcy, but people quickly stopped showing up, stopped sending their kids, and they closed. Her town, the one next door, elected to maintain calm as well; must've been something in the mountain air. Right after Cousin Jill and her kids arrived, her brother Dan arrived with his children and wife. They decided to stick together through the end, though they still fought and bickered. We didn't mind and were happy to make it work.

After we had found mementos upstairs, Grandma got the idea that we should watch home movies at dinner. We still had power—the system only took a few people to run and some were kind enough to keep it going so the rest of us could watch family videos and cook with our families and friends. We picked the best ones out, including Grandma and Gramps wedding, and put them in the basket of mementos that had now grown enough to necessitate a laundry basket to hold it all. We picked ones of all of the grandkids putting on a play and ones of the our cousins' football games. Gramps recorded almost all of them and recorded a couple of Seahawk's games too. We picked the ones we thought would be the most entertaining, after a bit of arguing, and picked a football game that had nearly all the cousins in it.

With three days before the big dinner, Grandma got starting cooking and planning out the meal. We would have chicken, potatoes, and a whole bunch of fresh vegetables, since the gardens were in bloom and we had to eat them all up. We would also use some of the other pickled food, but not too much. Even with the end coming, we still wanted to be prepared for anything. We even salted some of the pork, just like in the old days, just in case. We knew it amounted to nothing, still knew that after all we would all end anyway, but it was hard to let go of the optimism that Grandma and Gramps always held on to. So we kept some food, just in case.

The day before our big dinner, before we the end came, we were struggling for a while to figure out the table situation but eventually came up with something that would work. We made the dinner table out of about five different tables all shoved together. We took the really big one, the actual dining room table, and turned it around long ways, and kept tacking on as many tables, side tables, desks, anything as we could to fit in all the

relatives. We even brought down Gramps old writing desk, the one he used to pen all the letters to editors he sent over the years. It was an old obsession of his. He was always reading the paper, preferring it to the TV or radio. He could better control the volume, so to speak, and could go at his own pace.

As Uncle Joe and Cousin Nick—who had only just arrived and made immediately to start working—were carrying it down the stairs, some of the letters spilled out, scattering all around the floor. Grandma stopped to pick them up; some were hilarious, taking the editor to town over nonsensical nonissues and some were quite serious, when Gramps argued with a point the editor made. Gramps was an intelligent man who had been through many life struggles; he wasn't afraid to call out the bullshit he saw. Grandma decided to put these into our little basket of things to talk about, mementos to go over, and memories to share. It was starting to grow pretty big; it now had toys, portraits, dresses, and more in it. As more people arrived, they added their own bits and bobs, seeking out the treasures they had left behind in the old house.

With all the extra hands, we were able to get the whole house up and running. We had brought home some of the leftover wares from the blowout sale at the shop earlier, a couple of tents, some blow up mattresses, and a few other camping odds and ends. We thought it might be fun for the kids to “camp out” in the living room, so we set up all the tents out there and stuffed them full of blankets. We got some Christmas lights in all shapes and colors and strung them up between and around the tents. It looked so beautiful we decided to get out all the Christmas stuff, tree and all. We put the tree up in the center of the room, in a little circle of the tents. We waited to decorate it, put the boxes full of ornaments right under it for the children to once everyone had arrived. It made navigating

the area difficult, especially once the table grew and inched its way into the living room, but we made it work. It was a little odd to see these wares in Grandma's house, all set up, but also satisfying. The whole family was finally camping together. Plus it just felt right to have Christmas right then.

We had enough tents for all the kids but it got to be a bit too rambunctious with all of them in the living room and we eventually needed the space for the dining room table, so we moved them down to the basement, thinking that way at least we had a door to close. They took the Christmas tree and ornaments with them and had fun stringing and hanging them all up. As we all carried the tents, blankets, and other goodies down to the basement, like a little caravan, the kids ran in circles, darting between our legs, trying to not get run over.

The day of the dinner, of the apocalypse arrived, and we were all feeling homey and happy, having watched home videos and shared pictures for a couple days by then. We sat around together and watched the old home videos. The game with all the cousins was one of the best to watch, as all the players present in the living room kept adding new information to the plays that we never would have known otherwise. We had all the food ready, and many of the people were already there, had been for a while, though we were still waiting for a few. Even with a few of the townspeople had wandered up; the post people Grandma had sent pies to came along with their families. The principle came with her husband, but her children had opted to stay where they were. Many people came who didn't have any family, or whose family had been too far away to get to in time.

Grandma was beloved among those who knew her, which was a good many people and owned a local business so many locals knew our family. Some people talked

about the adventures they had after renting some of our equipment, and it made us happy that our shop was at least tangentially involved in some of people's greatest memories. We were happy and grateful for Grandma then, truly appreciative of the way she held our family together, despite being sick and having lost Gramps. Here all these people could see how great the two of them were and we appreciated them all the more for it.

Everyone started telling stories, reminiscing and basking in nostalgia. We told the story of how Gramps first took us up to visit the mountain. Ever since we were young, it always served as a dear friend to us. We talked to it as if it were a friend, involved him in all our games, and told him all our secrets, the way only children can. We didn't make it that far with our small legs but we did find a little waterfall. We had a lot of waterfalls around here, which was good, as it was clean water to share with all these people, but this little waterfall Gramps had never seen before. He let us name it and we chose Gramps, after him, because we were still too young to know his given name. Gramps Falls was our favorite place—and Gramps eventually built us a bridge that crossed the little stream and we helped him build us a treehouse nearby. It was our own sun-dappled world, beloved, but now nearly in ruins, after we grew old and forgot to take care of it.

We had brought the dogs inside now too. They were as much a part of our family as anyone else. Some frightened the children. The bigger ones looked like wolves, with their blue eyes and muscled bodies, but they were all harmless. Unless you were an animal and they were out hunting; but they were exceptionally well-trained by Gramps himself and would never hurt a child, though they were known to snarl at anyone who would hurt their kin.

The house was stuffed with people, too, but we were still missing a few. Aunt Helen had RSVPed but she was getting older and we worried about her safety and whether or not she would make. We started gathering everyone to the table to get started, though Grandma was stalling just in case anyone else came. Her grandma senses must have been tingling, because Aunt Helen showed up right as we finished gathering everyone up. Dinner was ready to be served.

It was nearly 9 o'clock by the time we sat down to eat. We had only a few hours left but none of us seemed to really worry about that. Instead, we dug into the food. It was some of the best any of us had ever had. Everyone had brought their favorite dishes and we had so much food, we could hear a couple of the tables groan under the weight. Resources were beginning to run scarce in many parts; the government cracked down hard after the initial round of looting and pillaging and all the grocery stores soon ran out of goods. But somehow we managed. We had multiple chicken pot pies, made by Grandma and her helpers, from the farm and garden. We had pickle sandwiches, made by one of my aunts. She made the bread herself, a recipe handed down to her, and used the pickles she had made the previous year. We had lots of pie, too, as it was one of the easier things to make with the limited resources: pumpkin pie, cherry pie, strawberry, chocolate and peanut butter, even gooseberry. We had lots of mashed potatoes to the table, made with some of the butter and cream that was rationed out. The potatoes were easy to come by. We even let the dogs eat the better food; it was their last night, too, after all.

The kids originally wanted to eat downstairs, in the little land they had created for themselves, but we forced them upstairs with us. They insisted on winning the fight

anyway they could, so we ended up eating with little children gathered under our feet with our own legs propped up on our chairs. We complained but secretly thought it was adorable and we were satisfied that we were all together.

After dinner, we moved the table, tried to make more space for us to sit around. At first we tried to move the tables back to where we found them but we quickly gave up. It was taking too much time, so we pushed them up against the walls instead. In its place, we gathered in a wide circle. Grandma had the laundry basket full of memories. She pulled out Gramps letters and read the funnier ones aloud. She read about Gramps growing up, about the children he knew and was friends with, about the men he served alongside all his life, how they all deserved everything he had and more. After she finished, there wasn't a dry eye in the room. We missed him dearly.

She told the stories that we had picked out from the attic. Told Marty and us about how the little teddy bear was his best friend, one he took with him everywhere. He had wanted to take it with him to school but he wasn't allowed to, so Grandma had put him in his backpack and told Marty to look to it whenever he felt he needed a friend and know that his friend was there. The portrait we had found was of Grandma, when she was much younger. It was her before she had meant Gramps, before she started her great adventure. It was odd but suddenly we could all see a bit of ourselves in the little portrait.

We were all happy to sit around and listen to Grandma tell all her stories. She talked about the other little bits and bobs we had brought down. After a while, everyone started telling all their own stories, too. We talked about all our various travels, the places we had been and the people we had met, and how that all stacked up to home. All those places, beautiful as they were, were nothing compared to our mountain, our home, and

our little waterfall. We talked about what made our little haven so great, about the love we shared for each other. We shared memories and drinks, two cousins having set up their own bar on their side of the circle, dishing out drinks to everyone, keeping everyone's glasses full. We looked out at our family and all we felt was peace, not fear or apprehension. Grandma had given us all great lives, and we hoped that we had helped her, gave her some greatness in her life, too. That's what family did; it brought out everything, the good and the bad, but ultimately was a safe haven from everything else going on.

When the time came, we gathered around the TV. A few kind broadcasters agreed to broadcast with their families at the station, so we were able to listen in to a final countdown. We found it kind that these men and women would do this for others, people potentially without any family. But we decided to go to the basement, play games with the kids, and try not to worry. The children brought the pillows and blankets out of the tents and we set up in a circle around the Christmas tree. Everyone trickled down, some lingering to hear what the broadcasters had to say, see what their families were doing. Grandma waited, wanting to be the last to head down. She walked downstairs at last, after turning off the countdown. The stairway to the basement was lined with mirrors, one for each of the grandchildren. They were all of varying shapes and sizes, some were gilded, some circles, some squares, and covered nearly the entire wall. We watched Grandma walk down slowly looking at her reflection in each of them, wondering what she saw when she looked into them. When she got to the bottom, Grandma looked up smiled at us. She joined the rest of our family, in our little Christmas heaven at the end of the world.

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