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Swamp Boat, Gravy Boat: Memory And Place In Fiction

Kaycie Surrell

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SWAMP BOAT, GRAVY BOAT: MEMORY AND PLACE IN FICTION

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

Kaycie Surrell

December 2016

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SWAMP BOAT, GRAVY BOAT: MEMORY AND PLACE IN FICTION

English

Missouri State University, December 2016

Master of Arts

Kaycie Surrell

ABSTRACT

The importance of memory to place is of particular interest to me and forms the basis for the bulk of my work. In my critical introduction I explore the work of authors and essayists who inspire my fiction work through their focus on place and memory. Specific authors include Sandra Cisneros, David Sedaris, and Pam Houston. Through my short fiction pieces I weave together the stories of my childhood from Florida to Missouri into a quilt that covers the important pieces of my life thus far. I am interested in how people are motivated by fear to write around their personal narratives and seek to understand how writers are able to conquer those fears through their writing. Through characters based in memory and those crafted from the history and folklore of the places I've called home I present a collection of fiction through the scope of a person without an attachment to any one place in particular, but to a handful of places that she calls home.

KEYWORDS: fiction, creative nonfiction, place, memory, Florida, Missouri

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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A Masters Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College
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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Hilary Snow for Port City Daily, Tim O'Brien says in regard to the idea of truth vs. story truth in his novel *The Things They Carried*, "...The line between fiction and non-fiction is not as absolute as we think in our common-sensical world...Truth itself becomes very murky and hard to pin down." Tom Clancy suggests that, "The difference between reality and fiction? Fiction has to make sense." Essentially these writers are saying the same thing. Those of us who are drawn to tell our stories through fiction are in part doing so because to tell our own versions of the truth would be difficult and inaccurate. Our stories wouldn't come together nearly as succinctly and eloquently. Even in the most chaotic prose, there is an essential truth. I've been inspired by authors whose collections tell the truth, one story at a time and blur the line between fiction nonfiction. Intertwined in the works of authors like David Sedaris, Pam Houston, and Sandra Cisneros are personal stories the author remembers and has pieced together and shaped into something new, something more closely resembling fiction. Each character is made complete by a patchwork of personal history, of several different people over time. Each story is a collection of various places, various moments.

The stories in my collection are the same. They are a way of telling the truth that lets the story find its place but doesn't reveal the complete reality behind the curtain. I find the stories I'm most drawn to do this, and I'm inspired to write my stories similarly. I've drawn inspiration from film, from poets, from short fiction writers, and from essayists. There is a historical element to some of these stories that plays with the line between past and present and a character as she is presented in various scenarios and locations throughout time. It would be impossible not to include pieces of my own

personal narrative in these characters and their stories, as that is my tendency as a writer. Writing these stories meant exploring the balance between fiction and nonfiction and creating characters that were made up of both personal experiences and imagined realities. The idea that fiction and nonfiction come together in a person's personal narrative is exemplified by the way writers weave together together memory and story. Tara DaPra offers an example of this in an article for *Creative Nonfiction* magazine titled "Writing Memoir and Writing for Therapy: An Inquiry on the Function of Reflection" where she says, "While there are clear parallels between reflecting in creative nonfiction and reflecting in our private lives, academia—like the larger culture—remains anxious about crossing into the land of therapy. Do writing teachers fear tissues littered across the floor, strangers breaking down? Or are we afraid of opening our own wounds? We're trained to compartmentalize relationships and responsibilities, to be professionals. Writing is about writing. Want to be safe? Stick to nature, or call it fiction" . While my stories are not categorized as creative nonfiction, I appreciate and understand the desire to mask something as fiction to maintain a level of safety. In my piece "Bad at Funerals," I reflect on the pain that comes with losing a parent through the scope of another person's loss. At the funeral of a close friend's mother I address the truth to my fear and reluctance to accept the reality that I will lose my own mother one day. From a pew just a few rows back from Alora and her family I reflect on how beautiful the service is and how graceful they are in their grief as a direct contrast to my own ability to accept the possibility of a similar situation for myself.

When I started the English program at Missouri State University, I wanted to be a poet. I was particularly inspired by writers like Charles Bukowski and his 1974 collection of

poetry, *Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*. I must have read my favorite poems hundreds of times. It was one of those books you bring with you when you go to a new place and you want to feel something familiar. His poem “As The Sparrow” is still a favorite of mine and is representative of what made me fall in love with poetry.

To give life you must take life,
and as our grief falls flat and hollow
upon the billion-blooded sea
I pass upon serious inward-breaking shoals rimmed
with white-legged, white-bellied rotting creatures
lengthily dead and rioting against surrounding scenes.
Dear child, I only did to you what the sparrow
Did to you; I am old when it is fashionable to be
young; I cry when it is fashionable to laugh.
I hated you when it would have taken less courage
to love.

There is something really beautiful in the brevity of poetry. Each word is of equal importance and so clearly expresses the unique ideas of its author. The poetry classes I took at Missouri State University helped me expand my knowledge of modern poetry and learn how to adapt my writing style and successfully put into practice certain writing techniques that really helped me improve as a poet. I wanted to be able to write about grief and loss and even political unrest, and poetry offered a creative way to express those interests. With poetry, a writer could follow the stream of consciousness of a character. Unfortunately, I wasn't a great poet. While I really liked the freedom that poetry allowed, I don't think my writing grew until I stretched out some of the ideas in fiction I was trying to squish into vague, pressed poems. When I started my graduate studies, I decided to make the switch to fiction and focus heavily on short, succinct prose. Luckily there are some excellent and attentive professors at Missouri State who have

been crucial to my growth as a writer. Their constructive criticism and peer workshops have been an essential part of my time as a graduate student at Missouri State.

Many of the stories I began to write were adaptations of myself in the various places I had grown up. My father came from a military background and was a pilot in the US Navy. He suffered a serious back injury but continued to work as a pilot. His job meant that my family bounced around from place to place as I was growing up. A significant part of my early life was spent living in south Florida. I was surrounded by orange trees, sandy beaches, and sunshine. I was also surrounded by alligators, huge spiders, and sunburns. It's the place I spent the largest chunk of my life, so it's the place that rests most heavily on my story collection. It's strange how the mind distorts pieces of a memory, transforming them into something that looks entirely different from what they were to begin with. In Dorothy Allison's craft essay "Place" for *Tin House* she says that place is a visual detail that requires context. She also says, "Place is the desire for a door. Place is the desire to get out of where you are. Place is experiencing where you are as a trap." (Allison) She acknowledges that fear is a wonderful place for writers because the anxiety is real. The details are real. The emotion is real. Tying that back to DaPra's article on the function of reflection, she expresses that writing is a form of problem solving. "Writers, no matter their genre, find inspiration to write from the same source: something they hear or see or otherwise experience stays with them. They can't stop musing; they must investigate." (DaPra) Through fiction, I was taking a more direct approach to working through the stories that lived in my memory but had yet to come to fruition on the page. My father passed away the summer of 2010 and I got the news while I was sitting in a summer poetry class with a professor at Missouri State. Later, in a

different class, I was asked by visiting professor to write something emotionally difficult. She wanted us to accept our raw emotions and try to use them to create a poem. She wanted us to write about *something we were afraid of*. I chose to write about listening to my father's voicemail message after his passing. That was the first time I really felt a connection to writing creatively.

Poetry wasn't going to be my home, but it was going to provide me with a springboard for working through the stories living in my memory. When I decided to pursue the MA in English, I took a workshop class where we explored the work of Sandra Cisneros. I was immediately drawn to Cisneros's ability to tell a story through short, proficient prose. Her characters in *Woman Hollering Creek* are those that reside deep in a person's soul and explain the purpose of place through the simplest and most childlike descriptions. It was through reading her short stories that I was inspired to take a step back from writing around a subject in a vague way and to instead attack it at the root. I decided to work through my preoccupation with place by writing my own versions of Cisneros-esque stories. So much of what I feel to be my origin story takes place in south Florida. Edward W. Said's critical inquiry "Invention, Memory, and Place" published in *Landscape and Power* addresses memory and geography, or the study of human space:

"Thus the study and concern with memory or a specifically desirable and recoverable past is a specially freighted twentieth-century phenomenon that has arisen at a time of bewildering change, of unimaginably large and diffuse mass societies, competing nationalisms, and, most important perhaps, the decreasing efficacy of religious, familial, and dynastic bonds. People now look to this refashioned memory, especially in its collective

forms, to give themselves a coherent identity, a national narrative, a place in the world, though, as I have indicated, the processes of memory are frequently, if not always, manipulated and intervened in for sometimes urgent purposes in the present.” (179)

I’ve always been drawn to stories inextricably tied to more personal narratives. The fuzzy, bumpy memories from my childhood found their place in short stories where characters could continue to exist after my own memories had faded. I decided to name those shorts for the people I remember. Each of their names sticks out in my mind, and I can see their faces and clothing as clearly as when I made the memory. I like short fiction because it retains the fast paced movement I was so drawn to in poetry, the narrative feels more complete in my fiction writing. The story is only as long as the memory is.

I felt compelled to read everything I could from authors like David Sedaris and Pam Houston. Sedaris’s essays have been some of my favorites for years. My brother gave me a copy of *Me Talk Pretty One Day* for my birthday, and I remember reading it on and off again over the years. His unapologetic glimpse behind the private curtains of his family’s lives was so interesting. He is never shy about telling the truth, even if it’s grotesque or uncomfortable. I have always been drawn to the way he organizes and writes stories of family members through his memories of them as a reflection of his own life. Sedaris started keeping a journal in 1977 and admittedly uses some of those old journal entries as inspiration for the stories that make their way into his collections. In an interview with NPR’s Terry Gross he says, “That’s how I start the day — by writing about the day before, but every now and then I read out loud from my diary. ... I wouldn’t open it up and just read, but every now and then something happens and I think, ‘Oh, this

might work in front of an audience, so I'm always hoping that something interesting will happen ... but I don't try to force it." (Sedaris)

There are a lot of short stories that came to life in this collection through journal entries I've made over the years. Some were based on memories from growing up in south Florida in a house that through independent research I would learn was once owned by a hermaphrodite named Big Six. She was a six foot tall madam who ran a brothel called Castle Hill out of the house my parents bought and remodeled when I was five years old. Punta Gorda was a seedy coastal town until large parts of it were remodeled in the early 1980s, but when Big Six had lived there, I imagined it to be a cross between *The Great Gatsby* and *Pulp Fiction*.

Part of my personal narrative is a connection to the theatre and burlesque performance art. I wanted to imagine a character who would live in a place I was so drawn to, but in a time I knew nothing about. I was intrigued by this character who had become an urban legend and decided to use her as the inspiration for a story that would inspire the main character in my story, "Mariposa." Part of growing up in Florida meant being influenced by the Cuban culture. I was inspired by what the area must have been like before it was a popular vacation spot for families. I was interested in writing about the lives of the characters who would make their homes in such a small coastal city, what their dreams might have been. Through my involvement in a local burlesque troupe, I was able to connect my experiences both as a performer and as a Florida native to a piece of history that was significant to me. "Mariposa" attempts to capture the importance of the history of southern Florida and connect it to the experiences of a character inspired by Punta Gorda's most notorious brothel owner. Through various workshops, I had written

several short pieces inspired by Cisneros and Houston, but “Mariposa” is the first piece that truly feels like an extension of my experiences . So much of what makes memory and place important to the journey of a writer is the ability to connect the two in a truly unique way. As a study of place, ”Mariposa” achieves what I wanted as far as the marriage between past, present, and setting.

Not all of my childhood was spent in Florida. Part of my history includes my parents’ difficult divorce, various relocations to the different parts of the midwest, and moving to Springfield, Missouri for school. Most of my short fiction pieces focus on the connections I made as a child in Florida because those are the stories I feel most connected to. When I had tried to write about my life and my experiences before, I had settled on a distinct style and the voice was a mess of what it meant to re-live memory. I made vague distinctions between reality and fantasy because that’s what I thought it meant to be a good writer. I mistook creativity for a vague sensibility about the past, and the characters who arose from it.

Through much of Cisneros’s work I found that instead of trying to build up the connections and memories she may have about a place or a person, she attacks that character and writes simply and clearly. In my short pieces about people and my interactions with them, as in ”Carita” and “Sal,” I wanted to recreate the moments carved out of a real memory and make a nice place for them to live in a story. By reading several interviews with Sandra Cisneros in literary journals such as *The Missouri Review* and *Superstition Review*, I was able to gain a little bit of insight about writing from experience. In an interview with *The Missouri Review*, she talks with the Gayle Elliot about coming to understand her “gift” or creative “stamp”. She says that people learn

things in spirals, and when she was an undergraduate she was intimidated by her classmates in a poetry workshop because she came from a very different socio-economic class. This caused her to become angry and write from a place of difference:

“Now I realize that place of difference is my gift. I ask my students to make a list of ten things that make you different from anyone in this room; ten things that make you different from anyone in your community; in the United States; in your family; in your gender. And we go on and on, making these lists of things that make us different. And of course the list could be a hundred and ten things.” (Cisneros)

For a long time, I was afraid of writing about some of the things that embarrassed me or made me feel different from my peers. Workshop can be a terrifying place when you're sharing your experiences through a story, no matter how fictional it is or isn't. Part of what I like so much about Pam Houston's work is that she isn't afraid to write about emotions that make people uncomfortable. I was first introduced to her writing through her collection of short stories, *Cowboys Are My Weakness*. Houston offers an interesting and unapologetic approach to relationships, and while there is a part of me that hates writing about romantic relationships, they're impossible to completely ignore, an essential part of the human experience. Houston is aware that a large part of what she writes is coming from or inspired by something that really happened. In tying my work back to reality and how closely the two are linked, I found an interview she did with *Fail Better Magazine* where she talks about her process. Houston says, “I don't spend a great deal of time trying to disguise the things that really happened in my fiction because I have so much faith in the way the world offers up the perfect detail every time, the one

that will make the story, and I don't want to lose that authenticity by moving the story from Los Angeles to Amsterdam or by changing a ski instructor to a brain surgeon.”

(Houston)

I've tried to write around romantic relationships in various short stories in the past but without much success. Thinly veiled and angry pieces about immature relationships weren't magically turning into well-written pieces overnight, so I decided to take a different approach with a few pieces I've included in my thesis. One is "Lunatic Fringe" which is inspired by the hours I spent reading and re-reading Houston's short stories and my love of female characters like Ramona Flowers in Bryan Lee O'Malley's *Scott Pilgrim* graphic novel series and Clementine Kruczynski in Charlie Kaufman's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. I really enjoy seeing two characters interact with one another through the mundane tasks that make up their daily lives. I like seeing someone's psyche unfold over and over again while they play out situations in her head that may or may not be real. I wanted to attach some of my own neuroses to a character who reminded me of some of the characters in my favorite movies and books. The counter character to "Lunatic Fringe" is Sylvia. Sylvia draws inspiration from film noir and like with "Mariposa," her character is a culmination of my experience with theatre and burlesque as well as my attachment to a bygone era. While these stories are different from the rest of the collection, I think they maintain a similarity to the rest of the characters I've created in my work.

Almost all of my characters spend a good deal of time in thought. There is little to no dialogue, and the characters are often experiencing the problem at hand as it develops, working out how to handle it or not handle it by themselves. In an interview

with Jason Gots for *Big Think*, author Nathan Englander says that “write what you know” is one of the best and most misunderstood pieces of advice ever. He articulates that it’s important to write about the emotions you know. Love, jealousy, anger, guilt, loss. These are the things that you know or don’t know about and these are the feelings I’ve tried to reveal through my characters. These stories are an expression of the places I’ve felt the most attachment to and the characters I’ve created to exist in them. They’re an extension my memories tied to the stories that made these places so important to me to begin with.

A SAFE PLACE

Fingernail polish was the only thing they let me keep when they admitted me to the Rivercliff. A plastic pink telephone with a circular dial and a long curly cord. A blue suitcase covered in stickers. My wig collection. These things were seized and put into a locker with my last name scrawled onto a piece of packing tape stuck to the front. When I got here they asked me what was the one thing I wanted to keep and I told them it was my nail polish. It was some silver glitter color. Cheap. I remember buying it after work one day. It had been an especially long shift and I remember looking down at my nails, cracked and a little bloody in the corners from picking them when I was bored or anxious. I remember thinking, nobody will love you with nails like these. When they look at your hands they'll think you're a slob.

Every other week I paint a thin coat of the silver glitter polish on each finger. The glitter is nice because if you paint too much you can just scrape it off with a nail from your other hand and it still looks like you did a semi-good job. It makes me feel like I know what's going on in the world. At least if my fingernails look okay, the rest of it will fall into place. When I asked them if I could ever go to the locker and switch out which things I wanted to keep, they said maybe. Maybe means no.

We have roommates at Rivercliff. Mine is this older woman with peach colored hair. I don't think it was supposed to come out like that but she probably didn't have time to tone it when they picked her up. It looks like maybe she was going for red, or some kind of blonde, but I don't want to ask her. Women are sensitive about their hair and it doesn't look too bad anyway. Her name is Lucy but at Rivercliff they call her Reed. We get along fine, but sometimes she talks in her sleep. She says things about some animal

she must have had back home. I think it's a dog because when she speaks in the night her voice is higher than normal and makes a sort of cooing sound. The kind of sound I've only heard people use when they talk to babies or pets. Sometimes she sounds like she's talking to a room of people. Not necessarily directing them but explaining things to them. Like she threw a party and she's telling everyone where the food and the drinks are and thanking them for coming or directing them to the bathrooms. I wonder if that's why she's here. Maybe she hosted lots of parties before. At Rivercliff she's in charge of games. On Saturdays we go outside to the backyard and play croquet. It's this game with heavy little balls and mallets. You strategically hit the balls through the wickets. A ball's deadness is carried over each turn until it's been cleared by scoring the next wicket. Reed is very matter-of-fact when she plays. She doesn't allow for any daydreaming during game play.

My last job was for this movie theatre. We had to wear ugly little vests with one pocket on the right that was sewn shut. I worked behind the counter and filled popcorn bags and tubs. Every night I took all of the popcorn out of the machine and put it into a large plastic garbage bag. The bag was clean and everything. We just put the popcorn there so we could clean out the heavy metal grates then we put the old popcorn back in the machine and served it again the following night. It sounds kind of gross when I think about it now, but it seemed normal then. The smell of all that fake popcorn butter never leaves you. Sometimes I think I smell it here when I walk into the cafeteria but I know it's just my memory making things up. We don't have popcorn at Rivercliff. We don't even have corn here. We have these little squares of bread, sort of like that square pizza they served back in grade school. Sometimes we have these little cups of what I think is

supposed to be fruit served in a sugar syrup. They serve the whole thing with a box of dairy drink. Not milk. Dairy drink. I don't remember the last time I had real milk.

Anyway. Back at my old job at the theatre I was always the one to close at the end of the night. All of the other employees would skip out to go on dates or hang out with their friends at the bars down the street, so I would get stuck closing. I saw the endings of a lot of movies. After the doors were locked and the popcorn maker was clean, I would sneak into the theatres to lock the back entrances and stick around to watch people's faces move. Women reuniting with their long lost loves. Women losing their long lost loves for good. Women embracing their friends and learning something new about themselves. People traveling. I wonder what the theatre is used for now. Maybe a camp or a call center. Maybe nothing. They brought me to Rivercliff because I knew how to run film through the old projectors.

I was working at the theatre when she came in. Everyone else had gone home for the night, and this woman walked in with a long red coat and long red fingernails. Our last show started at 9:30 at night and it was 9:17, so I sold her a ticket and she asked me to watch the movie with her. Sometimes older people do that. I made her up a bag of popcorn and followed her to the theatre. We were the only two there and we watched the movie in silence but every now and then she would look over at me and make notes in this little red notebook she had in her lap. I didn't think anything of it. After the movie she asked me about my work and how long I'd been here. Twelve years. I'd been at the theatre for twelve years and that's why the boss left me alone so much. She asked me what I liked to do in my spare time and I answered that I liked to work on computers. I'd made the website for the theatre and I told her it looked pretty good. I didn't have a lot of

friends so I spent a lot of time reading alone and working on code. The next day she came to my house and offered me a position here at Rivercliff. I don't really know how long it's been.

Every morning at six I wake up and look over to see if Reed is still there. Usually she's already gone so I go back to sleep until seven and wait for the orderly to come in and make sure I haven't hanged myself with a sheet or tried to climb out the window. What would be the point? It's not any worse here than it was out there.

The entire facility is staffed by women. Women who cook and women who clean. Women losing their long lost loves for good and women embracing their friends and learning something new about themselves. Before, when I worked out there, clocking in and accepting a paycheck at the end of every two weeks, I wondered what it would be like if we were the ones in charge. If there wasn't always some disgruntled guy in a polo with a logo on the front pocket crunching the numbers and waiting for a reason to shout. If we monitored the money and the food and the traffic. Now I know that we're in charge. At least I think we are.

I never see the lady in red anymore. When she picked me up from my house that afternoon she was wearing the same coat and carrying the same purse and this time had red lipstick on that matched everything else. She told me her name was Molly. She asked if I wanted to go somewhere where I wouldn't have to scoop popcorn out of a machine every night only to put it back and do this over and over again with not so much as a thank you. I asked her what the catch was. The catch is that you'll never see your family again. You'll never have that happy ending you see in the movies. You'll never stand on an empty street corner, just thinking about the way things are and the way you belong to

them and be caught off guard by a handsome stranger. There are no romantic relationships at Rivercliff.

We have books and sometimes we watch film strips that show us the world outside and what we mean to it. They show us the riots and the fires and the buildings with their windows smashed in, tiny pieces of glass littering the streets and yellow tape marking them off so people don't get hurt. But the people still get hurt. We don't see many happy endings in here. But we have one another. We have a purpose. We have a goal.

There was a woman who bunked down the hall from Reed and me, and she and her roommate got into a fight. They were around the same age and came from the same place. Montana or something. Apparently they fell in love. Sometimes that happens. They were pretty quiet about it but they spent a lot of time in their room and one morning one of the orderlies caught them in the middle of the night holding one another under the covers and drawing pictures in this notebook that one of them had brought in when the rest of their belongings were shoved in that locker. None of us would have found out, but the orderly that found them was pretty young and sometimes she let things slip. It's hard to keep secrets all to yourself. The both of them were forced out of Rivercliff and back into the world. The world with its broken glass and disappointment. A fate worse than death, is what they called it the next morning at breakfast. I chewed my food in silence and stared down at my silver glitter polish. Felt safe.

Sometimes when I'm writing code for the main informational distribution reels, I slip in these bits of code. They don't show up in the final screens. Nobody would know that they were there. But they turn into little pictures when I write them. A string of slash

marks and semicolons and commas. Sometimes they say things like *sunshine* or *kissing*. Sometimes they make little hearts. Sometimes they look like little snakes. If you connected them all together they might tell a story. I don't think I'm intentionally writing the codes to look like that. At least that's what I'd say if anyone ever asked me. But then again, they'd have to be looking, and nobody ever really looks for anything like that around here. They're too concerned with the straight lines, following rules, and keeping quiet. The concrete. I've always been more interested in the story that's hiding behind everything else. The frame that someone forgot to double check. Like Reed dreaming out loud in the middle of the night about her dog and her parties. I'm the only one that knows what she sounded like before. What her life must have been like when she lived at home. Just like mine with all those movies.

BAD AT FUNERALS

Alora's mother died on a Tuesday and we didn't even know she had a mother. I mean, we knew she did. Everyone has a mother. But she wasn't one of those people who talked about their mothers the way I talked about mine. My own mother was always talking with her hands in the air and smoking cigarettes in the morning with her coffee. My mother hated messes and loved birds and every surface was covered with tiny special things she found (an old key, a little stuffed elephant, a stamp in the shape of a sea shell). Everything touched. None of us knew Alora's mother. We knew that her parents were still married and that they'd had her when they were older. Someone suggested a memory that her mother had been having heart problems lately. Nobody knew if this was true. We drove out to attend the service even though we didn't know her. We thought maybe a familiar face or two would be comforting to Alora in a church full of old people, breathing with their mouths open and grunting in agreement with the pastor.

Alora looked beautiful. She sat in the front next to her father and her long hair stuck on the back of her jacket and touched the pew. We all walked quiet as mice on the thick carpet toward an empty bench in the back and waited. I hadn't even been to a funeral since my own father's. His was more of a shared service and the whole thing had been swiftly glossed over with nobody in suits or anything. I remember my uncle showing up in his gym clothes. I had never really liked my uncle that much. He was the kind of guy who gave gold coins on your birthday and said they'd be worth something someday. I always ended up using them on candy at the mall a few weeks later anyway.

Suddenly everyone was bowing their heads and praying, and we all sort of looked at one another and did the same. I don't really pray that often and when I do it's difficult.

Growing up Catholic meant that the prayers were all memorized ones. If we talked to God it was through a man in a little room and usually it was pretty one-sided. I said the sin out loud and he told me how many “Hail Mary’s” I would need to do to make up for it. Rinse. Repeat. The man speaking for Alora’s mother was not like any of the priests at my church back home. There was no incense. There were no tall, pointed hats. He wore a suit instead of a long, green robe. I watched Alora’s father’s shoulders shake as he wept, silently. All at once everyone was standing and being shown the aisle and up to the casket to pay their respects. This part I remembered. I’ve now seen three very dead people in my life and all of them have been sitting in silk lined caskets with their bodies full of fluid. Their faces covered in makeup that sets well at a room temperature and won’t stick in the wrong places. I remember my cousin putting pennies in my grandfather’s casket and my aunt taking them out and explaining that pennies aren’t the sort of thing Grandpa wants to take with him to heaven. She said he would rather have his harmonica or a picture of Grandma but it only made my cousin cry. She couldn’t understand.

I didn’t want to look at this woman I didn’t even know, dead in her casket with her family sitting nearby and looking at all of us. Their faces were pressed hard with feeling and their eyes were raw and red from crying. There were pictures on stands of Alora with her sisters and her mother. Alora in her prom dress. A little boy in a wheelchair in the middle. Her father, big and proud with his arms around his wife. The two of them holding hands at her old sister’s wedding. So proud of their girls. Alora was strong. We turned back to hug her and I stole a glance at her mother as she was now and saw her face, her cheeks pooled out and her jaw loose. Her hair was gray and thin and they’d put hardly any makeup on her face. She looked like a good woman. She looked

like a woman who loved her family and put food on the table and cheered at football games and hugged her grandbabies. She looked so old. She was only 62. My own mother is just 55. I think. I can't remember and she doesn't celebrate age anymore. She's always looked so young and beautiful and never seemed like a person who could get old and die one day. I looked over and watched the few of us there for Alora lean on one another and tug at her dress, pet her hair, mouth the words "I love you" silently as her relatives and neighbors told loud stories about her mother. I didn't want to do this at my own mother's funeral. I don't think I could. I think it would just have to be her and me sitting there alone. One of us dead and the other just waiting. Then there'd be just the two of us left. Me and a brother who sleeps too late and drinks too often and will make someone very happy someday. There can't just be the two of us. I don't grieve as beautifully as Alora and there's no father to shake silently while he cries.

CARITA

Carita's family was from Hawaii. Her brother was called Keoni and her mother was just called Mama T. I met her at school and I don't even know how it happened but all of the sudden we were best friends. She used to wear this coat and these flat red shoes. The coat was tan and buttoned all the way up the front and had a belt in the middle, like a rain coat. Her skin was perfect and she had skinny legs that made her look like a model when she walked around in that coat. Her hair went all the way down her back and all the boys would whisper when she walked by but she would grab my hand and walk me down the street to the after school place where the kids would go when their parents had to work late.

We would both go sit in the back room where the littler kids had lunch during the day and steal a banana pudding each, then we'd go up to the tallest part of the playground to talk about boys and sex. She explained exactly how sex worked because I was six and she was eight and she knew a lot more about things than I did. She told me women were like flowers and when they opened up and all their petals came out, that's when they were ready and men knew this and stabbed them with their thorns. It sounded beautiful and painful, and even though I tried to understand I really couldn't. But I liked listening to her talk, the way she used her hands to tell the story.

Sometimes when my parents had to work really late, Mama T would let me stay over at her house until my mom came to pick me up at night. She lived close enough to walk if me and Carita held hands the whole way there. At Carita's we were allowed to jump on the bed and listen to music that wasn't on the radio and eat bananas dipped in chocolate on the lanai. Carita even had a pair of high heels. Once, for a sleepover party,

Mama T took Carita and me out for dinner and then took us to see a play. I didn't have anything as exciting as Carita to wear to a play, but she let me try on a pair of her heels and borrow a dress so we would match. The clacking sound the heels made against the floor in her bedroom made me feel fancy and important. I couldn't even remember what the play was about when my mom asked me, because I spent the whole time looking down at my feet and getting up to go to the lobby so I could clack around on tiles by the concession stands.

When I turned seven, Carita came to a party at my house way on the other side of town and gave me a mixtape filled with songs by our favorite band. We played the music really loud and sang all the songs at the top of our lungs and flung our pony tails around and around like we saw Gwen Stefani do on TV and pretended we were famous rock stars who could wear bikini tops as shirts and sing about being important and how boys were mean and stupid. Carita knew about everything. She knew about diets and divorce and dating and everything I wouldn't find out about until later. Her mother had gone on a diet to lose weight for her new boyfriend and the only things she ate were eggs and bananas and for two whole weeks, Mama T would shout from the kitchen, "Eggs and bananas, eggs and bananas - me tienes hasta el último pelo!" which Carita said meant she was going crazy. I don't know if her diet worked, but she always looked the same to me with kooky, kinky hair that stuck out all over the place and long skinny legs like Carita's. She was always smoking a Marlboro Light like my mom and pointing it at you when she told you to do something, or told you to go somewhere, or how you should be acting in her house. Mama T would open the door to check on us when I slept over and in the night all I could see was the burning end of her cigarette while she stood there and smoked, just

watching us. She would come over and touch us both on the forehead and drop a little ash on the floor then creep back out into the hallway when she thought we were good and dreaming.

We moved away after that. My parents picked a place that was farther away from the ocean and closer to a bunch of horses and cows and rancher men instead of little girls and palm trees. Carita and I spent the night before I moved at her place watching Practical Magic with Sandra Bullock and she made me be the red headed one because I'm so pale and she was so much darker. We made up spells that would keep us friends forever, even if we lived far away. We pretended to be witches like the sisters in the movie. Her with her long skinny legs and her hair all down her back and me with my freckles and my crooked teeth and all those letters mailed out from our new farm while I waited to hear back.

COURTNEY

The year that Courtney moved to town from Michigan, we were living on that ranch in the middle of nowhere with three chickens and three ducks and a rabbit named Peter. There was a pond in the middle and alligators that swam back and forth with one eye fixed on our dog, Leon Russell. Courtney was tan and pretty and had short curly brown hair and an older sister who listened to bands that were way cooler than the bands I liked and whose parents always made fluffer-nutter sandwiches for lunch with peanut butter and marshmallow fluff together between two pieces of white bread. Courtney wore brand new Nike's and shopped at the mall and had an expensive backpack. Her parents had an in-ground pool and she asked me to come over and swim once we'd known each other a few weeks at school. We both liked singing and dancing to this boy band that was everything to our small, silly hearts. Courtney's mother let us turn up the volume really loud in the car and didn't say much except to ask me how I liked living here and what my parents did.

Courtney was bright and sunny and my parents loved her. They let her come over on the weekends and spend the night even though we lived really far out of town and it took them a long time to drive her back on Sundays. We would stay up really late and talk about the boys at school, and she'd tell me about Chris in fourth period who she loved and wanted to sit next to on the bus during the trip to Sea Camp at the end of the year. I didn't really like any of the boys at school yet, but I pretended to like this boy named Dylan who was shorter than everyone else but really nice to the other kids and

told pretty funny jokes. She pulled out last year's yearbook from my shelf and flipped to Chris's class photo. She let her finger trace a heart around his picture and then she dropped pieces of popcorn into her mouth. "Do you think he likes me back?" she would wonder aloud, and I would sit, silent before responding with what I would do if I had powers like Sabrina the Teenage Witch and could talk to cats or change clothes so fast it'd make your head spin. My parents sat in separate chairs in the living room, speaking through a cloud of smoke.

LESLIE

Leslie lived across the street from us after we moved away from the house on six acres in Florida and moved into a two story yellow Victorian that was busy falling apart in Illinois. She was a little bit too tall and had long brown hair that was always ratty and went un-brushed because her mother worked overnights at the hospital in the next town over. Her house was right off the highway and just a block away from the library and the Methodist church. The first day we lived in the yellow house, Leslie came over and brought us an actual plate of cookies. No joke. The town we moved to had just 5,000 people living in it and I knew that because it, and every itty bitty town before it, had a sign in front that told us the population. As if it had anything to brag about. The cookies she brought us were good, too. She told us that her mom's name was Nancy and that Nancy worked in the next town over because the hospital here in our town was too small and didn't have room for all of the nurses. She told us her sister's name was Meg and that her Dad's name was Kevin, just like my dad. Then she told us the names of her two cats. The girl was open. She helped carry hampers of my clothes upstairs to my new bedroom and told me about the boy whose grandparents lived across the street from us and visited on the weekends to swim in their pool. She told me about David who lived just a couple of houses down across from the big funeral home whose dad was the school guidance counselor and who flirted with every single girl in the sixth grade. She told me to stay away from David. My mother watched us from the porch and smoked a cigarette, every now and then flicking the ashes into the grass.

MARCO

He sat in a wicker chair on the patio and crossed and uncrossed his legs while he watched a banana spider spin zig zags into the web that completely covered the screen door. The light at the back of the deep end of the pool made the web glow a green, blue color in the night, and he could see small bugs floating on the surface of the water. Marc Bolan on the record player singing “Hot Love” and “Teenage Dream” all warbly and warped from the humidity. He could almost hear the needle sluggishly pull through the moisture that was collecting on the vinyl.

Glass beads on necklaces and bracelets and long lace robes with fringe at the arms and the feet, so long they dusted the floor when he walked over to dry off the record and put on another one. When it was quiet, all he could hear was the buzzing of the animals in the dark. Tree frogs and toads down by the water that croaked and bellowed. Palmetto bugs that would climb over the concrete then fly up to the screen and nest in the corner where the patio walls met. “Life on Mars” played and pale toes dipped into the shallow end of the pool where his toenail polish would shine through the glow of the pool lights and the water made his toes look fat like the heads of the little green men in those alien movies he watched at night.

He smoked clove cigarettes and picked cumquats off the trees in the neighbor's yard for a snack. The house was Mexican pink with a cracked adobe front and tile pieces bent and broken around the stairs where they'd fallen off when the door slammed too

hard. The neighbor girl's name was Kimmi and she was six years old. She gave him tapes to play and held his hand when he picked up the cumquats to take home. Kimmi's mother didn't seem to mind and he liked the stories the little girl told. She had all kinds of theories about how things worked and where things were from and what would happen when she grew up, and he liked hearing those.

The inside of his own home was cool and dark and the walls were made out of great big pieces of rocks that were cut up and stuck together. There were french doors for all of the bedrooms and everyone could see right in. The sun was hot and his skin was so pale he'd burn when he went outside, so he wore a big hat with a wide brim when he visited the neighbors or went outside to pick fruit from the fruit trees. Mostly he waited until it was nighttime and wrapped his red hair up in a big purple turban and talked to the cats that slept on the tiki bar on the patio and mixed himself fruit cocktails with the fruit from the fruit trees and listened to stories on the record player. He read books about old cars and little witches and his long fingers got cuts from the pages sometimes.

When he finally went to sleep he would turn on a nightlight that projected the planets and the moons and the stars on the ceiling, and he'd stare up at those after staring up at the real ones for a long time until his eyelids were heavy and he couldn't force them open anymore. For a while he would dream.

MARIPOSA

Marla had been working for Big Six for about a month now and she didn't exactly hate it. She got paid for dances and housework, so she made double on days the other girls got lazy and called down that they were staying in bed or going into town for shopping or whatever else they did. Marla stayed at the house and saved her money, keeping it in a double pair of wool socks in the bottom of her suitcase. Nobody else knew it was there. She was going to use the money on a train ticket to Bonita Springs where her mother lived. She was going to go back home and kiss her mother before she got on a boat and went straight to Cuba. A round trip to Cuba only cost about \$50 with room and board and she was going to sock away enough to get there. She knew there was something waiting for her there that she would never find between the green room and the curtain at Big Six's place. She had to get out while she could before one of those boys from Daytona came down and put a big bracelet on her wrist and started calling her *baby* from a single seat in the front row. The last thing she needed was a man with a big heart and one too many Dark & Stormy's.

There were a few frequent visitors who weren't bad, but nothing was worse than getting landlocked with a guy who came home too early and left too late. She was going to find herself a hotel billionaire with an island named after him. She wouldn't have to dance on a stage again unless she really wanted to and the costumes were really good. No more pin pricks in her fingers or bruises on her ankles from bad shoes. She'd never have to dye her own feathers and she'd never have to lace her own corset. She'd have someone to do it for her and when she left the stage there'd be a big bottle of champagne for her

with a bouquet of fresh, pink roses. All she had to do was figure out how to tell Big. Six hadn't ever been too bad for her. Six had taken Marla in when she'd been living out of her suitcase down by Fisherman's Wharf with all those drunk fisherman and fry cooks. She had all she could eat in fried fish but too much of the grabby gnarled fingers that reached out for her legs and tried to grip her arms. She was a little scared and with nowhere to go, she headed to the whorehouse. Six had fourteen girls staying with her right now. Most of them came and went as they pleased. but there were seven or so that had been there with Six for a long time now. They were the high dollar earners with regulars who stopped in every time they came through town. They're the ones who kept the lights on and the ice boxes full.

Six had been running this place since before anybody could remember, and she kept a tight ship. The girls did three shows a night and afternoons were spent cleaning before rehearsal. You couldn't just walk right in and request a woman for the night, you had to watch the show and then pick your girls when their numbers were through. She also sold drinks at a long bar in the back and rented out the guest rooms for \$10 a night. Whatever else you spent was decided on once you got in there. Marla hadn't slept with any of the customers, but she was a pretty good dancer so Six let her stay on to keep the nightly shows up to speed and help some of the new girls with the choreography. Marla couldn't bring herself to let a greasy old salesman feel her up on a chintzy couch for a measly \$50 bucks. She wanted to wait until she got to her sky rise apartment where a handsome man with a mustache would fix her a drink and pull her robe off of her shoulder real slow. She wanted to sit by a white beach and sip on rum floats with her toenails peeking up through the sand. She wanted people to ask for her autograph.

She collected postcards from guests who would come through and leave them on the nightstand or forget them on the counter, and sometimes a good one from Cuba would come through. Each time she'd imagine herself in one of the windows in a building behind that big welcome sign and she'd wink to herself and wave her fingers slow and one at a time. All she had to do was get out.

She started setting a little money back after each shift she worked for Six behind the bar. Girls didn't make money off of slinging the drinks because the customers all paid for them directly when they closed out with Six at the end of the night, but sometimes they'd slip you a few bucks for a tip or if you left your hand a little longer on the table, let them hold it. She tucked this away in her sock each night and at the end after everyone else had gone to sleep, she'd take it out and count it. All she had to do was get to Cuba. Get there and let someone find her. Get there and be sitting on the right bus bench at the right time with the right face and hair. She practiced being coy and shy at first, then sultry and mysterious. She was ready for whichever situation presented itself. There's no way she wouldn't become a big, big star. She couldn't let herself think like otherwise. She couldn't let the doubt creep in at night before she fell asleep. She couldn't tune into the stories the other girls told one another about getting stuck out there with nowhere to live and begging for work.

Weeks of this. Night after night she counted and sang and kicked up her heels and showed a little leg and pulled drunks out the back alley with help from the bigger girls so they could sleep it off. She counted ones and stacked them up neat, then rolled them together and hid them away. She smelled salt in the air rolling fresh off the docks and fried fish for dinner. She slept. She saved \$200 and bought herself a bus ticket to Bonita

Springs. She put all of her silk underwear in the suitcase and all her rolled socks. She packed her books and her nail polish and her tassel glue to keep her rhinestone pasties on while she danced. She packed her good heels and her white gloves and left little gifts for all the girls under their pillows when they were out working the floors. She kissed Big Six on the forehead and told her she almost thought of her like a real mama, and that made Big Six tear up a little bit and she had to look away and act like it didn't give her any feelings at all.

Marla walked all the way to the bus station from the whorehouse on the corner of Marilyn Avenue with a big smile on her face and her suitcase pulling her a little on her left side. Everything was humid and the mosquitos flew at her arms to bite and make her itch, but she swatted them away and dabbed calamine lotion on her spots. She would take the bus from Port Charlotte across the Peace River and then on to Bonita Springs where her mother would be waiting with hot-dish and rum cocktails. Mother would try to convince her that she should stay there with her in the house and set up a room for her with its own door so she could come and go as she pleased, but none of it would work. Marla would be stern and hug her mother very hard so she understood.

It was so hot outside. Sweat showed through her dress under her arms and around her breasts. She dabbed at her forehead and her lips where the sweat and begun to bead and trickle down her face. She thought about Ava Gardner and Lucky Luciano smoking fat cigars and swapping stories at the Luciano's hotel and she pressed on, blisters starting at her heels.

It was only about sixty miles to Bonita Springs from Big Six's place and she'd already walked two when she finally made it to the bus station and took her seat on the

sticky plastic vinyl by the window. She set her suitcase between her legs and pulled out an issue of Cabaret Quarterly. It was a magazine for tourists and an article on Havana was dog-eared and thinning from wear. It called Havana “a mistress of pleasure, the lush and opulent goddess of delights.” She repeated the words quietly to herself, focusing on the syllables of each one. Opulent goddess. Delights. She stared out the window and watched fisherman walk to their posts on the docks to catch fish for their dinners. She watched little girls hula hoop in the street. She fell asleep.

The bus rocked her awake and crept to a slow stop an hour and a half later when she’d reached Bonita Springs. The bus station was just inside the little town and it was a short walk to her mother’s house. She could almost smell the warm food from her oven and taste the mint leaves that would be floating in the drinks. She could feel her mother’s skin, soft like tissue paper, on her own. Her hair stuck wet to her face and her knees were covered in dust. This wasn’t how she’d look when she was a Cuban princess, heir to a mafia millionaire’s fortune. She would be wearing a long white dress with an open back and Mariposa flowers pinned to her hair. She would never sweat or eat hot sticky, cheap food unless she wanted to. She would drink cool drinks all day and fan herself from the heat. She wouldn’t get blisters.

Her mother’s house was the last one in of a cluster of homes on the other side of a sign that read “Tropic Gardens”. Each house was a different color. Pink, orange, yellow, faded purple. Her mother’s house was blue. A faded greenish blue that looked like the water in a pool that needed cleaning. There were little fish painted on one side of the wall facing the street and little palm plants on either side of the door. Marla loved this house. This is where she’d spent most of her life until she’d run up to St. Augustine, thinking the

way out of it all was to head north, but she'd been wrong. The way out was to go back. Head south. Cross the ocean. Since then she'd been making her way back down and sleeping in strange places in all the tourist traps. For a while she'd slept in an orange grove in Sarasota, but the sticky fruit brought too many bugs and orchard people and the hot citrus smell made her sick.

Her mother ran out to greet her before she could even knock on the door. Her hands were covered in flour and egg and her hair was pinned up every which way, the ends falling and sticking to her face in the heat. She reached out her thin arms to her daughter and grasped at the air to pull her in like magic. Marla ran up to meet her and dropped her heavy case right there in the yard, falling into her mother's hug like all those hugs before this. She squeezed and squeezed like it was the last time she'd ever squeeze because she knew it just might be and she wanted to remember just how she fit. Her mother kissed her sticky forehead and ushered her into the house, quick as can be, and started mixing together something cool to knock the heat out of her.

They sat at the big round table in Marla's mother's kitchen and talked about the heat and the bugs and how big the citrus crop was this year and everything under the big Florida sun except for where Marla had been for the past two years and where she was going to next. Marla held her mother's hands in hers while she talked and only left them to lift her glass to her lips and sip on the sweet rum cocktail that was taking the pain right out of her feet and her knees, achy from the trip. The two just sat and talked and smoked a cigarette or two between food and pie and drinks and before they knew it, it was dark out and Marla patted her mother on the head. Marla said she might just go lie down for a while if that'd be ok, and she was asleep almost before her head hit the pillow.

While she slept, she dreamed of big boats with plates piled high with jumbo shrimp and ladies in bright green bathing suits jumping into fountains from tall ladders on the ship's deck. She dreamed of a man in a tight, white suit who took her by the arm and led her to a big stage surrounded by small, circular tables and at each table, a mariposa in a crystal vase. The guests filed in and filled the room with their furs and their big hats and their white gloves and sharp looking coats. When she sang, they applauded.

She woke to her mother sitting on the edge of her bed and staring at her, her hands outstretched and offering a cup of hot coffee which Marla eagerly accepted. There was a sweet, slow sadness that filled her face as she stared into her mother's, and the women sat together like that, drinking their coffee and whispering into the morning air about all of the things they would do together that they knew would never come true. After some time, Marla let her mother comb her hair and pin it back, tight against her head so the thick, muggy air wouldn't drag it back down around her face. She slipped her daughter a little money she had been saving under the sink just in case. Just in case never came with any regard to how and when and where it would become necessary or how it would be used. You never knew if "just in case" meant a sick child or a dying husband or a trip to the coast to see your daughter off one last time before she made her way to Havana, drunk on a dream. She cooed and pet and fussed over Marla's hair and face and clothes and even offered up a few of her finer things to fill out Marla's suitcase. Maybe she could make herself something nice out of the old, forgotten dresses that had hung in the back of closets since before Marla was born.

Marla didn't ask her to, but she accepted her mother's offer to go with her to the Miami coast where the boat would pick her up for Havana. Her mother said she had

business with her sister in Boca Raton anyway and she wouldn't hear another word of Marla making the trip alone. She was her mother after all, and if she couldn't convince her to stay she could at least see her off on this big important trip that lit up her eyes and lifted her spirits. Marla had never been a girl to stay in one place. When she was little she would sit in the yard and draw her adventures in the sand. She'd never been a girl with many friends growing up. She made friends with animals and trees and storybooks and the baker down the street but with other children, she was silent, and her eyes peeped through long bangs, suspicious and afraid. The other children were loud and confusing, yelling things that made no sense. They pulled each other's hair and tripped over sticks and cried out for their mothers when they fell down.

They rode in silence the two and a half hours to Miami. They'd packed sandwiches and glass bottles of coke for the trip and the Mexican sugar was making Marla nervous and jittery. She slept some, her head hitting her mother's shoulder and bumping up over potholes in the road. She sipped from her bottle and when the bus bumped, the glass hit her teeth and she worried they'd chip and she'd never be famous. She thought about every little thing in her suitcase that was settled between her knees just like her mother taught her. She saw the rolled socks, stuffed with money. She saw the thin cotton night gown she wore to bed every night. She saw the mint green dress for daytime and the dark green dress for night. She saw hair pins and tubes of lipstick and cold cream for her face. She saw the picture of her mother, small in its yellow frame, and envisioned it on the nightstand next to her bed in the place she'd sleep when she got to Havana. The sound of people yelling on the street pulled her from her daydreaming.

Families with their cars piled high with their trunks and their children in traveling clothes crowded the docks to the ferries that would take them across to Cuba. Tall palm trees lined the streets and old women with their hair tied up into handkerchiefs waved goodbye to their sons and daughters. Marla stepped off the bus in front of her mother, reaching back to help her down the stairs. A man on the street sold oranges and sunglasses and called out to them, "Pretty ladies, muy bonita, dos naranjas para las mujeres bonitas!" and they shooed him away and smiled. A man called from the ferry that it was time to board, and Marla felt her stomach open wide and eat the rest of her body up whole. Her legs felt hollow and her feet went tingly and numb. Her mother squeezed her hand and pulled her in close to whisper in her ear, "Home again, home again, jiggy jog" which was something she used to whisper in her ear when Marla was a little girl and they'd get home from a long trip and she'd kiss Marla twice on each eyelid.

Marla looked down at her hands and hoped they were pretty enough for her to be a star. She put them against her mother's cheeks and squished her face tight between them so her mother would laugh and throw her head back and open her mouth big, showing her straight, pretty teeth. Those were the teeth she had given Marla and Marla was grateful.

Ten minutes. Seven minutes. Five and then down to three and it was time for her to get on the boat that would take her two hundred and twenty-eight miles to Havana where everything would be hot and bright and good for her. She could feel it in the bottom of her stomach where the fear and loneliness had been living. Kisses on her mother's cheeks and final goodbyes and up the ramp to the second ferry deck, where she would sit and stare down into the ocean and look for fish that jumped up along the side of

the boat like the back home in Bonita Springs. Everybody looked back at the crowd to give tearful goodbyes as the boats left the docks except for Marla. She thought deep down about her mother and Big Six and the women at the whorehouse and the tall man with his fine mustache who waited for her in Havana, and the water swallowed up everything on the docks, small and fuzzy and nothing but little blobs of color then nothing at all. All that ocean in front of her and in back. Salt sprayed cool on her face and Marla smiled.

MOONEY'S OVER MIAMI

My father used to like to come home from a long day at work and sit in front of the television with a tall glass of ice water and his feet propped up in our old recliner. He would watch M.A.S.H and eat bowls of chocolate ice cream, the dessert dripping all over the rag he kept spread out over his lap, the bowl with his name in blue paint over the ceramic.

He worked at an airport near the coast fixing airplane engines. Mooney's were his specialty. The annual Sun'n'Fun fly-in was in Lakeland right around my birthday each year, and my father would work long hours tinkering over the insides of other people's expensive planes to get them ready for flight and inspection. Each year for my birthday I would get a new pair of tiny airplane earrings or a set of silver wings to pin to my jean jacket. On days where there wasn't any extra work for him at the hanger, he'd let me stay home from school and he'd take me with him to get breakfast at the airport diner or drive me around the planes in an old yellow golf cart they kept for the mechanics. The airport secretary was named Tracy, and when I came to visit she'd pull off long sheets of the bubble wrap they kept in a roll on the wall and set them on the floor for me to jump on. She said she didn't mind the loud popping sounds I made when I jumped and landed on the sheets.

My father was strong. He took care of our family by working all of the time, flying to faraway places to deliver parts and fix the planes himself. Every weekend he would wake

me up early and drive us to the flea market by the water to so I could pick out bracelets and turn on old lamps bigger than me with silk lampshades in bright colors. Once, we left the flea market early to eat lunch at this restaurant with a big porch overlooking the bay. It started to rain and a car pulled in front of us suddenly. It nearly hit my side of the car and when I looked over I saw my father's eyes, wide and afraid. His right arm flew to my chest to protect me from the impact, but the car stopped just before hitting us and in less time than it took me to blink my father was unbuckling his seat-belt and slamming his door closed. I watched as he ran to the other car and screamed at the driver, his finger jabbing at the door frame, his face turning bright red with anger. The rain made it look like he and the car were shaking slowly back and forth. When it was all over he got back in the car, getting water everywhere and he just looked at me and said, "Let's go get some burgers."

SAL

Sal and his family owned an Italian restaurant down by the water, but during the day Sal worked for my mother, filing papers at my parents' insurance business in the city. Sal had a desk in the back and sometimes when I was stuck sitting in the back of the office until my dad picked me up, I would get to hang out with Sal and he would teach me words to say in Italian. He'd read my stories. Sometimes he would bring leftover food for lunch and share with me if I didn't feel like going to the grocery store across the street. Sal told me he lived in an apartment by the bridge with his girlfriend and their cat, Olivia. He thought he might ask his girlfriend to marry him soon, and he showed me pictures of the rings he liked in a magazine he would bring in to work with him.

My parents liked Sal a lot too, and sometimes on Friday nights we would go to dinner at his family's restaurant and eat bowls and bowls of fresh bread dipped in garlic and olive oil until we were too full for spaghetti and meatballs. People who worked in the restaurant would sing and his mom and dad would kiss on the lips when they brought us our food and clap my dad on the shoulder and smile at us. I think when my parents saw Sal's parents hug and kiss like that it made them want to do it too, and they'd be so happy on the drive home, smoking cigarettes with the windows rolled way down and holding hands between the seats.

My brother was little so he always fell asleep right before we left the restaurant and my mom would carry him to the car while I walked behind with my dad and asked him how Sal's dad got to be an Italian restaurant owner and how long my dad was going to sell insurance and did he like it and when would he fly planes again. I asked him so many questions my mouth got tired, and he would turn on Michael Jackson real loud for

me for the drive home or Eric Clapton and play air guitar and my mom would laugh. The air always smelled a little salty and felt thick on my face and my hands when I stuck them out the windows. When Mom tucked us in together I would lie awake at night and listen to the lizards crawl around on the walls of the house outside and the sticky warm air made me sleepy. In the morning I would go down to the water with Dad and fish off the side of the pier before he had to go back to his job at the insurance company with Mom and Sal and all those leftovers, and I would go to school and wait for the bell to ring so I could take the bus to see them and write some more stories and maybe Sal would read them and maybe everything would be just fine.

SKY'S GRANDMA'S POOL

Mexican cola on the cement ledge of the in-ground pool at Skye's grandmother's home in Fort Meyers. She's lived there for as long as anyone knows about or remembers and she has starfruit trees in her front yard. Her pool is tiled with blue and white and the whole thing is just four feet deep, so you have to be careful when you jump in that you don't bump your head on the bottom and drown. Sky and me pretend that one of us is the lifeguard and one of us is the drowning person and take turns spitting up water and throwing our arms around before we sink to the bottom and wait. When it's my turn I flail for a really long time. I spit up water like a whale, and when I let myself slip all the way under I look up at the sky through the water and imagine this is my very last breath. This is the last time I'll see the sky or trees or my friends or the blue tiles of Sky's grandmother's pool. This is the last day I'll remember my mother's face or her hair or her perfect pink suit with the skirt and the pearl colored high heels. This is the last day I ever get to eat a starfruit. This is the last day I'll ride on the back of my dad's motorcycle. This is the last day I'll read a book. Then Sky's face is above mine and her arms are reaching out for me and her red one piece lifeguard swimsuit is wobbling back and forth because I've been down here for a while just thinking, and it's only four feet but I was sitting indian style and before I know it I'm up on the side of the pool and not in it anymore. Sky is kissing me, kissing me, kissing me, and her hot breath is on my face and my eyes and in my mouth and she's rubbing her eyes and we're both all wet, so I can't tell if it's water or tears but I'm coughing and when I finally sit up we hug each other for a really long time like that by the side of the pool before her grandmother comes outside with towels and sandwiches and braids our hair like mermaids. We don't tell her what game we were

playing when she asks, but she says our eyes look red so we have to wear goggles when we swim if we want to look around underwater. We hold hands while we eat our sandwiches and when she comes back she gives us dive sticks and sunblock and red and green goggles so we can see. We decide to play a new game where neither one of us is the lifeguard and we jump in quick and make sure not to go headfirst and swim back to the top before either of us sits thinking for too long at the bottom of the pool.

STORIES FROM MY BROTHER

On a Tuesday night I stayed up really late. Later than I had in a long time, and I let the curser blink and blink while I stared straight ahead. The room was quiet and cold because the heat only worked sometimes and not all of the time, and I waited for my brother to get home from work, unlock the door, throw his bag down on the armchair and crack open his first beer. Re-runs played and the laugh track kept me company while I was alone.

Two hours later we were sitting at the kitchen table blowing smoke out the open window and swapping stories like the one about the banana spider in the shed out back that was bigger than our jack russell terrier. Or the one about the kid we let rent the apartment by the lake and when he mowed our lawn he ran the lawnmower right into the fence. He was wearing those stupid cowboy boots and a red leather hat like a jackass. He was from somewhere near St. Louis. He'd never been on a riding lawnmower in his life.

My brother told the one about the two neighbor boys who used to come over to jump on our trampoline and catch lizards with us. Once, the littlest one's foot slipped through the trampoline's edge while he was jumping and he just sat there screaming and screaming until his mother ran over from the ranch next door and wagged her fat finger at us for what felt like forever. We hated those kids. I told the one about the treehouse that was down the big road and through the back swamp, over the ditch and through the tallest trees, past that old pink bus that had been there for god knows how long. The treehouse was just a couple of boards and nets nailed up to some thin branches but we were little so we could climb up easily and hide things up there for each other. Then there was the one about the horse that lived at the end of the road. Her face was all cut up and flies circled

around her ears and her eyes and we both just felt so bad for her. We would sneak carrots from the refrigerator and walk down the street on summer days when our parents were gone away at work and we were left alone. We would walk right up to her and talk sweet to her and when she calmed down she'd let us pet her nose. We didn't even care that there was goop in her eyes and one of them was all glassy and cloudy. Her skin was worn down on her knees and her jaw bones. We just snapped off pieces of carrot and let her take them out of our hands, our palms held flat like they taught us when we were really little. There were always hungry horses and runaway cows and farm animals that didn't have enough water to drink. The summer heat and humidity and all those flies and bugs as big as your hands. Everything was trying to kill you.

No wonder the horses were thirsty and sad and afraid of the shade with its snakes and its alligators. We weren't even allowed to play down by the pond in our backyard, because you never knew what was crawling around in the water just waiting for you. Summers were mostly spent indoors or if we went outside while our parents were gone, we stayed on the porch and caught tree frogs or let our feet dangle in the pool on the lanai. Everything outside the screen was dangerous and sometimes you could see snakes slithering their way towards the chicken coop and there was nothing you could do about it because you were too little and not allowed to go all the way outside or you might get bit. Inside was for pillow forts and movies and magazines and dress up and for cooking up things without recipes that sometimes exploded in the microwave. My brother told the stories and sipped on his beer and I blew my smoke out the window and drank red wine now instead of beer. We talked until 2am about how things used to be and how they were

now, and when I went to sleep I was happy to know he was safe and there wasn't anything in the water crawling around waiting to get him anymore.

THE WEIGHT OF ROCKS AND ORANGES

Erin liked to sit in the middle of the room with an apple resting on the top of her head. If she stayed very still and just took little hurried gasps of air every now and then, she could keep the fruit balanced there for almost an hour. Once, she saw a spider crawl across the kitchen floor while she was sitting there balancing and it made her scream. The apple fell off her head and hit her cat. He ignored her more than usual for a week.

When her roommate got up for work in the mornings, Erin would listen to the sound of the bed squeaking as her roommate swung her legs over to the side and let her feet find the floor. She would listen to the sound of the dog rustling under the comforter and wiggling with the anticipation of being let outside. She would wait until she heard the sound of the shower curtain being pulled aside, the water splashing against the tub, the door closing with a snap, then Erin would fly from the bed and run across the hallway to the coffee maker to get the coffee started for her morning commute. Her roommate had probably seen her in her underwear before, but in the vulnerability of the morning she would wait for privacy.

Erin's best friend was a waitress at the only good taco truck in town, and when she'd had a particularly rotten day she'd sometimes go there and order a plate of nachos for herself and cover the whole thing in grated cheese, crumbles of ground beef, little flakes of cilantro and big pillowy dollops of sour cream before grabbing a seat near the back and gobbling the whole thing down between sips of Negra Modelo and snippets of conversation when someone was on break. It was a good place to eat because it didn't have a lunch rush to speak of, the food was cheap and they gave you a lot of it. There was

a decent beer selection and her friend could get her the half-off employee discount if her boss wasn't there. She didn't like to eat in front of people and she'd been told that her desire to eat in solitude was weird. Most people think eating alone in the bathroom with your pants still on would be terrible. But Erin liked being alone. She liked to be able to eat without having to hold her hand in front of her mouth so nobody could see her chew. To her, these little rituals seemed commonplace. What had started out as a few quirks here and there, small compulsions that gave her comfort, had turned into necessary moments in her day. The way she made her coffee. Two scoops of the good stuff from the coffee shop down the street and six scoops of the cheap stuff. A little cinnamon sprinkled on top. Purified water. Equal parts Irish cream and half & half. Everything very particular. Erin hadn't always been like this. There had been a time when she was the type of person who would drink after someone or sing at a karaoke bar on a weeknight. Unpredictable. She couldn't pinpoint the exact moment when she started to shift, but it had been happening little by little for what she guessed to be the last three years or so. Her brother Ben liked to rock climb. He'd always liked rocks and when he was little he collected them by the thousands. Brazilian Agate, Crystal Clusters, huge Amethyst Cathedrals that looked like gaping purple mouths. He would line them up on his dresser and place the dark blue bags they were sold in neatly inside the top drawer in case he needed to cart them along on a family trip to the grocery store or to their grandparents' house. He'd pull them out of the bag and matter-of-factly explain to Erin what each rock was, where it had come from and how it had been formed. Sometimes she would find them on her nightstand in the morning and she'd know that he'd tiptoed all the way down the hallway in the middle of the night to leave it there. If Ben gave someone a rock, it

was a really big deal. She kept a small bowl of treasures on her nightstand and it sparkled with the rocks he'd left for her.

When she was thirteen and he was six she'd helped him pack an overnight bag and buckled in next to him in their parent's suburban. They rode in the backseat the four hours from Tampa to Lakeland and were dropped off to spend part of their summer vacation with their grandparents who lived in a subdivision where everything was the color of sand. Even the people. Two or three hours a day were spent plopped in front of the television watching Happy Days re-runs or the Muppet Show before they started to go crazy. Staying at their grandparents' house wasn't uncommon since they had made the move from Michigan last summer. Their parents were grateful for a break, but things had been shakier than usual at home. Ben didn't notice but Erin had been keeping an eye on the clock for months and each day their mother got home a little bit later. Each day her father's face looked a little more lined with worry and his shoulders slumped forward. She had only packed enough clothes for the weekend but she was starting to think they'd be gone a lot longer than that. Her grandfather was at work for the most of the day but Grandma was always there. She liked to make apple pies and cut long snakes of apple skin into a trash can by the sink some afternoons. Erin liked to sit on the stool that jutted out from the kitchen island and watch, sometimes kneading the dough for the crust and sometimes helping crack the eggs into a mixing bowl and adding a little milk for the wash. Her favorite part was sprinkling the cinnamon over the top at the end.

One day her grandmother asked her for a favor. The house where Erin's grandparents lived was at the bottom of a hill and at the top of that hill there was an orange grove. Hundreds of trees with low hanging oranges as far as the eye could see. She wanted to

know if Erin could take her brother and a brown paper bag and fill the whole thing up with oranges for fresh orange juice. Erin took her brother by the hand and was glad for an adventure. Ben had been chasing lizards around the yard and playing on an old broken swing set for days and she knew her brother needed something to do. Thick Florida grass that nobody had bothered to cut in months scraped at their ankles.

She stood guard at the opening of the hole at the bottom of the fence as her brother climbed through. Rows and rows of dark green leaves on twenty foot trees with dark craggy branches sprouted from the sandy loam. Everything smelled like over-ripe citrus. Ben had never seen anything like it before, and when she looked down to check on him, his smile had nearly split his face in two. Thick clumps of weeds sprouted from the ground and all along the path between rows, the sand was peppered with oranges. She took his hand and they started to search for the best fruit. The oranges without holes in them from bugs or a tear in their skins from the heat. When oranges rot, the tops of their skins start to brown and flake like paper and they turn soft. She and Ben squished a few of these between their fingers until they popped and the juices ran down their arms leaving them sticky. They filled the bag in an hour or two and headed back through the grove to the hole in the fence. When they climbed back through, Ben asked if he could roll down the hill to get home. It occurred to her that they'd been there for a week now and Ben was calling it home. He was only six, but still. She wondered when her parents would pick them up and take them back to their ranch with their dog and the trees by her window. Before she could say yes or no he had taken off down the hill, his thin body a blur as he picked up speed. He kept his arms over his face like she'd taught him and his

legs crossed at the ankle. She ran down after him, loping along so she wouldn't spill the oranges everywhere.

Covered in grass and smelling like dirt and orange juice, Ben slid open the glass door to the kitchen and grinned at his grandmother. She pulled off his shirt and sat them both at the table where she cut the first oranges into slices and set them in a bowl in front of them. They bit into the flesh of the fruit and let the skins give them orange slice smiles, juice seeping out of the sides of their mouths while they laughed.

Her grandparents had been dead for years now and Erin missed them but it felt faraway. She remembered things like that, with Ben and the orange trees but she didn't remember the sound of her grandmother's voice. She couldn't remember if she'd ever gotten any important advice from her or what her grandmother liked to do for fun. She knew she had liked to smoke Virginia Slims and sip tea out of really old tea cups she collected and would set out on the shelf of a white hutch. Erin looked at the picture of her brother she kept on her nightstand. After she'd graduated and moved in with her roommate, she'd purchased some new furniture. She hadn't wanted to keep anything from before. All of the little rocks she'd kept as a kid made a circle around the picture of Ben. In the picture he was standing on the side of their grandparent's pool, soaking wet and pouting. She had warned him about playing near the water so of course, right when she'd turned her back, he'd fallen in. When he climbed out she remembered he just stood there by the edge, his lips in a pout and his shoulders slumped so much he looked like an old wrinkled man. She remembered running over and kneeling to look him in the eye. Right then, someone had snapped a picture. She didn't know just why she liked this one so much, but it was her favorite.

At her day job she stuffed newsletters for an online job board into envelopes for four hours at a time. There was a big oak table in the break room and a water cooler and a box full of cheap snacks. The monotony of stuffing each newsletter into each envelope and running a line of glue along the flap kept her mind off of things. It was precise. It was easy. They paid her eight dollars an hour to do it and the woman at the front desk made coffee every morning. It didn't quite pay the bills but she made a little extra donating plasma on the weekends. In the afternoons when she was done with stuffing envelopes, she sat in her car in the park and ate sandwiches while she watched people play tennis. She peeled back the crusts while she ate and made piles in her passenger seat. When she was done eating she tossed them out the window for the birds and drove home, making sure to get there before her roommate was off work. Sometimes the solitude of her bedroom was easiest, surrounded by her things. Surrounded by photographs.

Her parents had split up after it happened. Her brother had been taking the bus down from college. He went to a private university out of state so he could study architecture, and even though her parents had tried to convince him to stay close to home, he made a choice. She didn't blame him. Erin had stayed behind to help her father run their business. He ran a little mechanic's shop out their garage when they were growing up that had flourished in the early '90s. Tourists used to flew down to Florida from up north and fell in love with the palm trees and the beaches and the bullshit. All they saw were the sandy beaches and the suntan oil, slick on thin, trim bodies. By the time she and Ben had started staying with their grandparents in Lakeland, the business had grown up and ate all of her father's time. He called it Grove & Son Mechanic. He fixed airplane parts and rebuilt engines for all of the private plane owners that lived on the coast. There were so

many of them then. Small airports popped up all over the place and her father cashed in on his military training as an airplane mechanic to keep the family afloat. By the time Erin and Ben were old enough to go off to college, her parents had made enough money to buy a place on six acres with a pond. Erin had gone to community college to be near her family when her grandparents got sick and just in case her parents made good on their promise to separate, she wanted to be near her mother. She would need Erin's help.

The Christmas that Ben agreed to come home was an important one. Erin's parents had agreed to give it another shot and it seemed like they meant it this time. Neither of them had ever packed a bag and gone to a hotel. Things weren't quite there yet, but there had been late night arguments that, while whispered, carried the weight of Erin's worst fears. Their parents had been high school sweethearts and twenty years together was too many. Ben called ahead and said he had a two day break before the weekend so he'd be able to spend four days with the family. Erin hadn't seen him in almost a year and she was excited. She still lived at home and while her parents were at work she spent the time between work and school getting his room ready. She took his rock collection out from the top drawer of his dresser and set them out the way he used to like. She realized he might be too old to care about this now, but it made her feel better. It made her feel like there was still something to look forward to. She washed some sheets and made his bed. She fluffed the comforter and switched out the old, worn pillows with fresh ones. She vacuumed and put some books she thought he might like on the nightstand. He had always liked to read. While she was cleaning she remembered how he used to like to sit in the big chair in the den and listen to her read out loud to him. A series about a dog that

acted out the adventures of literary characters was his favorite. Particularly *Treasure Island*.

Her mother cooked all day in preparation of Ben's arrival. She made a pot roast and arranged the carrots along the edges in a crisscross pattern. She laid rosemary over the top and sprinkled it with paprika. She made peanut butter fudge and even bought a six pack of beer. Her parents had never been big drinkers but every now and then she saw her father take a nip of something that he kept in his bottom desk drawer while he worked. Her father sat in his La-Z-Boy and watched M.A.S.H re-runs while he waited for Ben's bus to arrive. It was slated for a 10 p.m. arrival and the whole family sat waiting in separate rooms hoping for a unity that would only come when they were all together again. The phone rang.

The funeral had been a blur. Family drove in from all over the country to attend. Erin knew that Ben had wanted to be cremated. They had talked about it once. It was right after one of their father's clients had died in a plane crash in the southern marshlands. His body had washed up in a swamp. Ben had said that he wouldn't have wanted to be seen like that. All loose skin and bloated like a dead fish. He wanted to be a part of the dirt right away. Erin stood by the open casket all afternoon shaking hands and accepting condolences. She waited until her parents had hugged everything they could hug and the priest helped load the flowers into their car. She waited until the cookies and juice had been cleared away and the organ had been covered back up with a thick red cloth. She waited until they closed the casket and asked if she had anything else to say before she pulled the dark blue bag of rocks out of her pocket and placed them all around his head.

Brazilian Agate, Crystal Clusters, Amethyst Cathedrals that looked like gaping purple mouths. Rays of light surrounding him.

Erin liked to be alone. She liked to count the tiles while she sat in a chair at the dentist's office and count them again when she was done with her appointment just to make sure they were all still there. She called her mother four times a day. She kept sixteen pens in a coffee can on her desk. When one of them was gone she wondered if her roommate had stolen it and waited until she was gone to track it down, only to find that it had rolled under her bed. She brushed her top and bottom teeth with an equal number of strokes. Twenty-six each. She moved her brother's picture a touch to the left and rolled a lint brush over her comforter. She didn't sing out loud and she clicked and unclicked her seatbelt five times before she started the car and drove to work in the morning. She put one of Ben's rocks in her pocket every morning and rolled it around in her palm during the day like a pair of dice, squeezing the sharp edges until they drew blood.

LUNATIC FRINGE

Every day they came home to his apartment and cooked dinner together in his small kitchen and put the leftovers in old sandwich containers, then into the fridge. They cleaned up the dishes and poured themselves a glass of red wine and sat together on the sofa in the living room and talked about what they'd read in the news that day or what they might like to do that weekend. Every night they finished their glasses of wine and left them by the sink before changing into their pajamas. They stood side by side and brushed their teeth with two different kinds of toothpaste. He liked the kind that tasted like oranges and she liked the kind that burned a little. They looked at each other and at the sink and sometimes just right into the mirror at themselves and brushed their teeth for a previously agreed upon time of exactly three minutes, so they could be sure to get their mouths really clean after the wine and the dinner. After that, she'd follow him to his bedroom and they'd lie under the covers and talk to each other a little bit more, each making the other one laugh until their hands were in each other's hair and their legs were on top of each other's legs and then sometimes before they fell asleep they'd have sex and breathe into one another's mouths in the dark. He always fell asleep first. When she could hear that his breath had steadied and a soft snore escaped his mouth, she would stare across the room at an armoire that was left open.

On one side of the armoire there were rows of shirts hanging neatly side by side. On the other side were shelves and on each shelf was something special. The top shelf was for photos of his family. Two sisters and two parents and five big happy smiles with their arms stretched out around one another at some kind of dinner. All the faces turned up toward some stranger holding the camera out and saying "1, 2, 3....cheese!" at an

Italian restaurant somewhere. The shelf below that had a couple of journals he'd kept over the years. They were full of songs he'd written and thoughts on movies he'd seen. He shared those with her and they'd laugh together about the old lyrics and she felt like he trusted her. The third shelf though. That shelf held birthday cards, photobooth strips, and a book with a big heart on it and in the middle it said "Love you, -Megan". She had been dating him for seven months now and still this book sat on his shelf with a big heart on it and in the middle the words "Love you, - Megan" like it was nothing. Every other night or so after they had sex, she would roll over while he slept and look into the dark and the three words on the cover of that book seemed to jump right off and dance themselves into the middle of the bedroom floor and laugh at her while she tried to sleep. In the morning when the sun came up, they were the first thing she saw when she opened her eyes. "Love you, - Megan". Seven months and countless breakfasts and endless glasses of wine and thousands of kisses and slaps on the ass and showers and embarrassing trips on the stairs out front and three or four drives out to her friends' house in the country and they hadn't said, "I love you," but he had loved Megan.

Megan had been with him for a birthday or a holiday or a no reason, just because day, and had given him this stupid little book with cartoon characters on the front and this long squiggly gold font, and right on the cover in red sharpie she'd drawn a big heart and put it right out there that she loved him and when he unwrapped it, he had probably said it back. They'd probably kissed and touched one another and laughed together and made dinner and fallen asleep with their legs like spiders all bent up and fuzzy in bed. She didn't want to be the kind of person who let a little thing like a woman who probably had long perfect hair and straight perfect teeth and long, perfect legs bother her. She didn't

want to be the kind of person who woke up each morning and stretched her body forward and up and reached over to him, waiting to hear what she knew was already true but couldn't confirm and so let herself fill up with doubt. She didn't want to be made insecure by three words in a heart written on the cover of a book on some shelf.

On a night when the weather was warmer and the snow didn't gather in the dark places and freeze, she decided they'd go out. The book had become too big and she could see it in every room in his house. She'd spent three nights at home that week and with her head covered by a pillow and her cat lying on her stomach she could still see the book. She needed to physically shake Megan and her devil-may-care emotional outpouring loose from her mind and fix this the only way she knew how. Liquid courage followed by word vomit followed by a fight followed by sleep. They had dinner at home and they rinsed their plates and they called a cab and headed to a bar where their friends were waiting and the drinks were cheap and they could be out together instead of inside with the book and all her feelings. She called some people she hadn't seen in too long and they found each other in a warm place on a side street downtown. She ordered red wine and he ordered whiskey and they clapped their friends on the back, and laughed about things that had happened since they'd last seen one another, and when she stepped outside to smoke a cigarette, the book was staring her right in the face. There he was. Leaning over the railing onto the street and talking with a woman the way only two people who have seen each other naked can talk to one another.

She was tall, but not as tall as him. She had long, brown hair and it curled perfectly into itself and blew a little bit in the wind as it fell across her face and onto her shoulder. She had long, perfect legs and they were accented by perfect boots and a

perfect skirt, and when she laughed she crinkled her nose just a bit and it was lovely. Damn, even she wanted to sleep with Megan. She looked down at her own shoes. Her pale legs were covered up with tights and over those, a bright purple dress with flowers and a black leather jacket with scuffs on the elbows and a couple of stains on the back. She was suddenly very aware of her roots showing through the bleach on her hair. She was suddenly very aware of her nails and how long it had been since she'd last had a manicure. She was aware of how long it had been since she'd had a wax and she was positive that Megan had a vagina that was tidy and perfect and she probably whispered "I love you" and didn't make it weird. She could smell the cigarette on her own fingertips and was disgusted. Instead of interrupting them, she decided to go inside and order another glass of wine and ignore what was building up in the bottom of her stomach and making their way to her throat.

Later, on the cab ride home, he held her hand and his long fingers trailed over her knuckles and he leaned in to kiss her on the neck. She pulled away. "You are stunning," he whispered and she could hear the cab driver chuckle. "I love that dress on you," he told her and the cabbie let out a full, and loud guffaw. She snatched her hand away and folded her arms over herself and stared out the window, feeling his hurt from the few inches of space between them. It was a shitty thing to do and she had embarrassed him. Why was she like this? She wasn't that drunk, but she felt warm and annoyed and she could feel every glass of wine sloshing around in her stomach and bulging out in rolls through the fabric of the purple dress she now hated and wanted more than anything to burn. They sat in silence the rest of the way home.

When the driver pulled into the lot, she basically bolted before he had even stopped the car and in a matter of seconds was up the steps and unlocking the door. She couldn't drive herself home and she wished she'd asked the cab driver to take her there, but more than anything she wanted to rip that book off of the shelf and throw it on the floor and demand an explanation. Why was this book here? Where was the birthday card she had given him two months ago with the silly drawing of that cat and the clever little note she'd written inside? Why wasn't that on his shelf of special things? Why hadn't he said "I love you" and why was it so important to her? She opened the door and lay down in the middle of the living room. She closed her eyes and heard him come in behind her. She heard him hang up his keys on the hook by the door and take off his coat. She heard him kick off his shoes and pull his hair out of its ponytail. The scratchy and swoosh of his long hair coming down. She felt the pressure change on the carpet as he stood over her then finally lay down next to her and found her hand with his. She heard him let out a few long, thoughtful breaths and waited for him to ask her what the hell was going on. But he didn't. He leaned forward and she opened up one eye to look at him. He stood up and poured her a glass of water from the kitchen. He held it out to her and she took it and sat up to drink. He reached out his hand to her and she took it and they went to the bathroom to brush their teeth. He took the bobby pins out of her hair and put them in a dish on the counter. He brushed her hair with his fingers and kissed her on the neck. Everything in her softened. They brushed their teeth for exactly three minutes and stared into the mirror and sometimes at one another. She followed him into his room and they crawled into bed where he held her and instead of giggling and tossing their legs around one another they

breathed quietly and the room was heavy. She faced the wall this time and fell asleep before he did. He traced the words “I love you” into her skin with his finger.

SYLVIA

The marble countertop reflected the compact cases and perfume bottles that were lined up on either side of the sink. Sylvia washed her hands and dried them with the towel hanging from the ring on the wall to her left. She opened up her bag and dropped in an expensive bottle of polish, three or four of the lipsticks from the drawer to her right, a pearl compact case, a vial of perfume. She carried the bag into the room across the hall and opened the door to the closet before crouching down on her tiptoes to enter the combination to the safe stored in the back. The lock clicked open and she pulled five bundles of cash out and a diamond necklace and layered them neatly in the bottom of her purse. \$5,000 dollars and whatever the necklace was worth. Ten, maybe twelve thousand dollars. That would be more than enough to get Sylvia to the coast and then out of the country before anyone would notice what had happened. She snapped the bag closed and stepped quickly and quietly through the hall and over the body that lay motionless between the kitchen and the dining room. As she opened the door, she looked back across the room and blew a little kiss. She'd always wanted to do that ever since she saw it in a movie when she was a little girl. It would be hours and hours before John's wife would be home, and by then she'd be long gone.

Sylvia had grown up in Van Nuys about a half an hour from West Hollywood where she stood now on the bright front porch belonging to a man who lay dead in his living room. She'd been the kind of little girl who spent hours walking around her neighborhood and stopping in stores down the street from the laundromat where her mother worked to try on clothes, practicing for the day when she'd be ridiculously wealthy. She would wave to the shop keeper and traipse back to the section of Miss Fancy's Emporium where there

were rows and rows of heels and corsets and long, silk dresses on tall, white mannequins that wore wigs and feathered hats and had pursed red lips. Sylvia would try on the shoes, always two or three sizes too big for her little girl feet, and walk up and down the carpeted aisles, stopping in front of the full length mirrors to admire her reflection. She would blow herself a kiss, imagining it was an admirer she was kissing, one of hundreds who couldn't get enough of her grown-up pout, and her perfectly curled hair. Every day after school she did this, and some days she would stay and help Miss Fancy close up shop. Fancy had taken over the shop when she was barely grown up herself. It had been her grandfather's and before it was the emporium filled with trinkets and jewels and costumes, it had been a home to oddities that he had collected over the years and in the back, a pawn shop. That's how Fancy had come upon so many of the costume pieces she would become known for. When Sylvia was old enough to fill out one of the lace-up corsets and the high heeled shoes fit her feet just right, she took some money from under her mother's mattress and bought them for herself. She packed the rest of her things into an old trunk and left Van Nuys.

All her life people had told Sylvia how pretty she was. "What a pretty little girl," they would say and reach out to touch her face and comment on her eyelashes. Her large eyes would look them up and down and her face would stay perfectly still. Her mouth would turn down in a scowl and she'd jerk her head away from their eager and unwelcome hands. She'd never really liked to be touched. "There's something wrong with that girl," her mother's friends would say while she sat in the doorway of her bedroom watching them play cards after dinner. She hated the cheap plates they ate their food off of. She hated the mundane television programs her mother watched on her days off. She hated

the smell of bleach and fabric softener that filled up every inch of their home. She'd been dreaming of the day she'd run away from home for as long as she could remember and when the day finally came, she felt nothing when she threw the stolen money into her bag and walked down the sidewalk toward the emporium.

Miss Fancy lifted her head in greeting when the bell chimed and Sylvia entered the shop that day with high heels and corsets and money on her mind. Sylvia's mother hadn't liked her daughter to wear a lot of makeup and thought that her collection of magazine cutouts was silly. She had wanted her daughter to take a respectable job. Go to school. Wear skirts that hit her below the knee. Meet a nice man at their church and raise a family. Sylvia's plan was very different. In her mind she saw herself as the mistress to some schmuck she'd met at the tiki bar on a Friday night. He was a big-wig lawyer who represented actresses in Hollywood and he'd tell her how beautiful she was over one too many cocktails until they'd stumble together to a car out front and he'd take her to a hotel so his wife wouldn't find out. She'd do this over and over until she met the right one. Till she had something good on him. That's where she'd picked up John.

John hadn't been all bad. She'd met him at a club called Good Times at Davey Wayne's on a Thursday night. He'd been nursing a cocktail at the end of the bar for over an hour before he finally got the courage to come over and ask for her name. She'd given him a fake one, of course. Mary was what she decided on. Something light. Something flirty. Something a little like a girl he might have known when he was young and not a married man with too much money and too many problems. She could tell he was rich because his shoes were expensive. Men who wore expensive shoes always had other expensive things. If the price of something that went on a person's feet was no question, there was

no telling what else they kept hidden away in lock-boxes and safes in their big huge houses in Hollywood. She lifted a shoulder and accepted his offer to join him for a drink in the VIP lounge upstairs. The doorman tipped his hat to them as they passed through a curtain and through a locked door to the patio overlooking the rest the bar patrons. Nobody could see them and this gave John the perfect opportunity to put his hand on Sylvia's knee and tell her all of his problems. She listened intently and when she excused herself to the ladies room to powder her nose and reapply her lipstick, she decided that John would be the perfect mark. He was funny enough, and he had a lot of money and a despondent wife who spent a lot of time at her sister's in San Francisco. He was lonely. He was wealthy. He was perfect.

The two of them started making a habit of going to Good Time's every Thursday night like clockwork. He put her up in an apartment near there and in no time the bar staff knew her and let her in straightaway when he called and asked if she'd meet him for drinks. He did this for weeks. Every time the same. He'd call. He'd send over a car. She'd be whisked over to Good Times or Ciro's and they'd sit and talk to one another until the barkeep told them it was time to leave. On nights when his wife was out of town, he'd come over to the apartment he'd picked out for her and they'd listen to records and drink a little, dance a little more. She'd keep pouring him drinks and filling up her own glass with soda water and a lime wedge so when he was ready to pass out in her bedroom she could slither out from under his arms and excuse herself to the patio in back where she would sit and smoke cigarettes and watch her neighbors coming and going into the morning. It was a night like that one when she met Lydi.

Lydi lived in the apartment directly across from her own. She had begun to notice that on nights when she stayed up late, avoiding John's sticky arms and guilty face, there was someone else sitting out there in the not so distant darkness with lit cigarette. The two of them shared enough nights on their respective patios until it finally got to Sylvia. She'd seen men come and go from the apartment and sometimes other women, but this woman in particular was the one who always spent her evenings outside in the dark and all alone. On a night when John's wife had come back early from her sister's and John was feeling particularly terrible and self-involved, he left Sylvia's early. She ran out of cigarettes and instead of walking down the street to the kwik-mart in the middle of the night, she stared intently at the apartment across the way until she saw the light go out and the flick of a lighter, the first dim puff of smoke. She walked outside and stood under the woman's balcony. "Hey stranger. Have you got an extra one of those?" she called up to the woman.

"That depends," the woman answered. "Have you got anything to drink?"

A new kind of pattern had begun to form in addition to John's visits. Sylvia brought over a bottle of whatever was left open once John had gone home and Lydi shared her cigarettes and her stories. She was a call girl. She wasn't one of the highest paid of course, or she wouldn't be living in this dump, but she made enough money and she planned to save enough to get out of this place and travel abroad. It was a sentiment that appealed to Sylvia. She was tired of John and his sad wife and his drool on her pillow in the morning and his suits that smelled like booze and olives. She liked the way Lydi wore her hair and all of her postcards taped up on the bathroom mirror. She liked her tight little wiggle dresses and her long red nails. She imagined the two of them

grifting their way across the globe until they'd made enough to go legit and wall themselves up in a big mansion in France surrounded by pet tigers and champagne. It was time to make her move.

She decided to bring Lydi in to the deal. The tricky part would be convincing John to part with his money and let the two of them run off together with most of it. She wondered how important keeping the secret of their affair from his wife was to him. What she'd learned about John was that his wife was the reason he'd been able to break into the business here in Hollywood. Before he'd been sweaty and guilty he'd been handsome and caught the eye of a woman whose father ran an advertising agency out of San Francisco. He saw an opportunity and took it, opening his own branch of the firm down in Hollywood and making money off of halfway legitimate business deals. He had cheated on his wife before, of course, but there was too much hanging the fray for him to leave her completely. Sylvia knew all of this because she was a good listener and she knew how much John liked to talk once he'd kicked off his shoes and tossed back a few strong ones. Sylvia had never even threatened anyone before. She'd never had to. It wasn't that she feared the confrontation, her approach had always just been a little softer. She relied heavily on her downturned eyes and her steely grimace to keep away unwanted attention and if a man did get too close, she could always look to the bar staff for help or sneak away when their eyes wandered. For this though, for the kind of money she wanted to make off with, she would need a partner. Lydi was perfect. Lydi had no family and no friends. She lived alone here and here guests were more like clients. They wouldn't bother to come looking for her and she didn't owe anybody anything. What she did have was a certain charm and mystery that John would fall all over himself to be near. All it

would take was an introduction and then Sylvia could step back and watch the mess make itself.

Sylvia arranged for John and Lydi to meet on a Friday night when John was through with work. She asked if he wouldn't mind to come meet one of her good girlfriends who was in from out of town at a new bar that John hadn't been to before. He agreed and she reminded Lydi to only call her Mary when John was around. It seemed silly to have made up a name for herself now, John wouldn't be able to find her even if he did know her real name. She hadn't spoken to her mother in years and Lydi didn't have anyone to come looking for her, either. The women took the car John sent for them to a secluded place in a shady neighborhood. John wouldn't like the looks of it, but she and Lydi had picked it for its close proximity to his home and the fact that they wouldn't have to take any main streets to get there when they were ready to leave.

Phase one was going well. Lydi and John seemed to be hitting it off, or at least it was clear that he was attracted to her. He leaned into her when he spoke and touched her elbow when she raised her glass to her lips. Sylvia enjoyed watching them and wondered if this is what she looked like when she was flirting with a man. Two or three hours passed and John had begun to try and slide his hands up the slit in her skirt. He was grabbing for Lydi and Sylvia's hands and holding them up to his face, pressing them against his cheeks. He was drunk and in another hour or two he'd be completely useless. John turned to Lydi and asked if she would give him a cigarette. She held out her cigarette case to him and watched him pluck one from the clean rows. While John stepped out to smoke, Lydi and Sylvia talked strategy. They needed to get John into the

car and drive to his house just a mile or two away. They needed him to stay good and passed out while they robbed him blind and made off with his money and his pride.

Sylvia got up to go check on John outside while Lydi settled up at the bar. She found him slumped against a potted plant outside with the cigarette dangling from his mouth and his belt buckle undone. She almost felt bad for him when she looked down at him like that.

Doubled over and sweating in the California heat. His shirt stuck to his body and she could see the stains on his shirt. The feeling ended abruptly when Lydi joined her outside and told her to go get his car, she would look after him for a minute. Sylvia walked around to the parking lot in back and climbed into John's lemon yellow Skylark. It was his wife's car, really, but he had been driving it while she gone. Sylvia drove around front to get them and shoved open the passenger door for Lydi to pull John into the backseat. The two of them threw John's arms over their shoulders and lifted him into the car. He was a dead weight and Sylvia's mouth curled into a disgusted sneer as she felt his perspiration soak into her own dress. After what felt like eternity, they managed to slip him into the back, half on the seat, half off. She put the car in drive and they headed back to John's place. Her stomach tightened. Lydi took her hand from across the passenger's seat. They were so close to leaving this place. One burly business man stood between them and a life of luxury on the lam.

Getting John inside the house would prove to be a more difficult experience than getting him into the car. Lydi and Sylvia pulled him by his feet, his belt buckle catching on the crook of the front seats where they met the floor. One of his buttons snapped off and fell into a forgotten place. They gave it one good tug and fell backwards, his head hitting the concrete as they freed the rest of his body from the car. The conk on the head seemed to

jostle something else inside of him and John bolted awake, his hand rushing to meet the back of his head where blood had started to rush forth and trickle down his neck. “God dammit, that smarts, how the hell did I get here, who the hell is this bitch,” he yelled, pointing at Lydi. “John, baby,” Sylvia answered, “This is Lydi, my friend from out of town, you remember.” “Yeah, yeah, ok, yeah,” he muttered at her under his breath. “Let’s go inside, I need another drink.”

Lydi and Sylvia helped John inside and Lydi offered to fix him a drink while Sylvia dressed up the wound on his head. She went to the bathroom to look for his first aid kit and stared at herself in the mirror. All those rows and rows of neat pink and red lipsticks. Pearl compact cases and vials of expensive perfume. She took her time looking for the bandages and the hydrogen peroxide. John would be fine and she wasn’t so sure she wanted to be in the kitchen with Lydi for this part of the plan. She ran herself a bath and found a bottle of bubbles under the sink. She poured the bubbles under the spout and let the water fill up to the top of the tub. Sylvia took off her dress and hung it on a hook on the back of the bathroom door next to John’s wife’s robe. She soaked and soaked in the tub until instead of voices and ice clinking in the glass, she heard nothing. Then she heard a loud thud and a crash and the sound of glass shattering. Sylvia winced and pictured John’s body as it crashed into the glass table behind the kitchen counter. She could see Lydi standing over him, wiping her hands and pouring the rest of his drink down the drain. Sylvia drained the water from the tub and dried herself off with one of the big, pink towels from the rack against the wall. She put a few drops of the expensive perfume on her wrists before taking a few items from the counter and tossing them into her bag. She

put on her dress when her skin was dry and soft and smelled like crushed flower petals.

Then she walked across the hall to steal John's money.

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