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The Boys with the Spare Keys

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THE BOYS WITH THE SPARE KEYS

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Katelyn Elizabeth Grisham

May 2019

THE BOYS WITH THE SPARE KEYS

English

Missouri State University, May 2019

Master of Arts

Katelyn Elizabeth Grisham

ABSTRACT

As human beings, we are constantly losing something: our keys, our wallets, our credits cards, or the mate to our favorite pair of socks. But what if you lose something that cannot be replaced, something that will impact your life in a permanent way? This collection looks at what it means to lose something life-altering; our sense of self, our friendships, our planned futures, our grasp on reality. Some things cannot be replaced. From trust fund kids to a dad preparing a Christmas tree for his daughter, this collection will explore the idea of what we can (or cannot) afford to lose and how to move on from our loss. These characters are all trapped, in many ways, and some may cross paths, whether that hinders or helps their progress. These stories will play with magical realism, drawn from authors like Karen Russel and Robert Olen Butler, and my first inspiration, George Saunders, who always includes a little fabulism in his stories that I like to take inspiration from.

KEYWORDS: short story, loss, magical realism, friendship, childhood, parenthood, loneliness, illness

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THE SANTA WHO RUINED CHRISTMAS:

HOW MAGICAL REALISM CAN BRING CREATIVITY INTO STORIES OF LOSS

By analyzing several of the short stories that I simply cannot let go of, I find myself settling into a common theme in my writing: that of characters losing something. Initially, this was not something I had been doing on purpose, but subconsciously. If I had my fiction examined, my therapist would likely be very concerned about my view on the world. However, I continue to produce these stories, oddly also usually fitting in the male point of view, because it seems to come naturally to me. I find it really interesting to see how people can react to loss—whether that be a physical object, people (to death or otherwise), or a relationship (romantic or otherwise). Within this realm of losing things, I do like to play with form, especially magical realism.

Not to sound conceited, but my favorite magical realism story I have written is entitled “The Santa Deal.” Brian, the protagonist, is a divorced father driving on Christmas Eve to buy a Christmas tree to appease his daughter Bettie. He only sees Bettie on the weekends, as his relationship with his ex-wife (LouAnne) is very rocky, and he thinks that a Christmas tree will really bring him and his daughter closer. As he is driving, he is quite literally in a car accident with Santa’s sleigh, which causes him to total his vehicle and be abandoned in a corn field. It is clear that Brian has never seen Santa in his life, but he is not surprised to find him once he gets out of the car, hinting that Santa is a known, real figure in this universe. Santa makes a deal with Brian—if Brian watches the reindeer while he goes and fetches some items to repair the sleigh, Santa will fix Brian’s car and get him a tree. Hence the title: The Santa Deal.

While Santa is gone, the narration slips between Brian observing and exploring the crash site, and his own reflections of his childhood with an abusive, overzealous father (Harold) who was obsessed with finding religion before he died of Parkinson's (which eventually he does, due to complications with choking on communion bread.) Child Brian has seen cults, molesting priests, all the fakes, and does not believe in religion as an adult. In a way, he sees Santa, now, as a savior. Certainly, Santa caused the crash by landing on Brian's car, but he can finally save Christmas for him and save his relationship with his young daughter, Bettie.

Over the course of several classes and reading numerous examples, I have come up with my own definition for magical realism. There is a realistic world, one readers can easily place themselves in; however, something in the world is off/wrong/out of the ordinary. The strange or abnormal addition to the text usually leads to a grand metaphor. In John Gardner's *Art Of Fiction*, he says,

A common and usually unfortunate answer [to what shall writers write about] is "Write about what you know." Nothing can be more limiting to the imagination, nothing is quicker to turn on the psyche's censoring devices and distortion systems than trying to write truthfully and interestingly about one's own home town, one's Episcopalian mother, one's crippled younger sister. (17)

He also emphasizes "Whereas the realist argues the reader into acceptance, the tale writer charms or lulls him into dropping objections; that is, persuades him to suspend disbelief" (24). For me, creating the balance of realist writing with that of the more magical—without crossing into fabulism—is what makes good magical realist fiction. In my story, readers must believe that Santa is real, because all Brian says is: "Sure enough, Santa Claus was sitting in the middle of the cornfield, spread-eagle, his beard and red suit dirty. His reindeer were struggling in their restraints. One or two had broken free, flying above the rest like a mobile." There is no fainting

or screaming or questioning everything—the reader is to act as Brian does. Santa has entered the scene, and he is real in this universe.

Another scholar and writer, Robert Olen Butler, highlights the motivation or wants of characters in his craft book *From Where you Dream*. He says, “yearning is *always* part of fictional character. In fact, one way to understand plot is that it represents the *dynamics of desire*. It’s the dynamics of desire that is at the heart of the narrative and plot” (63). For my story, Brian is yearning to make a nice Christmas for his daughter, as part of his “No Fuck-Ups Christmas Plan.” And in order to obtain his desire, the aspect of magical realism enters, perhaps showing that Brian is so far from getting what he wants, that things must turn mystical.

Butler writes:

If I say art doesn’t come from the mind, it comes from the place where you dream, you might say ‘Well, I wake up screaming in the night. I don’t want to go into my dreams, thank you very much. I don’t want to go into that white-hot center; I’ve spent my life staying out of there...’ But this is the tough part for those two hours a day when you write, you cannot flinch. You have to go down into that deepest, darkest, more roiling white-hot place...you can’t flinch, can’t walk away. That’s the only way to create a work of art. (20)

In this way, writers are able to play with magical realism. While my stories do not deal with horror, and I do not wake up screaming in the night, I do like adding in magical elements because it challenges me as a writer. I do not want to flinch. In “The Santa Deal,” not only is Santa real but, to put it in kind terms, he is a cheating, horrible man. When he returns from his repair trip, he fixes his sleigh and informs Brian that he does not have enough magic to hold up his end of the deal. Brian, infuriated, is helpless as Santa flies away to deliver joy to all. The confrontation scene reads:

“Oh, well, my boy,” Santa walked over to his reindeer and Rudolph certainly didn’t try to attack him. “You see, I’m running late on deliveries because of this

unfortunate incident, so I don't think I can use the magic to give you what you need."

Typical, typical, typical. Of course this happened. LouAnne always pounced on any opportunity to condemn Brian of being a bad father. His lateness, missing dance recitals, smelling like smoke, having a shitty car that always broke down, the list went on forever. Brian didn't think she remembered Harold. She remembered the idea of him. What he wanted to be.

"No," Brian said. "No, no, no."

"I'm awfully sorry," Santa said.

"You son of a bitch!" Brian wanted something to throw. He had nothing except a straw cross he made sitting at his feet. "You lying bastard!"

Santa only twirled his hand, magically fixing the broken and cracked pieces of the sleigh and also putting the reindeer back in place. That also shed glitter. "If only you'd been on the nice list, son. Or at least tried more."

Brian let his arms fall to his sides. "Bettie," he said. "Bettie. My daughter. What list is she on?"

"She's on the nice list, for now," Santa said as he climbed aboard the sled. He let out a jolly laugh, even though it certainly was not the right occasion for one. "But we'll see if she ends up on the same list as you."

"I'm trying," Brian said, but Santa was already gone, his reindeer launching into the sky and the sled lifting with it, like a roller coaster ascending the hill for the big drop. But this lying sack of shit would only keep going up, keep on bringing happiness, keep on doing what everyone expected him to do.

This scene emphasizes what is really going on: a father worried for his daughter does not see much of and cannot have much influence over. He worries that she's going to end up like him, having bad luck followed by more bad luck, until she ends up on the "naughty list." Brian is trying, as he says, to be the good father, unlike his father Harold, and he's trying at this moment, this moment he can actually grasp, to give her a well-deserved Christmas Eve. But he fails because the magical element does not give Brian what he wants. If Santa, at least to Brian, is seen as this religious figure, able to help Brian past his sins, he fails him, much like the Christian religion failed him as a boy by not protecting him from his father. Anyone could have hit Brian on the side of the road and derailed his plan, but the fact that a semi-worshiped being did it is important to connect everything together.

As a writer, my number one inspiration is George Saunders. While I think Saunders often flirts with the idea of magical realism, I'm not sure his stories can directly be related to that. As for my theme of losing something (Brian losing the evening with his daughter), I think of "Victory Lap," my favorite short story from Saunders in his collection *Tenth of December*. Even though the point of view switches between three characters and two of the narrators are children, I think the ending resonates somewhere within me and inspires my writing. In this story, the children lose their innocence when presented with a kidnapping scenario, and the kidnapper/rapist loses his life by the end of the piece. What starts out as an innocent story—sweet Allison analyzing her parents' party and coming up with multiple, imagined scenarios, quickly becomes serious and horrific. When Kyle, the neighbor of Allison who is the victim, saves her from being taken away in the van, the narration goes:

Want a skull gash on top of your existing skull gash, big man? You think I won't?
You think I—
Easy scout [his parents in his head], you're out of control.
Slow you motor down, Beloved Only.
Quiet. I'm the boss of me. (23)

Kyle kills the man, at least in my reading. And thus he loses control of his childhood, his life, his freedom. While Brian is only in the process of losing his daughter and their relationship, Kyle has lost so much more. But I am still able to connect the similarities.

At the end of "The Santa Deal," the scene echoes something Brian stated earlier, how he bought Bettie a snow globe because as a child his parents collected them and he cherished them. He liked to look at them "just so" and pretend he was at whatever destination the globe held inside. The scene goes:

Once Santa was gone, Brian went back over to his car. He pried the driver's side door open and popped the trunk. Going around to the back, he picked up the small paper bag he left in the corner of the trunk, protected by umbrellas and spare

blankets he kept back there. It was still intact, even after everything. He took out the snow globe resting inside. Hawaii. [...]

He picked up the snow globe, one eye squinted a little, and looked at it just so.

Another one of George Saunders' stories that deals with magical realism is his classic story "Sea Oak" from his short story collection *Pastoralia*. This short story is about a struggling family led by the boss of the house—the great aunt. The narrator, who works at a pilot-themed strip club, is trying to financially make ends meet. The great aunt dies, is buried, only to be resurrected as this horrific, offensive zombie figure that comes back to live with her family, adamant on making sure they have everything in order before she finally rots and falls apart. That, for sure, screams magical realism.

The end scene, when Bernie, the great aunt, literally falls apart and thus dies for real this time, reads:

For every hundred bucks I make, I set aside five for Bernie's stone.

What do you write on something like that? LIFE PASSED HER BY? DIED DISAPPOINTED? CAME BACK TO LIFE BUT FELL APART? All true, but too sad, and no way I'm writing any of those.

BERNIE KOWALSKI, it's going to say: BELOVED AUNT.

Sometimes she comes to me in dreams. She never looks good. Sometimes she's wearing a dirty smock. Once she had on handcuffs. Once she was naked and dirty and this mean cat was clawing its way up her front. But every time it's the same thing.

"Some people get everything and I got nothing," she says. "Why? Why did that happen?"

Every time I say I don't know.

And I don't. (125)

If any other story inspired my writing more, it has to be this one. The fact that it does have an absurd aspect and humor (the great aunt shouting "Go show your cock!" so the narrator can earn more money) and yet ends on sadness is something I find in my writing. I would never compare myself to Saunders in any way, but I admire how he always seems to accomplish this with his more humorous pieces. Things start out fine, things go wrong, things end somberly. I

definitely would argue my writing takes the same form. Bernie has lost her ability to live a full life. She feels as if she's been cheated, and the narrator, the living, does not know what to say to her. She has lost something she may never take back, and Saunders uses magical realism to accomplish this plot arc.

While I try to link my theme of losing something within magical realism for "The Santa Deal," along with other stories I have written, I hope to elevate them to a new level where not only is there a magical element, but that magical object emphasizes the very thing that the narrator must lose.

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THE BOYS WITH THE SPARE KEYS

After three weeks and one day of living in my new apartment, I came home from work and someone was sitting in my living room watching the television.

He looked around my age, maybe a few years past college, with curly blonde hair like little springs in a pen when you unscrew the top and pull out the innards. He had broad shoulders and a bright orange shirt, the kind that might reflect light.

I had never considered someone else being in my apartment. I didn't like the idea of roommates. I liked being alone. There's that saying that you're your own best company, or whatever. Or is it worst company?

"Uh," I said as I watched the man sitting on the futon I *borrowed* from my parents' basement.

The guy turned, looking over his shoulder. "So. You're the new guy," he said.

"Uh," I said.

The guy stood up, having a good four inches on me. My mother always said I had a body built for a soccer player, slim and lean. She enrolled me in a soccer program with the YMCA when I was five. Our first game had been in winter, and I'd spent the entire time crying on the sidelines, clinging to her leg. My dad waited for us in the car while my mom encouraged me to join my teammates—which I never did.

"I'm Tyler," he said.

I stared at his hand. "Uh..." I said. "I live here."

Tyler kept his hand out, and I shook it. Only then he spoke. "I figured."

“What are you doing?” I asked, glancing at the TV. It was *Frasier*. My mom watched it a lot. Daphne was yelling at Niles about something, her accent making the whole scene somehow amusing, the laughing track rolling. Or were there real people in the audience?

“I didn’t have a place to crash tonight,” Tyler said as I looked back at him. “Listen.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “I used to know the guy who lived here before you. Name was Peter. Cool guy. Used to sell me pot for next to nothing. Such a cool dude.”

“Okay,” I said. An advertisement came on the TV about a vacuum that turned into a mop. I glanced at the picture of Gret on top of the TV stand, grinning her huge grin, all teeth shining, as she had her arm looped around me, smiling less, as we showed off our college graduation gowns.

Tyler shifted his weight and I looked at him again. “Peter moved away. Got a job translating for a school in fuckin’ Argentina. Can you believe that?”

“Uh...” I said. “No.”

“Yeah, but, like, he left this key, see.” He dug into his pocket and produced the aforementioned key, dangling it in front of me. It was attached to a keychain with a little, wooden Buddha. “So, I thought I’d come by. See who took up his spot. I knew the idiot property manager wouldn’t change the locks. You met him, I’m sure. Balding guy, gut like some kinda Santa? I’ll let you in on a secret, bud, that hair ain’t real any more than my dating profile online.”

I remembered when I was little and watched *The Shining* with my dad. After the movie ended, I asked him what ghosts were like. My dad said they didn’t exist. I asked him what Jack saw at the hotel. My dad said probably ghosts. I asked how that made sense, ‘cause ghosts weren’t real. He said. *That’s fiction, son.*

I poked Tyler in the chest, hard, with my index finger.

“Dude!” He stepped back, rubbing the spot. “What the hell, man?”

“Is this a joke?” I asked.

“No,” Tyler answered. “Can I stay here tonight—please, man? Come on. My roommate and I are fighting, and it’s a shitshow there. Like, we were about to start throwing dishes at each other. I need to lay low for the night.”

I remembered when I watched *Batman* when I was younger. The silly one with the real actors that I couldn’t remember the names of. There was always some villain ready to take advantage of the innocent. I asked my dad if murderers were going to come to our house. My dad said maybe. I said how much maybe. He said, *anything is possible*.

“Are you here to rob me?” I asked. I stuck my hand in my pocket, wrapping my fingers around my phone. I had never used the emergency call feature—one swipe away—but I could now. Maybe the police would use grappling hooks. But this guy didn’t look like the robbing type.

Tyler’s pupils dilated. “Hell no, man! I just need a place to sleep.”

I let go of my phone, drawing my hand slowly out of my pocket, as if we were about to duel. But I hated Westerns. Dad loved ‘em. I thought I’d judge this guy a few more minutes before I fired. “Okay,” I said. “Uh, okay. Yeah.”

“Thanks, man, thanks.” Tyler put his hand on my shoulder again, giving it a shake.

“You’re the dude, man.”

I didn’t fire.

...

The next morning, I woke up and two men were sitting on my couch and Tyler was in the kitchen. I smelled something burning.

“Shit, Tyler!” One of the new guys yelled, standing by the TV. He was skinnier than even I was—a real beanpole, this one—with greasy black hair and a large hook nose. He picked up the picture of Gret, squinting at it, obviously not *that* alarmed.

The other dude was half-asleep, eyelids drooped, staring at the blank TV. He had a beanie pulled over his long hair with a picture of a rainbow-colored unicorn.

“Uh,” I said as I walked further into the room. I unceremoniously grabbed Gret’s picture out of Beanpole’s hand, holding it to my chest and looking around the corner into the kitchen. Tyler was balancing on one foot, one hand holding a smoking pan under the sink faucet, water splashing onto the counters and the floor, while his other hand fiddled with the dial on the stove. “My dude!” Tyler said, overly cheerful as his face looked illuminated in a thin layer of sweat. “Good morning. Thought I’d make breakfast, ya know? To say thanks for letting me crash. That futon is seriously awesome, man. But, like, you see —”

“Tyler can’t cook for shit,” Beanpole finished. “Who is in that hot chick in the picture?”

“No one,” I said. I watched Tyler.

“I looked online, okay?” Tyler said, catching my gaze only for a moment. I finally heard the click of the stove dial finding the off position, and he dropped the pan, now sizzling quietly, into the sink. I peered over the soaked counter and could not tell what he was originally making, the entire bottom of the pan had a layer of black goop. “Rachel Ray posts videos online. Don’t you guys kinda think she’s a babe?”

“If she could cook for me, totally.” Beanpole sat on the couch now that the impending danger was over. He scratched his crotch and yawned before propping his feet on my coffee table, his sandals covering the few skiing magazines I housed there. I’d been thinking of saving up and going within the year. My parents used to take me skiing as a kid, until they got too old

and my mom watched some documentary or movie about a young boy falling and nearly dying on a slope before being kidnapped—still on the slope—by some dude who murdered him in the connecting woods. And Dad thought my paranoia was weird.

“Sexist, dude,” Tyler said about the Rachel Ray comment. He left the sink running and walked around the counter to the adjoining living room, which connected to the adjoining hallway where I still half-stood, half-balanced to see into the kitchen. He sat down next to Unicorn Beanie, who fully woke up with a snort.

“Well,” Beanpole said, “guess that’s breakfast.”

“Uh,” I said, “I’m guessing you guys knew the guy who used to live here, too?”

“Oh, yeah, Peter,” Beanpole said as Tyler nodded so hard I could almost hear the bones in his neck cracking. Unicorn Beanie stared at the television, in a trance. “Great guy. He’s teaching kids in Argentina now, you know.”

“I heard,” I replied. “How long are you staying here?” I glanced over all three of them, even though I assumed Tyler was their chosen leader. I stepped back and carefully placed the picture back where it belonged, right above the TV so I could always see both the television and the frame from the couch.

“Oh, not long, bro,” Tyler said, shrugging.

...

That afternoon, I came home from the store with three bags of groceries—paper only, as my mother taught me to *save the environment!*—and the only occupant in my home was Unicorn Beanie. He was sleeping on the couch, but sat up like a dead corpse when I slammed the front door behind me.

“Hey,” he said as I looked at him. “Tyler and Zander went to work.”

“Hi,” I said. I didn’t even know he’d noticed me this morning. I was imagining Zander equaled to Beanpole, unless there was another spare key owner. “What are you still doing here?”

He looked around as if that question baffled him. “Fell asleep watching Animal Planet. Did you know that sloths grow algae on them?”

“Algae?” I asked. I could feel the coldness of the milk jug in one of the bags stinging my forearm.

“Yeah, cause they don’t move so fast so they’re kinda like a sitting rock, so the algae just grows on them, or something.”

“Oh,” I said.

“It’s pretty weird.” Unicorn Beanie straightened his unicorn beanie. “To think they’ve survived this long during our whole evolution thing. I guess it’s those claws.”

My parents never let me invite people along for our skiing trips. They said they wouldn’t be responsible for anyone’s kids getting hurt (or later “kidnapped and murdered” as my mother would specify), and I only had one friend in high school and college, anyways. Her name was Gretel. Yeah, like the fairy tale. She always said her mom must have been high on pain meds when she filled out the forms. But Gretel went by Gret, which I’m not sure is any better.

But the real irony was that it wasn’t a witch that killed Gret, but a drunk driver, which was maybe even more cliché in some twisted, dark humor kind of way? Isn’t that always the case with people dying? The drunk driver having a slight concussion while the victim, who was sober, is left mutilated? That’s what Mom said when it happened a few years back. A few weeks after we took the graduation picture together.

“What’d ya buy?” Unicorn Beanie asked.

“What?”

He pointed to the bags I realized were still in my arms. My forearm was numbed. “Just some standard stuff,” I said.

“Got any veggie chips?” he asked.

“Uh,” I said. “No.”

He looked really distraught at this. “Pete used to always buy veggie chips.”

“Pete?”

“Peter.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“What is he teaching the kids in Argentina?” I asked.

Unicorn Beanie stared at the brown bags. “I don’t know. He never said. Just said he was going to *change the lives of the youth* or some motivational-poster bullshit. I think Peter took one too many pills when he signed up for that.”

“But he had to take tests and stuff, right?” I asked. “They’re not just going to let anyone do that.”

“Yeah,” Unicorn Beanie nodded. “Guess you’re right.”

He continued to stare at the bags, so I asked if he wanted to help put them away. He moved so slowly that I checked the back of his sweatshirt to make sure algae wasn’t growing on him.

...

Mom called that night as I tucked myself into bed with my headphones in. Tyler, Zander, and Unicorn Beanie were in the living room playing what sounded like a very intense game of Pictionary. Or charades. I kept hearing random nouns shouted, so I hoped that was the case.

“Hello?” I answered, pulling the headphones free.

“Hi, honey,” Mom replied. “Sorry to call so late.” It was 8:00. “How’s the new apartment?”

“ZEBRA!” (maybe) Zander yelled. I leaned over in bed, my fingertips barely able to skim the doorframe enough to push my bedroom door closed.

“It’s good,” I said.

“Settling in okay, then?”

“Yeah.” I said. More muffled shouts from the other room like *robot* and *gardener* and *Peter that one time he got too high*.

“My son, up-and-coming in that big city,” Mom said in that very Mom-like way, tilting her words like she was cheesing it up. “Are there a lot of people?”

“ROCKET PROPELLED GRENADE,” answered from the other room.

“Too many,” I said.

“Aw, honey.” Mom lowered her tone, ridding herself of the cheese. “Remember what we talked about?”

She had lectured me a few nights before I left home, with Dad silently reading the paper in the La-Z-Boy placed in front of the fireplace, about how I needed to *branch out more*. Make friends. Go to church groups and meet girls. Maybe go to the library and start reading something with award stickers on the front. “Yeah,” I said.

“It can be hard,” she said. “To meet people.”

I closed my eyes, listening to more guesses from the guys in the other room. “Yeah.”

“—after Gret, you know,” Mom said.

“Yeah.”

“It’s just been…”

“Yeah.”

“I can come visit,” she said. “Stay the weekend? Maybe convince your father to come.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’m fine.”

After we’d hung up, I walked into the living room. Unicorn Beanie was standing still, his eyes widened as he faced the futon.

“Deer in the headlights!” Tyler yelled. Both he and Zander were standing. Zander had his fists clenched like this game would decide the fate of their lives.

Unicorn Beanie didn’t answer.

“Owl,” I said.

Unicorn Beanie turned, so slowly he really was like an owl turning his head around, except not quite as far. “Yeah,” he said.

“Dude!” Zander said, all three of them now staring. “Nice one!”

“Get over here, Pete,” Tyler said. “It’s my turn.”

I didn’t correct them. I went and stood by them in front of my futon.

...

They stayed at my apartment for three weeks. I don’t know if they really liked me, or just wanted a replacement. They only slipped up on my name again a few times (Zander saying “Peter, dude, you have got to lighten up,” and Unicorn Beanie saying, “Pete, I love my nickname”) but usually just *dude* or *bro* or some other placeholder for me would suffice. I didn’t tell them what my name actually was.

I told Mom about them. Lightened them up a little, left out the drug stuff, the bad qualities. It was like I wanted to write this story, how I met Tyler first in line to get coffee and

we talked about where I could buy a futon, how I met Zander when the waiter at a restaurant switched our orders, how UB (I decided the full nickname would blow my cover) had been friends with Tyler and tagged along with the four of us. Mom ate it all up, and I could almost hear her licking her lips at the end of our nightly phone calls.

I guess it felt kinda good. To be a part of something. To watch Animal Planet and see these weird, multi-colored pills that made me feel happy and relaxed and laugh more. To cook shitty dinners that at least weren't burnt to a crisp—I was short that one pan I was forced to retire because of the Breakfast Incident, which we always joked about. UB hung the pan on the wall as some sort of inside joke, something we could laugh about, while Tyler pretended to be offended, while laughing along, too. I told them about Gret, showed them all the picture, and they said how much it sucked and anytime someone dies it just sucks and the other driver should have died along with her. I told them about how my mom came to the funeral with me as support, while my dad flew overseas to meet with a client in London.

I knew it was weird; I knew I should tell them that they never should have come here, that *they* were weird for thinking a stranger would take them on like this but *I* was equally as weird for letting them stay. But we played games and smoked and swallowed those pills and maybe along the way it was just that...something. Something previously missing from my life. Something that maybe had once been there but was taken away by force.

...

One morning, I woke up, my mouth feeling dry and my head feeling like my brain had been squeezed out of my ears. I blinked around my bedroom, checking my alarm clock. I had my job at a call center around the block so I could walk 'cause I didn't have a car. But I didn't work that day. Last night, I'd told the guys about it, and all night we pretended to wear headsets, all

saying, *Please hold* and *We will be with you shortly* and *We're so sorry for the inconvenience*. I'd laughed so hard water came out of my nose and had landed on UB, who yelled and laughed and struggled out of his hoodie.

I went into the living room and it was empty. I didn't know what time it was. In the kitchen, I found a note on the counter, held down by an empty beer can.

Dude,

We got busted, man. Landlord found out we had the spare keys and we weren't supposed to. It's been fun, though, bro! We humbly thank you for the entertainment and the laughs. You're the man.

-The guys

I stared at the note, written in such sloppy script I could barely make out the words. Or maybe it was because I couldn't see right, my eyesight blurring.

I didn't know their last names.

I didn't know their phone numbers.

I didn't know where they lived. They always came here.

Maybe, I thought, they'll still come over. Losing spare keys doesn't mean I can't let them in.

...

One month later, as I burned some bacon, the edges as black as the pan that I had pulled from the wall, I understood they weren't coming back. I'd been a blip in their lives, a convenience, a futon, a TV with more than the basic channels, a fourth member to their games.

I remembered when I asked my dad how to make friends. People thought I was too quiet, never said the right things, left me alone at recess. My dad said to talk to people. I said I did. He said, *Man up*.

The bacon continued to blacken, and I thought of Gret, how she had left, too. In an equally permanent and unfindable way. I glanced at her picture on the TV unit, front and center, catching the shine of her teeth, her eyes dark from this angle. In my chest, I felt a pang. I had loved her. Still did.

My phone rang, and I took the pan off the stove. It was Mom.

“Good morning!” she said, cheery as ever. She’d been so proud of my false accomplishments. “Any big plans today with those boys of yours?”

I stared at the note they left on the counter, still sitting right where I’d found it. “Yeah,” I said. “We’ll probably do something later.”

“Oh, that’s great, honey, just great,” she said. “I’m so happy.”

“Yeah.”

“I just worried for a bit, you know? That’d you stay under your little cloud and...”

“Yeah.”

“But I think those boys really helped you come out from underneath that little rain cloud and into the light.”

“Yeah.” I picked up the burnt bacon, shoving it in my mouth. It tasted like ashes. “Is Dad around?”

“Oh, well, he’s busy in this office right now. He can call you later, though, if he has time.”

“Yeah.” I felt my face twist up, either from the bitterness of the bacon or something else.

“Well, I’ll let you go, hon, but I’ll call tonight, okay?” she said.

I hung up and ate the rest of the burnt bacon, burning my tongue, before I threw the pan away. The *clunk* as it hit the bottom of the trashcan seemed to echo.

A FAREWELL TO THE MOUNTAINS

"Maybe...you'll fall in love with me all over again."

"Hell," I said, "I love you enough now. What do you want to do? Ruin me?"

"Yes. I want to ruin you."

"Good," I said. "That's what I want too."

Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*

A Ferrari. No, a BMW. No, maybe a Porsche. Were those too cliché? Either way, it had to be a convertible. One with a top that goes down smooth and slick. One that celebrities drove. Maybe with those doors that opened upwards. Those were always on expensive cars.

It would be just that Ferrari/BMW/Porsche, and chilled, mountainous air. Maybe there would be, probably there would be, pine trees lining the road. Like Batman driving to his lair. Or James Bond going to a secluded mansion to sleep with his uncharacterized mistress.

"Herbert?"

Herbert looked up from his book, *The Farewell to Rising Suns*. Wait, no, *A Farewell to Arms*. That was it. Right.

His coworker/manager stood above him, hands on her hips and popping her chewing gum a few times like gunshots.

"What?" Herbert asked.

"Your break ended ten minutes ago; what are you still doing back here?" she asked him. She wore the same mustard-yellow polo that he did. It looked a little like baby diarrhea smeared

on a shirt. His had a hole in the collar that grew larger each time he took a trip to the laundromat. He liked to stick his thumb through the hole when he had idle hands.

“Oh.” Herbert stood up from the folding table in the break room, a space barely big enough to fit a table, much less the twelve people who worked for *Pumpin’ and Rollin’*. Earlier, he’d had to tell a confused man that, no, this was not some undercover porn store and, yes, the gas pumps out front were actually gas pumps and not whatever the man had thought they were (Herbert did not ask).

“Did you know,” he said as he pushed in his chair and began to follow his manager—her name was Grace, and he’d tried to get with her for months with absolutely no success—out the swinging, stained break-room door and into the gas station lobby. “Hemingway is such a great writer. Have you ever read anything I’ve recommended?”

“No,” Grace said, rearranging some Slim Jims near the front register. Bobby, the third and final member working that shift, was doling out change to an old woman with a small dog in her bag. The dog looked at Herbert and raised a lip, shaking so badly that it made the owner’s earrings sway. The three employees were all around the same age, twenty or so—Herbert liked to tell himself that it was romantic, somehow, the three of them working through this transitional time both literally and metaphorically. He hadn’t figured out the metaphor yet.

“Why not?” he asked Grace about the books.

“Because I don’t want to.”

“You could come over sometime. I could read you some of his stuff. It’s incredible. Totally revolutionary for his time period.”

“No.”

Herbert shrugged, grinned, and ducked behind the front counter. He slid the book next to his keys and wallet on a little shelf under where the register sat.

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains.

A box was sitting for Herbert on the shelf below the counter, full of sports drinks that had been delivered that morning. He took the box and made it back to the refrigeration section behind the shelves. He always liked it back there, in the small space, where he could remain hidden from customers, quietly stocking their drinks and watching hands reach in, receiving what he provided.

His breath fogging in front of him, he began packing in the drinks. There was another box of milk sitting to his right, meant to be stocked yesterday. As he continued working, he thought of what he had to do when he got off work at three a.m.: call Indigo (she always wanted him to call to make sure he “got home safe”), finish reading *The Farewell to Rising Suns*, and then stay up on the rooftop of his apartment on the bad side of town, watching the stars. People watched the stars. Watching stars was a thing people did. Usually, it just put Herbert to sleep.

As he finished stocking the sports drinks and began with the milk, he thought of the mountains again. The white tips, the sheer height of them. The fact that no matter where he stood, they would always be a looming presence, reliable in a way.

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains.

...

“Seriously?” his sister Clarice asked as Herbert sat down across from her in a small coffee shop the following morning, placing his book and black coffee down carefully. The steam

from the drink reached up in a beautifully aesthetic way that Herbert watched for a moment before sitting down.

“What?” he asked.

“Why are you still pretending to read that shit?” she asked, nodding at his book.

Herbert put a hand on his book, as if about to swear on it like those who were Christians did with their Bible. “I *am* reading it.”

Clarice blew on her Chai tea latte, her bright red lips puckering, and then asked, “What’s it about?”

“He’s a minimalist writer.”

“Cool. What’s it about?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” he said. “If you haven’t read it before.”

“Great. So, like, what’s it about?”

Herbert was not playing this game. Clarice, his only sibling, was a molecular biologist working in a huge lab that sat on the outskirts of town, always reminding him of some governmental, undercover institution. She wouldn’t appreciate a true revolutionary like Hemingway. “How are the folks?”

“Well, let’s see.” Clarice put her chin in her palm. “Mom’s drinking brandy, Dad’s drinking scotch. They had me over for dinner a few nights ago to discuss politics.”

“Interesting,” Herbert said into his coffee cup. Light reflected off the liquid and he wished he could look up and see patterns on the ceiling, like with mirror tricks.

“They didn’t mention you, don’t worry.”

“I don’t care.”

Clarice hummed. She sipped at her drink.

The clock ticked beside them on the wall, an old piece made out of car parts fashioned with clock hands. Across the room, on another wall, hung a painting of a caterpillar coming out of a cocoon. Not the most touching image to stare at while sipping a cup of joe, but Herbert thought it was charming the way the coffee place sold art from locals. Made the whole thing seem like they were some happy family all joined through a communal support.

Herbert's phone rang: Peyton. "Hello?" he answered, ignoring Clarice's look of disapproval and supreme judgement.

"Hey," Peyton said. Usually, she always said, *Hey baby*, but Peyton was still upset with him. Last week, during intercourse, he'd cried out Indigo's name instead of hers.

It did not end well for either of them.

She knew he dated more than one woman—she should get it.

His mother always said he had those "dashing good looks and charm," which sounded like something someone would say in the twenties. That was before the banishment. He could use that charm to get Peyton's forgiveness.

"What's up?" Herbert asked, putting a smile in his voice.

"Just at the mall with my sister. What are you doing?"

"I'm with Clarice. She says hi." Clarice flipped him the bird.

"Tell her hi."

"Will do."

Charm, charm, charm. "So, buying anything special at that one lingerie store in the mall? The one you like so much?"

"No."

"Not even something a little special? Maybe you can show me?"

Clarice shoved herself up from the table and walked towards the bathrooms in the back.

“No, I haven’t thought about doing any of that.”

“Oh, I see.” Herbert took a sip of his coffee to create a dramatic pause. “Ever the tease, aren’t you, Pey-Pey?”

“I was wondering when I could get my stuff,” she said.

“Your weed?”

“No.”

“Your T-shirt you left that one time?”

“I didn’t leave a T-shirt there ‘that one time,’ Herbert.”

Hm. Maybe that had been Regina. “What did you leave at my place?”

“The shit I have in my *drawer*,” she said.

“What?” Herbert put his coffee down.

“Listen, Herbert.” Peyton sighed long and low and a little wheezy. She suffered from asthma, and it was prime allergy season. “I’m not hanging out at your place anymore, okay?”

“Okay,” Herbert said. “I mean, I’ve tried to make it be the best it can be, despite the circumstances. We can just go to your place.” Her place was across town and would force Herbert to take the bus, but in the last year he’d memorized all the bus routes.

“I don’t want you at my place, either. I just can’t do this polygamous thing anymore. I’m done with it. I’m not on *The Bachelor*.”

“I’d give you a rose anytime, baby.”

Static filled the line for exactly seven seconds. “I’m picking up my stuff tomorrow. I’ll use the spare key if you’re not there. Bye.” His phone beeped at him, ending the call.

Herbert stared at the caterpillar more intensely, imagining what it must be like to confine himself into something so small and claustrophobic, and then to emerge and not even recognize himself.

“What’s the news, Herbert the Pervert?” Clarice asked as she returned to the table, nearly knocking over her cup of tea. Herbert put a hand on his book in preparation of the spill, but she corrected the cup just in time.

“I don’t like that nickname.”

“Well, I don’t like the way you treat women. So, we’re even.”

Herbert took a long drink of his coffee, feeling it burn his tongue and making his eyes water as it cascaded down his throat like lava. “Peyton just checking in,” he said.

“Which one is she?” Clarice asked.

“The one studying to be a teacher,” he said.

“Oh. Sure, yeah.” Clarice, Herbert knew, had no idea who he was talking about.

By the time Peyton had cleared out her drawer—while he had been at a shift at *Pumpin’ and Rollin’*—he’d told himself she’d never really existed, anyhow. Her drawer he filled with Hemingway essays he found online and printed, but never read.

...

In the middle of the night, he called his parent’s house, sitting on the fire escape outside his bedroom window where he got the best reception. No one answered. No one ever answered, or listened, or talked about anything real.

He looked at the stars, at the mountains in the distance. He thought he’d like to have a Mustang, not too flashy but still a nice ride.

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains.

...

At work a few days later, as he sat in the breakroom, his phone attempted to load an email. Herbert held his book and waited. It was from Harvard University.

Right before Grace came in and told him his time was up, the email finally appeared on his cracked screen:

Dear Mr. Stevenson,

This is Dr. Kenton Williams. I have spoken extensively with your father, my good friend, about your application and your letters of recommendation. I was surprised to check your records and only find an email from you to an advising professor in the literature department that said: "I don't need your university to be smart. Fuck you, Herby."

We are both concerned about you, since I was so impressed with your boyish wit and eagerness when I met you with your mother last year. I wonder if this is some sort of error, or if your email account was hacked. I would love to meet with you and discuss your future enrollment at our university. Your father's observatory should be built by then—it'll be quite the sight!

Sincerely,

Dr. Williams

"Herbert." There stood Grace, popping gum again. How her mouth worked like that to pop every bubble to the extent where it sounded lethal marveled Herbert.

"Read anything yet?" he asked as he followed her, slipping his phone into his back pocket. He wagged his book in front of her face.

She swatted at it and he dropped it, nearly stepping on it. To avoid doing so, he ran into the display of suckers, knocking the entire stand over. Bright colors flew across the floor like some spontaneous celebration was taking place.

Herbert picked up his book. Then he began picking up the suckers.

...

Regina took him to the biggest park in the city, bringing a charming plaid blanket and spreading it on the grass. It seemed like something Hemingway would write in a scene.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked him as they sprawled out on the blanket together, her head resting on his chest.

“You,” Herbert said, stroking her hair.

“I can hear your heartbeats. I’d like to count them,” she said. Regina studied literature at the university in town.

“They all belong to you,” he said.

She nuzzled her face into his shirt. Then she sat up, the sun striking her blonde hair as she looked back at him over her shoulder. “Need any more of my Hemingway notes?” she asked him.

“No,” Herbert said.

She smiled, all white, perfect teeth. She looked straight out of a modeling shoot. “You some sort of expert now?”

He felt his face flush. “I didn’t need your notes. I understood what Hemingway wanted me to know from the very first line I read from him.”

Regina laughed, throwing her face up to the sun. Herbert’s face grew hotter, but not from the beautiful woman in front of him.

“Really,” he said. “I’ve read all his stuff twice now.”

“Okay,” Regina said. She stood up, brushing off her shirt. “Want to get some ice cream?”

“No,” Herbert said.

“Aw, poor boy.” Regina looked down at him, still smiling. “Did I hurt your feelings?”

“No,” he said.

“Sure seems like it.”

He sat back. “Just had a spat with a friend. You know how it is.” He thought of his dresser, he thought of the letter from Dr. Williams. If he had the email as a typed letter, would he have burned it or stored it? He contemplated this imaginary dilemma. He decided it would have burned.

“A friend?” She cocked her head to one side.

“Well, no. Yes. Anyway.” Keep things brisk. Don’t explain. Hemingway would have hated all this emotion he was producing. “Do you ever have dreams of driving?” Herbert asked. Nature. Hemingway liked nature. Or so he’d heard.

“What?”

“Driving. On some roads.” He motioned towards the general direction of the mountains. He always knew where they were, like his mind had some compass buried in it, always pointing to what he wanted. And he always wanted the mountains.

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains.

“No,” Regina said.

A week later, he had another empty drawer in his dresser.

...

The air conditioning in his apartment complex went out suddenly one night, and Herbert felt entering *Pumpin' and Rollin'* was a sort of safe-haven. As he clocked in, he got a call from Clarice.

“Dad says you need to email that professor back,” she said.

Herbert hid behind the lottery card stand. “What?”

“I don’t know. That’s just what he told me this morning at brunch.”

“You had brunch with him?” He heard gum popping. Grace must be close by, ready to nail him for being on the phone while clocked in.

“Yeah. He’s drinking cider now. It was really riveting conversation. He talked about trimming the shrubs outside. Mom was silent, as usual. Lots of wine. But he brought up some email a professor sent you. Guess pops and this professor are best buds or something.”

“Oh.”

“I mean,” Clarice said, “you don’t have to email him. Again, I’m just restating what Dad said. I wish you would just go over there and talk to them. I think they’d come around and then I’d be out of this awkward position.”

“They told me I wasn’t allowed back in the house until I brought a college acceptance letter with me.”

“They were probably being dramatic.”

“Mom and Dad aren’t exactly performance artists.”

Clarice sighed. “Sure, right. They never pretend. Just do something, okay?”

Gum popped right in his unoccupied ear. “Off the phone, Herbert,” Grace said.

...

Herbert hid in the refrigeration section, taking extra time stocking the drinks. He took his book with him and read and reread the first page over and over until the words were jumbled in his brain, mashing together.

...beyond the plain the mountains were brown and bare. There was fighting in the mountains and at night we could see the flashes from the artillery. In the dark it was like summer lightning, but the nights were cool and there was not the feeling of a storm coming.

Why fight in the mountains? What was summer lightning? Was it different than in the winter? Surely, Herbert thought, he'd felt the feeling of a storm coming during the nighttime hours, not just during the day. And why the war? What war? Where are the metaphors?

He ripped out the first page and stuck it to the condensation on a container of orange juice and left it there. A few days later, he hadn't sent any emails, and he found that the particular orange juice with the page stuck on it had not been sold.

...

It felt strange only seeing one woman. He'd grown up seeing his father have multiple affairs that his father somehow believed he kept secret from his kids and wife. His father could only come home with so many lipstick stains on his clothes and so many panties his mother found while doing laundry and set on the table the next morning, like a morbid placemat, for everyone to become aware of the situation. His dad knew she did this, but kept on, as if wondering where the breaking point would be set.

Even though no one was allowed to talk about it. Even though no one was allowed to talk about *not* talking about it. No talking, only the basics.

Very Hemingway.

His last love, his last girl—Hemingway had many wives, too—Indigo. She liked to wear long skirts and had hair that always curled, especially in the rain. She went to protests and painted signs. He'd never joined her. Herbert didn't like to commit to any particular political view, or religious view, or life view. He just stocked drinks at a gas station and read the same book over and over.

Indigo brought him to an open-mic night for poetry. Herbert sat beside her, nursing a beer, while a woman moaned and groaned about a rug. She swayed on stage, eyes half-closed, like some sort of possession experience.

Beside him, Indigo remained riveted. She nudged him a few times, her face showing the expression of *how impressive is this?* Herbert nodded until his neck began to crack with each bob. He felt like he was competing at the most low-key headbanging competition ever held.

Afterwards, Indigo wanted to know if she could come home with him. He'd printed off about a hundred pages of Hemingway essays—written by others—and knew they were strewn all over his apartment. He'd printed and printed until his printer ran out of ink, the final pages all spitting out blank.

He thought of the underwear strewn on his parents' table. Always lacy, always some sort of thong.

"I'm busy," Herbert said.

"Okay, maybe next week?" Indigo asked. As they stalled outside the joint, a few people passed them, laughing and smoking, likely a group of intellectual friends who had met at a university.

"I'm going to be busy for a while."

Indigo leaned against the brick of the building. "What do you mean?"

Herbert looked at his shoes. “I’m going to be busy forever.”

“What?” Indigo asked, but he left. She didn’t go after him.

The third drawer he emptied that night, laying out Indigo’s clothes on his bed and studying them for a long while. She had left a few pairs of underwear. He hid those at the bottom of the pile. He did not send any emails. He did not try to call his parents.

...

The walk to the mountains took about an hour and a half from where he lived. Along the way, he held out his thumb multiple times, only to see several cars zoom by without even looking. He’d never hitchhiked before. He wondered if he was doing it right. It was also three in the morning, and his eyes still burned from staring up at the starry sky at his apartment, waiting for something.

Finally, his feet aching and blistered, he reached a main road that ran between the mountains, splitting them down the middle like that one bible story about that one famous person splitting the sea—how was such a thing possible? Why do people believe in the impossible?

He looked up at the mountains and the pine trees and began walking up the road. Several cars, even though he no longer needed a ride, honked at him, but that was probably because it was hard to see around the turns and Herbert walked precariously on the side of the road. Most of the honking cars swerved violently to avoid him. Their flashes of headlights almost looked like they could be blasts of old, artillery weapons.

He got to a spot where there was a small clearing on the side of the road, and there was no barrier. He sat on the edge of the cliff. Somehow, he’d managed to find the spot of his dreams. The city sat beneath his feet, stretching out before him. He wished he could pinpoint his parents’ house. The sprawling hallways and wings of his childhood home would look like a

labyrinth from this height. The front lawn and surround property like a mini-golf course. But it would be distant to him, even if he could float down and land right on the roof.

A Ferrari blew by behind him on the road, headlights blinding him for several moments. It took off around the bend.

He took out *A Farewell to Arms* and tried to read it in the moonlight. His eyes burned again from the strain. Or from the tight feeling in his throat, like someone pressing on his esophagus.

Missing the first page proved to be detrimental to his understanding. He read the second page and tried to find meaning, tried to find words that struck him, stood out to him, told him what to do.

To the north we could look across a valley and see a forest of chestnut trees and behind it another mountain on this side of the river. There was fighting for that mountain, too, but it was not successful...

He flipped through the pages, half looking for his name, or a note someone had left in the margins. The pages were all blank.

Closing the book, Herbert ran his thumbs over the book cover.

Then he chucked the damn thing over the cliff. He watched the pages flutter like a butterfly attempting to take flight, before the book plunged into the darkness below him and disappeared from sight.

THE SANTA DEAL

If Brian didn't have to take care of these fucking deer creatures, he'd be sitting at home right now, drinking eggnog and watching his favorite Christmas movie, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. His seven-year-old daughter, Bettie, argued that it was a Halloween movie, not a Christmas movie. Brian argued that it's a masterpiece that is watched both in October *and* in December. He could carve a pumpkin for Halloween of Jack Skellington's face, and for Christmas, sing the song about kidnapping Sandy Claws. A perfect mix. But that fateful evening just didn't appear to be written in the stars. Instead, he was babysitting reindeer. That hadn't been a part of his No Fuck-Ups Christmas Plan.

...

Some thirty minutes prior, he was leaning close to his windshield of his '75 Bronco, trying to find the turn-off that led to Pretty Piney Places, the only place in town that sold authentic pine trees for everyone's holiday needs. For years, when he'd been married, he hadn't wanted to go through the hassle of getting a real tree. He had a fake one shoved in a box up in the attic that he used after the divorce, one his cat didn't pee on and didn't leave pine needles embedded in the carpet until Valentine's Day.

All he wanted was the authentic Christmas tree to please Bettie. Originally, he'd been on his way to pick up any straggling, ugly trees leftover before he picked Bettie up from her mom's house. That way, it would seem like some fantastic surprise instead of a last-ditch effort to spread Christmas cheer and shit—we get to put the tree in the holder together and decorate it while watching *The Nightmare Before Christmas!* Wow! Such fun! Bettie hated the movie, not just because of the Halloween debate, but the Oogie Boogie Man made her cry when the seam

comes undone and all the bugs spill out. But it was the only Christmas movie Brian had, especially since he had only basic cable and she hated *A Charlie Brown Christmas* even more.

Changing the radio station off the shitty Christmas music that was on every single station to commemorate Christmas Eve, he wondered if the present he got for Bettie would be better than LouAnne's gift. She would probably get their daughter a damn iPhone or some shit. Bettie was already glued to Brian's laptop whenever Brian worked on designing brochures and pamphlets—there was a difference—for the tech company he worked for. She would cry and beg to play some online game with little sloths that climbed trees. All that was required to pass the game was Bettie hitting the space bar—usually a good punch with her fist—whenever the sloth started to wobble and almost fall out of the tree.

Brian really didn't think the game was mind-challenging and might be melting her brain instead. And what kind of morbid shit happened if the sloth did fall out of the tree? Would the game show its carcass on the forest floor? Or maybe it would hit a branch on the way down and bend at a horrible angle, scarring children with internet access all across the world.

With the flash of multicolored lights and the sound somewhat like a yelping dog, something collided with the roof of Brian's car. He thought for a fleeting moment of the sloth before the colliding became a scraping and his car was thrown off the road and into a ditch.

Brian blinked himself out of the airbag and sat back in his seat. He rubbed his forehead and mumbled a few curses to anyone who might hear them. When he lowered his hand, his knuckles hit the roof, which now had an odd indentation, ending only a few inches above his head.

He got out of his car, cold air swirling around him. His hair—always too long, curling around his collar—blew into his eyes. Between that and the shaking in his legs, he thought this

was the afterlife. He saw lights. Was this what people meant? What really lay at the end of the tunnel? His father never found out.

It sure as fuck didn't seem like it would be Santa's sleigh. Brian stepped around the car, his feet cracking against the frosted grass, and climbed the rest of the way out of the small ditch. Sure enough, Santa Claus was sitting in the middle of the cornfield, spread-eagle, his beard and red suit dirty. His reindeer were struggling in their restraints. One or two had broken free, flying above the rest like a mobile.

Brian rubbed his forehead harder, so hard the lights began blurring.

Santa saw him and stood up. "I'm so sorry, young man," he said in what was a certainly a holly jolly tone like the books he read to Bettie. "So, so sorry. My mistake. I thought we'd make it to Kansas City without checking the reins, but I misjudged."

"What the fuck?" Brian asked. "Look at my car!" He motioned to the hunk of metal, roof dented with sleigh-skid-marks across the top like some failed attempt at a repaint.

Santa stood, shaking his head. "I always knew there was a reason you were on the naughty list as a boy. That mouth you have. How many bags of coal did you get? I can't remember." He grunted, stretching out his arms and rubbing his belly. Straw stuck out of his beard.

Brian did not want to talk about the bags of coal his mother always used to throw into the trash with a pointed look at Brian like *See where all those F's on your report card and that fight you got into last week got you? See why I am constantly nagging you to stop being such a fuck-up?* Except she wouldn't use "fuck up." No, his mom, who had gotten perms every week until the day she died from the beauty shop around the corner of his childhood home, would have

remained as G-rated as possible. She used lots of *Golly geees* and *Gosh darns*. He was practically a stand-in child for Beaver Cleaver.

Santa waved his arms. “Brian, old chap? You with me, son?”

“Yes,” Brian said. “I was just reminiscing about all that coal. Thanks for that, asshole.”

Santa whistled. “Only proving my point, bud.”

“So, can you fix my car, or what, old man?” Brian asked. The two reindeer that had been flying now landed, one of them taking a huge shit next to Brian’s totally totaled car.

“Alright, well, you can see I’m in quite a pickle here myself, Brian, my boy.” Santa looked behind him and began picking the straw out of his scraggly beard. “I’m going to need some tools from home to fix this.”

“I’m so sorry that you’re in this predicament you put yourself in, but I need my car. I need to get a Christmas tree.”

“It’s Christmas Eve, my boy,” Santa said.

“I know.”

“The only ones left will be little twigs.”

A pause.

“It’s for my daughter.”

“Ah, yes. Little Bettie.”

“Uh, yeah. So, I’m in a hurry.” Well, he had been in a hurry. Now he wasn’t going anywhere unless he suddenly jumped on a reindeer and flew to his destination. The thought almost made him laugh. Letting Bettie ride on a real reindeer would certainly earn him dad-points.

“How about,” Santa continued, “you watch my boys here, I get the things I need to fix my ride, and in return I’ll get you a fantastic Christmas tree and, as a bonus, a new car?”

“I only have,” Brian glanced at his watch, “half an hour.”

“Oh, I’ll be back in a few,” Santa smiled, not finishing the deal with anything but a wink and a *whoosh*. He disappeared into a flutter of sparkles. Fucking sparkles. Jesus.

Daddy, Bettie asked him the other day, *are we going to church on Sunday? Momma says you need to go and see Jesus there.*

Jesus sure won’t be there, Brian had said. He didn’t add that Jesus wouldn’t probably be anywhere he could think up to look for him.

...

His father really thought he’d found Jesus when Brian had been ten. One day, his dad, Harold, came home with one of those Bibles those men with white hair and beards always passed out on street corners clasped in his hand. He’d already gotten pretty sick at that point, and his hand shook.

“We’re going to church on Sunday,” he announced. Brian had been on the floor in the den playing with his ThunderCats action figures, and his mother had been dusting. Yes, dusting. Jesus, she had been a living cliché. Brian didn’t know that, then.

“What, dear?” his mother asked, dusting the old grandfather clock that had actually come from Brian’s grandfather. The irony. That man had been a total ass, too.

“Church. We’re going. Do you still have that suit, Brian? From Great Aunt Pauline’s funeral?”

Brian had nodded, pausing his pretend fight scene to look at his father.

“The Lord is here for us. May he guide us to Salvation,” Harold said. His father knew he would be dead soon, a fact that was later apparent to the entire family as his search escalated.

...

When Santa came back, Brian had questions prepared. Mainly, he wanted to ask if he really watched him while he was sleeping and knew when he was awake. Saw him go to his dead-end tech job and try to watch documentaries when he got home with a TV-dinner in front of him because the receptionist, a pretty girl named Joanne, always recommended some, and he wanted to have something to talk to her about. Did Santa see him at night in bed, lying awake and staring at the popcorn ceiling, wondering if it was even worth getting up in the morning? Did he see him standing in the park, watching his daughter on the swings, going higher, higher, higher, and wondering *Am I messing up her life somehow?*

He only got her on the weekends. And that had been a struggle to win. LouAnne didn't want Bettie in his life, ever. Brian argued that every child who had a capable father needed to know them; LouAnne argued that Brian wasn't that type of father. She held him to impossible standards while he could hardly scrape by with the bare minimum. But he'd do better. He would.

Did Santa see all that? Was he the God Harold had tried to find for years? Was he to blame for the coal in Brian's stocking, or was that Brian's own fault?

Who was the real one to blame—the kids or the parents?

He took a step towards Rudolph and the animal kicked his hind legs, nearly taking off Brian's head. “Fuck you,” he told the animal with eyes that looked a little too human. Giving the bastard a wide berth, he went around the sled and found the infamous bag sitting on the sled's seat—huge and red and tied with gold ribbon. Just like the books said.

Brian untied the ribbon and sparkles exploded into his face. He coughed, wiping them off his face, which only caused the glitter to stick to his hands, and then his jeans when he wiped his palms on his thighs. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he said, vindictive, now, with his cursing. He felt like he was trapped in a demented snow globe. Maybe one held by a child about to shake it and watch more fake snow fall. His mother had collected snow globes from different cities they’d lived throughout his childhood while his father tried to find the perfect church, the perfect pastor, the perfect message. She used to line them up on the mantelpiece during the holidays. Brian’s favorite had been Hawaii, a place that he thought was surely too warm to have a White Christmas. But he liked the palm trees covered in white within the miniature world. He hadn’t lived there—his parents had vacationed there on their honeymoon.

After he got all the glitter out of his eyelashes, he finally managed to look into the bag.

...

There were scams, of course. His dad got ripped off hundreds of dollars by a man who threw water on them that smelled sour and said he was “blessing their home.” That had been in Detroit. He thought the healing touch would be just around the corner, at the next state, at the next church.

The next came when Harold was about two miles away from a cult before he told the driver *No, thank you, please take my family back to our hotel*. It had taken some more persuading comments from Brian’s mother and a *you’ll all rot in hell* from the driver, which Brian’s father took with great remorse, before they made the trip back. Harold hit Brian back in the hotel room, a fist to the gut, saying that it was all his fault.

Brian didn’t know that the overall-clad farmer had looked like trouble when he’d talked to Brian at the gas station while Brian stood in front of the gumball machine. Brian had wished

he had a quarter and the man had given him one and asked for his parents. The next thing he knew, Harold was going on and on about how this group could be their salvation, before he considered that cultish activities would not help him get better. That was in Colorado.

Harold really thought he found Jesus in Maine when he found a little chapel by a lighthouse with only a handful of people in the congregation. Brian had fallen asleep when the man had talked about Revelation and how the world was damned. Harold had slapped his wife and shoved Brian into a closet because he said they weren't doing it right—they hadn't been baptized, they were all going to burn. And he only had so much time left.

...

The bag never ended. It was like a fucking circus act. Brian stuck his whole arm into the thing, up to the armpit, and grasped at nothing. He couldn't find a single thing in the bag. The reindeer watched him, frozen in place. They knew he was doing something wrong, and Brian didn't care. He thought about looking in the bag, falling down the rabbit hole, ending up somewhere else. The thought made him laugh. Was this some sort of gag? Was he the Scrooge in the story about to be taught a moral lesson by Santa Claus himself?

He finally gave up and tied the bag back closed. The reindeers continued to pick at the ground, stomping their hooves and snorting white puffs into the night air.

Brian now only had fifteen minutes.

Sitting on the grass, he picked at the frozen remnants of the crop. He and his parents had lived on a farm for a while, when he was a boy, with a pastor and his daughter. The daughter had been LouAnne. As he sat, he twisted the strands together, discarding some when they snapped from the frost, until he made a little straw cross. The end of it sliced his thumb, and Brian tossed it aside.

A snow globe. He'd bought Bettie a snow globe. Maybe she wouldn't get the meaning, but Brian would. He would show her how to shake it, that if you held it just so, one eye squinted a little, you could pretend you were there, on the fake ice rink with the huge Christmas tree in the middle.

She'd probably just take one look at it and save the sloth again from falling out of the tree.

...

When his dad got even sicker and his mom had to drive their station wagon, they took trips to Delaware (the pastor was found out to be a child molester while they attended the church), Wyoming (most cult-ish activities), and Texas (God would bless Brian, the pastor promised.)

Their final church was one in Missouri. It had a pastor that Harold liked, one that Brian could avoid, while his mom popped some blue pills and smiled along at everything going on. Brian remembered once looking up at Jesus on the cross and wondering how his hands didn't just rip apart from the nails. How did he stay up there?

This was when they lived in the farmhouse. This was when he first met LouAnne, the shy, blond pastor's daughter who smiled at him with her eyes.

When he asked his dad why Jesus never fell off the cross, he got a black eye. They had to skip a week of services. When they got back, it was Holy Communion. They passed around a plate of bread and little plastic cups of wine. Real wine. Brian saw his mother take two, and his father took the largest piece of bread on the plate. Maybe he wanted to eat the most of Jesus' flesh or something, stuff his stomach so he could really feel God and the holy spirit and all that really within him.

Brian took the bread after a look from his father and washed it down with the wine. Right as he swallowed, Harold's shoulders jerked. Brian didn't pay much attention—his father's body never obeyed his demands, or else, that was his excuse a lot of the time for striking his son and wife—but then when Harold doubled over, eyes bulging, Brian realized his father was choking.

“And may all of us,” the pastor said, raising up his loaf of bread.

Brian's father fell into the aisle, gripping his neck.

“Be blessed on this day,” the pastor said.

People got up to help, but Harold had stopped moving.

“And may God always shine down upon us,” the pastor finished, breaking the whole loaf of bread that only he got.

Harold died that morning. Choked on the bread. It happened sometimes with Parkinson's—people shake too much and aren't able to swallow their food properly.

Brian took another piece of bread when no one was looking. In fact, when they loaded up his dad into the back of an ambulance, Brian ate all the bread on the plate.

...

Brian had five minutes left when Santa came back. He had what looked like a stereotypical red toolbox. “Brian, my boy!” he exclaimed. “So happy to see you're still here.” He rattled the box and Brian stood up.

“Yeah, it's fantastic. Now, I'm going to be late picking up Bettie. Can you get my end of the deal done, now? I waited more than just a fucking *flash*.”

“Oh, well, my boy...” Santa walked over to his reindeer, and Rudolph certainly didn't try to attack him. “You see, I'm running late on deliveries because of this unfortunate incident, so I don't think I can use the magic to give you what you need.”

Typical, typical, typical. Of course this happened. LouAnne always pounced on any opportunity to condemn Brian for being a bad father. His lateness, missing dance recitals because of a project's deadline, smelling like smoke, having a shitty car that always broke down, the list went on forever. Brian didn't think she remembered Harold. She remembered the idea of him. What he wanted to be.

"No," Brian said. "No, no, no."

"I'm awfully sorry," Santa said.

"You son of a bitch!" Brian wanted something to throw. He had nothing except the straw cross sitting at his feet. "You lying bastard!"

Santa only twirled his hand, magically fixing the broken and cracked pieces of the sleigh and also putting the reindeer back in place. That also shed glitter. "If only you'd been on the nice list, son. Or at least tried more."

Brian let his arms fall to his sides. "Bettie," he said. "Bettie. My daughter. What list is she on?" All this time, Brian thought he'd been doomed on the naughty list because of Harold and his fucked up childhood. His belief was that Bettie could end up better, end up being someone important, influential, keep the family line going and not let it die in the church's aisle.

"She's on the nice list, for now," Santa said as he climbed aboard the sled. He let out a jolly laugh, even though it certainly was not the right occasion for one. "But we'll see if she ends up on the same list as you."

"She has to," Brian said. Wind began swirling around them as the reindeer prepared to take flight. "I want her to."

"I don't think you'll have anything to do with it," Santa said, looking at him with steady eyes. He didn't look so jolly anymore.

“I don’t want to be like him,” Brian said, his voice cracking. He hated himself for it. He hated Harold, and LouAnne, and Santa Claus, and he hated himself in that moment.

“You already are,” Santa said.

“I am not!” Brian shouted, stepping closer. He pushed his hair back from his eyes. “That is completely unfair. I never lay a hand on my daughter. I spend time with her. I actually give a shit.”

“Would she say that?” Santa asked.

“I...” Brian stared at the ground. He was really crying now, the wind lashing the water off his cheeks. “I never lay a hand on her.”

“But you go out, on Christmas Eve of all nights, to try to give your daughter a good Christmas. All last minute, like she’s an afterthought. You make her watch that awful movie that she hates. You spend ten dollars on her present. Do you really think she enjoys being there? Isn’t just counting down the moments where she can return to LouAnne?” Santa asked.

Brian looked up. “Do you know that? Are you telling the truth?”

Santa whipped the reins and it sounded like a thunderclap. “I’m always watching, bucko. Are you?”

“I’m trying,” Brian said, but Santa was already gone, his reindeer launching into the sky and the sled lifting with it, like a roller coaster ascending the hill for the big drop. But this lying sack of shit would only keep going up, keep on bringing happiness, keep on doing what everyone expected him to do.

...

Once Santa was gone, Brian went back over to his car. He pried the driver’s side door open and popped the trunk. Going around to the back, he picked up the small paper bag he left in

the corner of the trunk, protected by umbrellas and spare blankets he kept back there. It was still intact, even after everything. He took out the snow globe resting inside. Hawaii.

He saw Bettie in his mind, saving the sloth again and again with a simple punch of the space key. She wouldn't hit the save key for him, like how he'd watched Harold choke without moving to help.

He picked up the snow globe, one eye squinted a little, and looked at it just so.

HUNGRY

Josie ran out of dog food for her pug.

She scraped the cup she had taken home from a restaurant many years ago, the logo long ago faded and undistinguishable, and listened again and again as it scraped against the cloth-plastic material of the bottom of the dog food bag of Tasty Crispies. Scrape. Then scrape again. Scrape once more, coming up with three pieces of dog food shaped like miniature dog bones. She'd read that giving dogs real-people food would make them fat, make them beg, and make them die. Dog food of a certain brand, with meat as the first ingredient, ensured a longer life.

Oh, no, no. This would not do. She remembered writing *dog food* on the list that she provided her sister Angela every Wednesday between 4:00 and 4:07 when she stopped by Josie's house on her way home from her job. Angela taught small children numbers and letters and made them play nice and sang to them during quiet time and read books about sharing and kindness and being organized, books with multiple ethnicities and multiple settings and the tales were always short, but with some moral the kids probably wouldn't get but they'd enjoy the story anyway and—.

Josie needed to get dog food. The clock over her oven read that it was 8:03 in the evening. Her five-year-old pug, Nugget, looked up at her from his spot at her feet, his nose snorting and his eyes begging. *Have you forgotten about me?* he'd ask. *You're my one and only friend. You've forgotten all about me! How could you?!*

Nugget blinked, and Josie thought he might be holding back tears. He only howled when he heard sirens. Whether that be the police kind, ambulance kind, City Utilities kind, emergency weather kind, or once when a boy down the road from her house had a couple of air horns and a

couple more beers. Nugget would open his little, spittle-lined mouth and let out something like a prolonged yelping. She thought he had that look in his eyes now.

Josie dropped the cup back into the bag. The cup had actually been from the bar, surely. The one she used to go to with her friends, Georgia and Willa. Once, in college, they'd stolen chopsticks from a sushi place and it had bothered Josie for months before she finally brought hers back, laying them before the front door long before the restaurant opened. She knew they would likely not be used by the staff any longer, but Josie did not like being responsible for anything. It was too risky.

Except she felt responsible for Nugget. Stupid. How had she not noticed? Maybe she had noticed, but had been very distracted last night watching the nightly news and chewing her fingernails. Had she fed the dog and chewed her fingernails simultaneously? Surely not. She knew better.

Walking over to the sink, Josie washed her hands and looked out the window. Her '99 Jeep Wrangler sat in the driveway, idle for months, like a glacier in the ocean that refused to move or melt. She'd thought about having it towed, but didn't want to spend money on a tow truck, and she had the keys to move it herself.

Nugget began howling. Josie clasped her wet hands over her ears. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she wailed, falling onto her knees. "Angela was supposed to get it. I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Nugget sat in front of her and stopped howling, instead whimpering and nudging her arm with his snot-covered nose. Josie looked up at him. Angela would be out tonight, since it was a Friday, likely with her coworkers at their favorite bar. Her coworkers were all blond and had pretty noses and nice mascara and each had an air of patience that was required for all

elementary school teachers. She felt guilty calling Angela over something as trivial as dog food. Her friends already thought Josie was a disaster case, and she could only imagine what they would say if Angela had to excuse herself to go buy her crazy sister a bag of dog food at 8:05 in the evening.

Josie looked at Nugget now, who opened his mouth and widened his eyes in pre-howl, and she intervened. “Alright, I’m going to get you some dog food. Sit tight.”

...

It took her fifteen minutes to find her car keys, buried under newspapers in the bin she kept in her living room but never took down to the recycling center. She spun the keychain around her thumb, again and again and again. Finally, she walked out her front door, went to the car, went back to make sure she locked the front door, walked inside to make sure she hadn’t left the iron on that she used to iron out tissue paper she saved from her birthday last week (she got one present from her neighbor, a nice candle that smelled like cinnamon and spice and was in this cute little jar with a tin top and the wick didn’t burn quickly and curl like the cheap candles she had in her home but never lit because she was afraid she’d leave them on and burn down the house), went back out to the car, back to the door to make sure it was locked, ripped down the eviction notices on her door, crumpled them in her fist and threw them into her front yard, and finally got into her car.

It rumbled to life like the dragon from the princess’s tower being awakened to kill the knight.

She turned the lights on, since they were manual, and the darkness of her cracked driveway undergoing a weed revolution brightened before her, shining towards her neighbor’s house—the one who had given her the candle, left on her doorstep since Josie never answered

the door. She watched enough *Dateline* to know better. Betty was the neighbor's name. She had card games with old ladies and called the cops when the air-horn kid down the street had gone wild that night with his horns and his beer. Well, at least that's what Josie thought she had done. And that it had been the kid down the street. She never left her house to learn about it, but she got a Neighborhood Watch note in the mail a few days later, recording the incident, and it had informed everyone that *no one was harmed*. Josie wondered if someone could be harmed by an air horn. Maybe if blown directly into one's ear, it would bust their ear drum. After reading the note, Josie checked her house for air horns, deciding she must have hoarded one sometime in the two years she'd lived here, but she never found one.

No one else in the neighborhood ever seemed to be home. Sometimes, she imagined that she was the only one in her house, the only one for miles, and the walls were slowly closing in like her brother's video games she'd watched him play while growing up. He lived in Ireland now and never sent her postcards or letters, not keeping contact after their dad had been murdered. Pretty soon, she'd be squished between the walls. But then she'd sit on her couch and the walls would be still and she would watch a romantic comedy and everything would be fine and her neighbors would be home, also watching movies alone or with loved ones and—.

She thought she saw someone standing in Betty's yard, but, no, that was only a budding tree they had planted some time recently without Josie noticing.

Okay, she knew how to do this. She pressed on the brake and shifted into gear. Her speedometer barely reached the lowest notch as she inched down the driveway and out onto the street. What was that in the road? A dead cat? A disembodied arm? No, only a piece of a branch. A bad storm had blown through a few days ago, and Josie had looked up how likely it was that hurricanes could reach her city. Not likely. Breathing out in relief.

The further she drove down the street and away from her home, she felt like she had maybe left the iron on, and her thoughts had been so preoccupied that she hadn't *actually* seen the plug not in the wall. She imagined Nugget being trapped in the burning house, doubly upset because she had left him hungry and left him to burn alive.

Didn't they eat dogs in some kind of country? Or was that cats? Either way, no domestic animal should be eaten.

Her father had been obsessed with veal before he died. He made her mother cook veal every time he got a promotion, or after a business trip, or got a gift basket from his employees on Boss Appreciation Day. Was that day actually a thing? She never found out, but they celebrated it at her father's company until he retired. She wondered if the company still celebrated it in his memory. But every time they ate it, Josie threw it up in the bathroom after dinner, sweat beaded across her forehead and her hair matted against her vomit-lined lips. She did not like animal cruelty.

A shadow moved across the road. No, only the shadow of a tree branch from the streetlights lining her quiet neighborhood (air horn incident aside).

The grocery store was only a block away. It wouldn't be a big deal. Josie got money from the hats and scarves and Afghans she knitted and sold on her own website. Her basement sat with several boxes full of completed projects. She had nothing else to fill her time with. She had been featured several times in knitting magazines, but she always declined the request for an interview because she did not want to drive to some office to speak to someone she'd never met. Phone interviews gave her the first signs of a panic attack. Once, a woman had shown up at her house to interview her. Josie had baked her cookies, peanut butter with mini chocolate chips, but before the woman could get out the first question, Josie had vomited all over the cookie tray, the carpet

of her living room, the knitting samples she brought up from her basement for pictures, and the woman who had her recorder out and had her hair perfectly curled around her face, and mascara that made her eyes dark, but in a sultry, mysterious way, not the emo-stage way. She had not been featured in that magazine. In fact, it took several months for someone to contact her again—.

She hit a bump on the main road that the grocery store was on, and she gasped, braking automatically. She'd been so wrapped up in remembering the magazines she hadn't even been paying attention to her driving; that is, she hadn't been paying 100 percent attention. Several cars honked and flew by as she came to a full stop, heart beating so hard she thought her ribs might bruise. Had it been an animal? A person?

She got out of her car, nearly having her door knocked off by a speeding Volvo, which also honked at her.

Searching the street behind her car, she looked for crushed animals or people writhing on the road, begging for life as their brains leaked out onto the pavement with their arms missing, caught up in Josie's tire wheels.

She saw a sewage grate. It was only the grate that caused the bump. Cars were lined up behind her, trying to get into the other busy lane beside them, their headlights blinding. What if whatever she hit got thrown down into the drain? A body would not fit, but what if it was an animal? She fell to her knees in front of the grate, drowning out the honking of the line of cars to her right, and looked down into the grate. She couldn't see anything. She listened, but couldn't hear anything. Nothing suffering. The slots in the grate were just big enough that she began to reach her arm through, but it caught on her bicep and could go in no further. The residue from the grate smeared on her arm, smelling a little like a porta-potty combined with the time when

Nugget ate a bird and then hacked up its body parts onto her kitchen floor, one eyeball still intact.

She retracted her arm and stuck it through the larger hole that ran off the curb and remembered when Angela made her watch *It* when they were kids and how she never, ever walked by grates ever again. She would cross the street or walk in the grass above. The movie had made her cry, and her mother had shushed her and said that being afraid of something fictitious meant she would never be ready to face the fears of the real world.

Her arm fit much better in this hole, if she bent at the elbow and her shoulder kissed the curb. She felt something wet—just leaves. More residue covered her arm, and now her shirt and the knees of her jeans.

She dug around, and found no dying animal. Satisfied, she climbed to her feet and threw up onto the street when the car right in front of her honked so loud she thought it rivaled an air horn to the ear. She wiped her mouth with the back of her non-sewer-covered hand and then got back into her car. The nastiness of the whole ordeal was worth it. She hadn't killed anything.

The parking lot to the grocery store did not contain many cars. Even so, Josie parked far away from all of them, not wanting to take the risk of running down someone with their shopping carts heading to their Sedans.

The smell from her arm and shirt wafted into her nose , and she took in deep breaths through her mouth. Dog food. She needed dog food. Nugget needed her.

...

Once, years ago, Angela managed to convince Josie to come along with her and her coworkers to their weekly bar visit. Angela drove, of course.

Once they arrived, her friends had looked at her like some strange, caged animal newly released. She'd tried to curl her straw-textured hair, but it ended up crimping in several spots with no curls. She'd stabbed her eye with the mascara wand and cried in the bathroom, jumping up and down on her toes as the pain made her think her eyesight would be lost by the time it receded.

At the end of it all, hair crimped not in the cool, early 2000's way, but the failed attempt at curling hair way, and her mascara smudged a little along her eyelids, she had went to the bar, had one drink called Strawberry Dreamer, laughed when everyone else did and nodded along thoughtfully when everyone else did that, too. All the women talked about their students, little snot-nosed monsters that they complained about over their martinis and gin and tonics. Angela sat beside Josie the entire time, laughing when the cue came, interjecting with a funny anecdote when it seemed appropriate. For her, it was all natural.

Josie had fiddled with the drink menu because her hands had become bored clasped together in her lap. She couldn't comment on the mentioned students she didn't know and had never seen, and noticed the drink she ordered didn't actually include any alcohol, just a lot of sparkling juice and sugar and cream. When she hadn't been looking, all the women had probably laughed at her. Or maybe they thought she was some AA recovery case, and pitied her. Or maybe they'd thought she'd been a buzzkill, not willing to let loose.

Politely excusing herself, Josie had gone into the bathroom and thrown up in the toilet in the handicapped stall, one eye on the door. What if someone handicapped came in and had to wait? She imagined a woman in a wheelchair, dying from cancer with one last wish to go to a bar and have a drink, waiting outside the door with her oxygen tank, about to pee her pants but politely waiting for Josie to finish blowing chunks.

Angela took her home after the bathroom incident, shooting glances at her at spaced intervals. The look reminded Josie of how Angela looked at their mother the last time they had seen her. Worry. As if Josie was a step away from becoming unhinged.

That must have been where she got the cup for the dog food. Angela had ordered a cup of water before they left the bar, and the bartender had given her a complimentary company cup, big with plastic ridges. The lid and straw had been thrown away, but the cup had been handy for her over the years as a dog-food scoop. How could Angela forget the dog food? So unlike her.

...

She got the biggest bag she could find. When she lifted it, her knees complained loudly. She needed to exercise. Back when Georgia and Willa were still her friends and before the phone calls and random visits stopped, they used to all go to group yoga together. Hot yoga. Josie hated it, the sweating, the eyes on her that were or weren't really on her from the other participants. When she did three-legged dog, she'd let out a groan that bordered on sexual, and the three of them had laughed about it for weeks. Back when Josie was not so easily embarrassed. Back before her mother killed her father with a butcher's cleaver right as he was raising his veal-filled fork to his mouth.

She'd also watched *Sweeney Todd* (Hollywood movie version) with her sister years ago during Halloween, before it happened. Josie had a fantasy in her head that her mother had lobbed off her father's head with the cleaver and then crammed his body into the oven while singing something dramatic in a minor key.

The dog food bag felt a little like hauling a body bag, and Josie waddled up to the registers. The boy behind the register looked young and in high school with dimples and

probably an application to Harvard in the mail. He smiled as she approached. "Let me help you," he said.

She grunted, too weighed down to speak as he hurried around the counter. As he neared, his nose scrunched up when he caught her smell. She could see him trying to conceal it and be polite as he took the dog food from her. Some of the grime from her arm transferred onto the bag and then smeared onto his store apron. Josie did not inform him about it.

He rang up the dog food. \$40.96. She gaped at the price and then dug around in her purse. That was at least three sold knitted caps. She got out two twenties and counted out exact change. "Do you need help taking this to your car?" the cashier boy asked, looking like all he wanted her to say was *No, thank you*.

"Can I have a cart?" she asked.

"Yes," he breathed and ran off to get one. The woman in line behind Josie sighed in impatience. Josie felt her stomach churn.

Finally, cashier boy returned with a cart and hauled the dog food bag into it. "All set," he said. "Have a good night."

Josie was afraid she'd throw up if she opened her mouth, so she only nodded and did something that resembled a smile and then turned and walked the cart out of the store.

...

She had another incident on her way home, only this time it involved a large bump when she went through the grocery store's parking lot. Josie started screaming, a long, never-ending scream as she shoved the gear shift into park and stumbled out of the car, looking behind her vehicle to find the raised carcass of a speed bump. It was the dark kind, blending in with the

pavement and not painted yellow. Only then her scream stopped. She heard the buzz of the lit-up sign for the grocery store hanging somewhere behind her.

A younger couple ran up to her.

“Are you alright, miss?” the man asked. He was handsome, but not too handsome. The woman he was with could have done better. Just like Josie’s mother could have done better when choosing her father. She had been petite and brunette, with delicate features like a carved doll the creator spent extra time on. She had skittered around all the time in an apron like it was the 1950’s instead of the 1990’s. She allowed Josie’s father to throw veal at her if it wasn’t cooked to his liking.

Her father had been a balding man with a belly from beer and a beard from laziness. His voice boomed like the announcer at football games. Sometimes, Josie still thought about how his voice really did seem to echo *MY-my-FAVORITE-favorite-MEAL-meal-IS-is-RUINED-ruined*. Followed by a crash of a dinner plate and the sound of the overspill of wine dripping onto their hardwood floor in the dining room and her mother’s rushed apologies as marinated, tender veal slid down her apron and her neck and chunks of the meat stuck to the hairspray in her hair.

“I’m fine,” Josie replied to the semi-handsome man, determined not to throw up as her stomach rolled and rolled and rolled.

“You were screaming,” the woman noted as if the sound were still not ringing in Josie’s ears and her throat felt like she’d swallowed dry leaves. The woman stepped up beside her mate and slid her arm through his, as if afraid. Josie was still the caged animal, after all, let loose once more.

“I’m fine; sorry to frighten you.” Josie screwed her lips up into some kind of smiling sneer and then climbed back into her Jeep.

She'd debated driving into oncoming traffic on the way home to finally end all of the screaming in her head, but she couldn't leave Nugget without his dinner.

...

Nugget ate his food happily as soon as she gave him a fresh bowl of it. When she checked the ingredients to make sure it was the best she could buy, she saw that the first ingredient was veal. She stared at the ingredient for so long her eyes blurred.

After making sure Nugget was content, she took a shower, washing the sewer grime off of her. It stuck to her like the temporary tattoos she had as a kid, and she scrubbed with her washcloth until her skin turned a bright pink.

Stepping out of the shower and putting on her bathrobe, she found her house phone. She'd lost her cell phone months ago, or maybe she'd thrown it against the wall and broken it into a million unfixable pieces, her own Humpty Dumpty, a few years ago after the police had called and given her the news that her father was dead and they couldn't ever put her family back together again. The day after the phone call, she'd adopted Nugget at the local shelter where someone had dumped him.

Dialing Angela's number, she sat on the bed in the dark of her bedroom, listening to the ringing.

"Hello—,"

"Hey, Angela."

"—you've reached Angela. Sorry I missed your call. Leave your name and number and I'll get back to you as soon as possible. Have a marvelous day!" A beep followed.

Josie opened her mouth, the words stuck in her throat with the dried leaves, and hung up the phone. While looking at her call log, she saw all the times she had tried to call her sister and Angela had not picked up. When was the last time they spoke...?

Going into the kitchen, she wanted something for dinner. Opening her pantry, she found empty shelves. Only one expired can of tuna that smelled like death itself when she opened it. She didn't eat meat, anyway, which is why she'd never opened the can before. Her fridge was empty other than strawberry syrup, Dijon mustard, and an old lime. She hadn't eaten all day, she realized. How had it been a full day? She placed a hand to her stomach.

She had some crackers and cheese—no, she ate that up yesterday.

She had some cereal—nope, had that for dinner the other night. Or was it...?

How had she not noticed the food being gone? She pulled at her hair again so hard her vision blurred with tears. She thought if she ripped the hair from the roots, maybe it would make her feel better. She never had a huge quantity of food since she stayed by herself and she kept the grocery list for Angela small, but to have no food at all?

She thought for a moment, staring at the gaping mouth of her open pantry. When was the last time Angela had stopped by? Her sister sent her a birthday card to her from a new address all the way across the city. It sat on Josie's bedside table, tucked back into the envelope, stacked on top of late bill notices and more eviction warnings.

Looking around for lost food on countertops, comforting herself in the fact that she owned no knives, no cleavers, not even dinner ones, Josie spotted a pile of grocery lists on top of the microwave she used on occasion and always thought would catch fire. It had several weeks' worth of lists, all filled out in Josie's nice, loopy handwriting.

Thinking of going out again made Josie throw up in her kitchen sink, empty of dishes. She washed her mouth out with water and realized when she wiped her mouth with a paper towel that it was wet, not just from bile and sink water but from tears. She hadn't realized she'd been crying.

Nugget finished his meal and twirled around her legs, waiting for a pat and for her to congratulate him on his eating accomplishments. Her father never did such a thing. When he was satisfied with a meal, he would simply remain silent.

She could not leave the house, not again. She didn't trust people who delivered food. There were people who killed their delivery customers—one of the *Dateline* episodes. Her neighbors were not home. The walls began to move towards her, rattling the dishware in her cabinets.

Shoving her hands back into her hair, Josie, again, pulled on it hard enough that the pain made the walls stop moving. That had been close. She'd been sure she'd be squished that time and have no hearts left.

She got a bowl out of her cabinet and scooped out a cup of dog food. She put the strawberry syrup and Dijon mustard on top of the food, got a spoon, and sat on the floor of her kitchen, legs stretched out front of her. Nugget, watching her and licking his paw, finally came over and lay on her lap, cocking his head at her as if saying, *You've really hit the bottom this time, huh? Now I really am your only friend.*

Josie brought the dog food/syrup/mustard spoonful to her mouth. And ate. And ate. And ate.

Everyone knew about our neighborhood. Not because of gangs or violence or as a hot spot for meth labs, but because of Ms. Sandy.

Not national-level fame, of course. Our neighborhood story did not interrupt the regular scheduled programming of politicians having pissing contests or of another mass shooting with no real consequences or solutions. Small-town stories were only touching when it involved an inspiring teacher that worked at the soup kitchens every day after class or produced a viral online video of a cat.

No, the house of Ms. Sandy did not reach beyond tristate area newspapers. The latest heading from a big city in the next state over read: “Police investigate a quirky wax museum because of lifelike figures that look too real to be fake.” A more realistic, but what I would learn to be misleading, headline read: “Woman suffers through midlife crisis with wax.”

Johnny, my next-door neighbor, thought the entire thing was ridiculous. “A waste of people’s attention,” he said as we smoked in our conjoining driveway and watched the cars pass by our houses. Tourists never knew quite where the house was, and at any hour of the day cars cruised across the cracked roads, looking at house numbers.

“She must be making a shit-ton of money with all those donations,” I said, blowing smoke out in front of me and watching it dissipate in the cool, spring air.

“I heard her next figure is Lady Gaga,” Johnny said.

“She’s probably about out of room, now, don’t ’cha think? I mean, do you think she keeps all of them locked up in her house when she’s done with the week?”

“Probably.” Neither of us had walked down there to see it. In part because of the traffic and in part because neither one of us ever felt especially sightseer-y.

I dropped my cigarette and crushed it into the gravel as another car passed, both driver and passenger leaning towards the windshield, squinting, their old Volvo’s engine belt whining and making Sheryl Ronald’s dachshund across the street to howl.

...

Her house sat on the edge of my street where the pavement wrapped around in a cul-de-sac. It all started about six months ago. During the first few days, she painted the exterior of her house from a pastel baby blue to a yellow-and-orange monster, like some sort of warning sign. I think it did the impending situation justice. Once she was finished with painting, she covered her front yard with a large tarp. Then the cooling fans with weather-proof extension cords were installed under the tarp.

Finally, after much intrigue from the neighborhood, the figures began to appear. It started with a wax replica of Cher. The bangs and the youthful face suggested an old—or maybe new?—model. The singer stood right beside the front door, smiling out onto the yard and scaring Bert Jenkins half to death on his morning walk to help with the arthritis in his knees.

The next figure placed by the tarp-covered mailbox and posed as if waving to an invisible audience held the form of Whitney Houston. Followed by a hippie-inspired, young Stevie Nicks placed, respectively, by a flowerbed overgrown with weeds that were choking the previously-housed violets.

By this time, the city caught onto this strange phenomenon. A story showed up on the local news. They used the rookie broadcaster, a kid who looked like he had just finished his

senior chemistry class before running over to the news station. He knocked on the door to speak with Ms. Sandy, but no one answered.

Tragedy struck. One night, a group of kids from the only high school in town rampaged Ms. Sandy's front lawn, drawing a penis on Cher's forehead. Stevie Nicks had an arm amputated. And Whitney Houston somehow managed to end up on the roof, standing atop the chimney like she awaited Santa's arrival.

No one knew what happened to the famous women, because, by the next morning, the figures disappeared. A week passed and people began to dismiss the whole thing as some kind of fluke. Johnny said she was probably hitting some sort of midlife crisis, as the newspaper article suggested.

But Ms. Sandy was not done creating her wax figures. On a Saturday morning, Patricia Reynolds's boyfriend had been mowing the lawn when he noticed a new figure posing for the world. This time, Ms. Sandy had left a naked figure standing in the middle of the lawn. A woman, presumably, from the breasts and lack of a penis. Her face was all smooth wax, lacking any features.

Police were called. Rumors ran wild. Was this some sort of protest against the high school kids? Clearly, Ms. Sandy—who attended church regularly and collected box tops for the elementary school kids—felt publicly unhappy.

The police took away the vulgar figure. The city waited for some other type of rebuke. A few mornings later, she had an entire lawn set up with a dark theme. Selena, Marvin Gaye, John Lennon, and Kurt Cobain sat around a patio set with plastic chairs and a floral centerpiece atop a plastic table. There were also drinks with little umbrellas in their wax hands.

Following themes included singers who were left handed: Dick Van Dyke, Paul McCartney, David Bowie (or, at least that's what Joyce Fowler's daughter thought), and several weeks full of singers from different decades (she got Freddie Mercury's yellow jacket down to near perfection, or so I heard).

No one knew where the figures came from. Was she stealing them? Police found no evidence to support this theory. Was she making them? Possible, but unlikely, considering how often they changed. No news team got an interview with her. The only people who saw her put the figures up were those willing to wait and watch in the dead of night. The more famous the figures became, the more common it was for "fans" to sit out on the curb all night to be the first to see the new theme. Ms. Sandy never said anything concrete when she set them up. She took them out one by one and only said "move" or "get off my damn property" when sightseers would approach her with questions. Once, she had reportedly thrown Michael Jackson's leg at a persistent bystander, but no one from the neighborhood could confirm the story.

...

When the cool, light spring air took up permanent residence before the dead, heavy heat of summer came to suffocate the town, my brother Wilson came to visit. He brought his two children, Jenny and Jake. They ran rampant through my house, knocking magazines off end-tables and managing at one point to knock down every single plastic ware container I owned out of the cabinet.

"How have you been?" I asked. I really wanted a smoke, but I knew Wilson would get pissy if I got out a cigarette. He would claim it was because of the kids, but we both knew he would be salivating from quitting only a few months ago.

“Fine,” he said as he read the paper. The front page announced Ms. Sandy’s newest creations. Theme: Jazz. Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and Billie Holiday all stood shoulder-to-shoulder, like a multi-decade concert. The kids had already asked around seventy-three times if they could walk down the street and see the spectacle for themselves. The line of cars already reached beyond my house and towards the turnoff, and Wilson replied maybe later.

I twiddled my thumbs and watched TV. After Dad died, Wilson had felt some sort of obligation to come see me about once every two weeks to replace Dad’s and my biweekly fishing trips. The visits consisted of Wilson reading the paper, his children destroying my house, and me watching TV, usually the evening news about more shootings and more political nonsense.

My brother and I never had much to talk about. Being newly retired was boring, and being a father of two was horrific.

Wilson ruffled the paper and cleared his throat. “What’s for dinner?” he finally asked.

“I have frozen pot pies,” I said.

“Fine,” he said.

“Wilson,” I said, still staring at the TV. “I have cancer.”

He put down the newspaper.

...

When my doctor suggested I go to a cancer support group, I said, and I quote, “Hell, no.” Why’d I want to be in a room full of sick people who were dying and depressed—didn’t exactly seem like it would lift my spirits or perform any miracles for my health.

“Bullshit,” Johnny agreed as we smoked one evening. The fireflies kept us company, making the neighborhood feel warm despite the chill in the air from winter.

“He thinks it’ll be good for me.”

“Shit,” Johnny said, blowing out smoke in a deft breath. “Lungs and boobs, huh?”

“I think it’s politically correct to say breasts,” I replied.

Johnny eyed me. The gray was slowly starting to creep into his hair and beard. He only wore tie-dye shirts and army shorts, no matter what the weather. He never wore shoes when I saw him, even on gravel. The bottoms of his feet must be like hard leather by now. “I would think your doctor’s first piece of advice would be to quit smoking.”

“I didn’t say that the support group was his first line of advice,” I said, watching the cigarette in my hand.

“Are you gonna die?” he asked.

I shrugged.

“My ma had cancer,” he said. “Killed her within a week of diagnosis.”

“That’s so reassuring, thanks,” I said. I stamped out my cigarette.

Johnny watched me again out of the corner of his eye. Once upon a time, I thought I’d been in love with him. Now, I felt like he wasn’t worth the effort of getting into things with. Not because of the cancer thing, but because of the fact that I didn’t *do* relationships. “You could try it,” he said. “The group, I mean. Maybe you could hold hands with everyone and sing *Kumbaya*.”

I shot him the bird and headed back into my house.

...

The support group building really looked like a place where people came to die. The building’s white paint was chipping, revealing rotting wood underneath. A sign in the window had, at one time, read “Where Hearts are Mended,” but the M had faded.

I sat in my truck for a good fifteen minutes, staring at the building. I watched several people walking inside. Two had walked in together and had laughed over some private joke.

Because of my delay, I was ten minutes late. That also meant everyone turned as one and stared at me when I entered the room. Resisting the urge to shield my eyes like I do when looking directly into the sun, I found an empty seat in the room and stared at my lap. Thankfully, the group leader did not confront me.

When I finally looked up, I noticed her. Directly across from me sat Ms. Sandy. She had a knitted scarf wrapped around her neck and her straw-blond hair stood out from her face. It took me until that moment to realize I never really knew what she looked like, at least not from this proximity. But I knew from her broad shoulders and pale face that it was her. She didn't look at me and instead had her attention focused on the leader.

I didn't say anything during the meeting. Everyone shared stories and simple, cliché words of encouragement. The only thing I took out of the ordeal was that cancer sucks. But that could have been because the group leader wore a shirt that proclaimed this.

Afterwards, we could drink water and eat mini-muffins. I approached Ms. Sandy from where she stood at the water jug. She held a cup in her hand, but it remained unfilled. She also had not spoken during the meeting.

"Ms. Sandy?" I said with hesitation, my voice sounding as if I were a child confronting their scornful teacher.

She looked up at me, her eyes dark. They were brown like mine. "Hm?"

"Um." I picked up a small paper cup, big enough for about two sips of water. "I live down the street from you. Do you recognize me?"

She stared at me for so long that I almost put down the cup and walked out. But then she nodded. “You have the brick mailbox like mine.”

“Oh, uh, yeah,” I said, not knowing at all that she had such a mailbox. Did I have a brick mailbox? Oh, yeah, I guess I did. “That’s me.”

She raised her cheeks in an attempt of a smile. “Good to see you.”

“Yeah, you, too,” I said. Then I laughed in a strangled way. “You’re basically a celebrity, so I guess you have random people come up to you all the time, huh?”

Another long stare. “I suppose,” she said.

“Your Louis Armstrong looked really authentic in the paper.”

“Thank you,” she said and then filled up her water cup. The bubbles glugged to the top of the container, and we both watched as they popped one by one.

“Can I ask you a question?” I asked.

A pause. “My father owned a museum,” she said. A more authentic smile pulled up her lips when I found my mouth hanging halfway open. “Everyone wants to know. The news people yell the question at my front door. He left the figures to me when he died a while back, after closing down his museum.”

A disappointment filled me. I realized I liked the mystery of the figures appearing like magic. Now I saw the trapdoor underneath the illusion, the wires on the levitating object.

“My dad died a few years ago,” I said. “Didn’t leave me anything but some old fishing rods.”

“Hm,” she replied, watching the water again. I didn’t know which one of us inherited the better gift. To me, they both kind of sucked.

“Um,” I said. Our fatherless connection spurred me to continue the conversation. I cleared my throat. “I have breast and lung cancer.”

“Oh,” she said, not unsympathetically, but as I would have expected a cancer person would say it. With some detachment, but some sense of comradery.

“What are you here for?” I asked. I did not know if this was an inappropriate question to ask. I hadn’t had cancer before and didn’t know the proper etiquette yet. Maybe there were books I could buy. The team leader of the support group highly praised informational cancer books. If Johnny had been here, he’d probably be laughing his ass off at my attempts at social interaction.

“Throat,” she said and softly taped the area of her scarf that covered the affected area.

“Oh,” I said in a similar manner to how she said it. I added a little nod. She blocked the spout of the water jug so I continued to hold my cup.

“Yes,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said, not sure exactly what all I was sorry for.

“As am I,” she replied.

I ended up taking my cup all the way home with me, only to throw it in the back dumpster. Johnny stood on the driveway nearby, watching. He didn’t ask how it went. I didn’t tell him. And I didn’t have a smoke.

...

The following week, I attended the group again. Ms. Sandy sat beside me and crossed her legs. I looked over at her and she smiled at me. While the leader spoke about how we must *hold onto hope* she slipped me a coupon for 10% off fishing rods.

The next meeting, I slipped her a note for a new museum opening all the way in Alaska, celebrating wax figures. We could give each other sly smiles.

“Fathers can be such shit,” she told me after a meeting one night.

I nodded, wishing I had a pack to smoke.

“You live alone, yes?” she asked me.

I nodded again.

She hummed, looking at the street off the parking lot, headlights washing over us. Her face looked gaunt in the shadows. “Life can be shit, too. Alone.”

“Yes,” I agreed. I thought of my brother, only coming by to visit because he knew I would be gone soon. How the only person I really had was Johnny, and he was nowhere near reliable, either as a friend or something else.

...

I heard it while in line at a grocery store. Pete, the bagboy, was talking to the old woman in front of me, Suzanne Calder. “Saw it on TV last night during this special,” he was saying as I found my spot in line. “Couldn’t have hardly believed it, ya know? To hear her name like that and not even about her freaky wax figures.”

“I’d heard about her fame before, among gossipers and such,” Suzanne Calder said. He handed her the grocery bags, but she still lingered to talk. I told the clerk woman to get me a box of Marlboros. Wilson and the kids waited outside in his minivan. He’d been coming to visit once a week now and wanted to do things for me, like drive me to the grocery store even though I owned a truck and could go by myself. He didn’t know how to handle the cancer thing anymore than I did.

“Makes sense,” Suzanne Calder said. “With all the singing figures.”

“Yeah,” Pete said, his face lighting up at the sudden connection. If I squinted real hard, I could almost see the lightbulb appear above his head.

The clerk returned with my box of cigarettes and rang up my items: a toilet brush, a container of dough to make cinnamon rolls, and a bottle of laundry detergent. She pushed the items down to Pete, who bagged them without looking at the items or at me.

Finally, he handed me the bag. “What are you guys talking about?” I asked. Having cancer made me bolder, I learned.

“Ms. Sandy,” Suzanne Calder said. “She used to sing on Broadway back in her day.”

I stared at her, hard. “You’re sure?” I asked.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “My girlfriend, Patty Aaron, has been inside her house. Broadway posters everywhere with her name on them. Even an award or two on her mantelpiece.”

“Oh,” I said.

Suzanne Calder smiled at me even as the corners of her eyes curved downwards, like she were melting. “I heard about your *cancer*.” She whispered the last word. “I’m so sorry to hear it.”

Apparently, Johnny shared his cigs and words with people other than me. Blabbermouthed asshole.

“It’s fine,” I said, even though it honestly was not. “But thanks,” I added, even though I did not feel grateful.

...

At home that night, I warmed up my computer. It grumbled and groaned and reminded me exactly how long it had been since the last time I had used it, but it eventually came to life. I realized I didn’t know Ms. Sandy’s first name. Or was her first name Sandy?

I walked across my gravel driveway and pounded on Johnny’s door. He answered, a long piece of wood in his hand.

“Is that to beat intruders over the head with?” I asked, looking at it.

“I’m building a desk,” he replied. “But I could improvise, if you like.”

“You build furniture?” I asked, taken aback since I always envisioned him a permanent slacker. Then I remembered my purpose here. “Listen, what’s Ms. Sandy’s full name?” I asked.

He used the wood to scratch his temple. “I think it’s Sandy Wringers.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Go back to your, um, carpentry.” I raised an eyebrow at him and then returned home. I added her name in the search engine and waited far too long and listened to far too many clicks and whirrs from my computer before the results finally appeared.

I quickly skimmed an article written about her. Apparently, she had won a Tony in 1989 for supporting actress in a musical. Without really meaning to, I read about her for hours. The sources were not all that bountiful, but I learned about how she rose to fame when she was only eighteen and she got cast in her first play. I watched a few grainy videos of a young Ms. Sandy on stage, posed with confidence. Her voice convinced me she deserved those rumored awards.

I didn’t watch too many of the videos. I felt like I was intruding on something private, a previous, forgotten life.

When she’d gotten married, her career slowly faded off into nothing. Nobody had written anything about her since the early 2000s. I also found the documentary that Pete the Bag Boy must have seen, a dated piece that did not even show her face, only mentioned her in a list of names.

I didn’t know if her husband was still alive. I assumed not, since I never heard about him. I thought about going next door and asking Johnny, but resisted and went to bed.

...

It took me two weeks. Ms. Sandy had missed both week's support groups. Summer had finally come into full swing, and temperatures were already getting uncomfortable. The day of my walk, I stood with Johnny in the driveway while he smoked.

"Nah, I didn't know that," he said as he reached into his pocket for his lighter. He offered me a smoke, and I shook my head. He raised his eyebrows in an obvious question, did not receive an answer, and then lit his cigarette. "Aren't those Tony awards just for plays?"

I nodded. "Yes, hermit."

"Hell, I don't know that shit. Men don't watch Broadway plays."

"You're a sexist asshole," I informed him. I kicked some gravel and watched it skitter down the driveway. The dog across the street barked in my general direction. "Does she live alone in that house?" I asked.

"Far as I know," he said.

"She was married, once," I said. "Maybe she has her dead husband lying in the bed upstairs."

"What?" he asked, looking at me like maybe he had hit me over the head with that piece of wood.

"With all the wax figures surrounding him," I added, laughing at my own joke.

"What?" he asked again.

"Never mind." I sighed. "I start chemo tomorrow," I said.

"Shit," he said.

I rocked back and forth on my feet. "I'll be back," I announced. I wiped the sweat from the back of my neck. God, it was hot. I hated summer. If I was gonna die from this cancer and rot in hell, I didn't need a preview of the intense heat awaiting me.

The crowd had dwindled slowly throughout the day. Cars turned around and headed home. I didn't even become consciously aware of this until I walked down to Ms. Sandy's house. There were a few people sitting on the curb across from her house and some cars parked on the road.

I didn't see any figures on her lawn as I approached. A few kids rode their bikes by, nearly running me down in their childish, exuberant joy. I considered yelling a few words at them, but decided against it. Cancer didn't need to turn me into a bigger cranky bitch than I already was.

When I finally reached the front of her lawn, the toes of my shoes touching the curb, I realized why I hadn't seen any figures.

Everything had melted. I didn't even know the theme she had chosen for the week. All I saw was white goop all over her lawn, running in rivulets down her front lawn and leaking onto the street. One of the cars had a ring of wax wrapped around the front tire. It was a police car, empty of inhabitants. I took in the scene and wiped the sweat from my upper lip.

"She hasn't come out yet," one of the bystanders, an older man, called out to me. "Damn shame about the heat."

"I googled it," the woman beside him said. "I guess wax starts melting at 99 degrees. The heat index is over a hundred today."

"Oh," I said. I looked over at the car and the wax-wheel. "Why is there a cop car here?"

"We called the cops," the first man added. "We're worried because she hasn't come out of her house at all today. Usually she comes out in the middle of the night to put out new figures, but we've been here since yesterday and haven't seen her."

I sat on the curb away from the couple and waited. Half of me wasn't surprised when the firetruck and ambulance joined the cop car. Several uniformed people moved into the house, their footsteps cracking against the strips of melted wax that had now hardened in the yard. It took an hour to receive the bad news.

Ms. Sandy Wringers had died in her sleep.

The next newspaper brushed on this, but mainly wanted to talk about how police found and counted fifty-three mannequins in her house. All the figures were posed around in the rooms like they were living people assigned with certain tasks. Julie Andrews was standing at the ironing board. Ethel Merman was at a table set with two full-set placemats. Carol Burnett was upstairs in the bathroom holding a tube of lipstick. All they needed were hearts and lungs and voices and the house would have been full of living people.

OUT OF ORDER

“I never trust a man with two first names,” Red Dress said to me. She spoke quickly. As I watched, she ran her tongue around the inside of her cheek. I didn’t know if she was aiming to be coy or had something stuck in her teeth. The room had remained fairly quiet during the dates. The only rule was we were not allowed to talk about the city. For some people, there weren’t a lot of alternative topics.

“What?” I asked.

She reached forward, red fingernail glimmering. I thought maybe she’d run it across my throat, ending this uncomfortable encounter prematurely, but she only tapped the name badge I wore under my collar on the right side. “John Vincent Edwards. Is Vincent your middle name?”

I shook my head.

“Didn’t think so. So, whata’ya go by? John or Vincent?”

I almost felt ashamed, like a child caught in front of a scribbled-on wall equipped with a Crayola in hand. Macaroni n Cheese had been my favorite color as a kid. Maybe I’d be holding that color. Or maybe I’d chosen Granny Smith Apple to go along with the food theme. Either way, my face felt Tickle Me Pink. “John Vincent, usually.”

“Is ‘usually’ your middle name?” she asked, laughing.

Switch.

“So, ever fired a gun?” Blue Eyes asked me. She pinched the pendant on her necklace between her fingers, running it back and forth across the chain.

“No,” I replied.

“No even a BB gun?” She looked at me as if I’d admitted lighting houses on fire as a hobby. Hobbies were an acceptable topic on the list to discuss, along with childhood, relationship history, favorite things, and a few other mild topics. Thoughts on looting, water quality, what to do if you want a divorce from a deceased partner but can’t get the paperwork, etc, were dangerous, but usually okay.

“No,” I repeated.

She flicked a hand at me, like a queen dismissing a lowly servant.

Switch.

“What side of town do you live on?” Black Lipstick asked me.

“Careful!” the coordinator, a man who resembled a tomato in both his round shape and “stress rashes,” said to her from his post by the door. I felt a little like an inmate during visitation hours. Not that I’d ever been to prison.

Black Lipstick blew a raspberry. “I mean, do you have a nice place to live?”

“An apartment. It’s not great.” I wiped at the sweat on my upper lip. The air circulation in this cramped building could really be improved.

“Does it have a basement?” she asked. “A shelter? Anything?”

“No,” I replied.

She blew another raspberry, spittle actually leaving her lips, traveling airborne across the table, and sprinkling across my face.

I stood up. The other speed dating contestants looked up at me, all pausing in conversation. They looked to me as if I were their leader, and I had an inclination to leap onto the table and yell, “The revolution is nigh!” Instead, I left the small brick building on the South side of town and began walking down the sidewalk.

John Vincent had been my grandfather's name. Not that I really cared about that. I had no family left to remember those types of facts, except me. I worried that the coordinator would charge me with breaking a contract. I'd signed up to participate in speed dating for three weeks. But I'd lasted twenty minutes.

I knew my wife at this point would have said something like: *You could have given the women a break. They probably felt just as awkward as you.*

I was insulted and spit on, I'd say.

She'd smile and pinch my cheek like a little boy in the candy store. Or a little boy who'd drawn all over the wall and burst into tears of guilt. *You are so smart, John Vincent. They would have seen that, if you'd stayed for more than ten minutes.*

Twenty minutes, I'd corrected, pulling a lock of her hair in an affectionate manner. Her full lips would have smiled at me in a teasing way, her soft eyes trained on my face. I remembered every detail about her, inside and out.

I felt guilty for signing up for the speed dating, at first. But I'd grown tired of trying to make conversation with the walls in a semi-serious manner. I pretended my toaster was the dead mayor (assassinated and not replaced, yet) sometimes. I scolded his incompetence while waiting on my toast, toasted just slightly, the way I liked it.

As I walked to the bus stop around the corner from the brick building, a car flew by on the empty street. A young hooligan in an inmate-inspired black-and-white striped hoodie yelled, "Your time is coming, asshole!" He threw a beer bottle, and it shattered on the sidewalk a few feet to my left.

I watched the car speed away. *Weird, my wife would have said. Probably drunk.*

Probably, I'd say. I sat on the sticky bench. Bending my head back, I looked at the faded flyers decorating the telephone pole behind me, some so faded they were now blank. Someone had lost a black and white terrier and the reward was "a really nice thank you."

Another flyer advertised the fall fair, which happened a little over six months ago. A pink paper said GARAGE SALE but the "garage" had been crossed out and someone had written PROSTITUTE in black marker.

Classy, my wife would have said.

When is it? I'd say, laughing. She would have swatted my arm, scolding me while still remaining amused because she knew I would never be unfaithful to her.

The flyer on top of the rest, bright red with white letters read, THIS TOWN WILL BE OURS.

The bus, of course, didn't come. The busses had become less and less reliable as of lately. Some bus drivers had stopped showing up. I'd heard about this from a woman I'd sold a multi-suction, multi-surface vacuum to a few months back. She'd told me amidst my sales pitch that her husband had taken her vacuum during the separation. "He'd driven busses," the woman said. "Just up and quit. Left the job and me and took my damn vacuum cleaner and left this cursed town." She'd been an easy client. The recently-separated ones usually were.

I felt cold as I walked home. I had missed the news this morning and had not brought an adequate coat. The metal on the inside of my name badge rubbed against my chest like an unmelting ice cube. I kept it on in spite of Red Dress's comments on my name. I wanted someone to pass by and read it. "Oh, John Vincent!" they'd say. "How sophisticated a name. How completely quaint." Did people still use the word "quaint" un-ironically? Or did they still use it

like, “Oh, Suzie, that hideous haircut that looks like you put your head into a wood-chipper is so *quaint.*”

Either way, the name badge stayed on. When I finally did reach home some hours later, I put it on my pajama shirt, keeping it on me as I slept and dreamed of my wife.

...

“You see Ma’am,” I said as I walked around Rich Woman’s living room, showing the versatility of the vacuum that had been sitting in my apartment for some months now. The Boss Man had stopped sending me vacuums, probably on account of the post office being burnt down. But I thought if I sold all the vacuums they had already sent, I could go to the next town over and send a letter to Boss Man with all my checks. *I sold all six vacuums sitting in my apartment, I’d write. Customers are still willing to buy here!*

“The mobility of this cleaner is simply revolutionary,” I told Rich Woman. “The wheels can turn at 360 degrees. And as for the suction power,” I led the machine towards the small pile of coffee grounds I had brought with me and sprinkled onto her white shag carpet. “One sweep is all that is needed.” I ran the vacuum over the coffee grounds and stepped aside so she could see their disappearance.

Rich Woman, who wore a pinstriped suit nicer than anything I owned and blue tortoiseshell glasses, did not get up from her couch to look. She held a large bottle of wine in her hand and occasionally sipped from it. “I said I didn’t want one.”

“But, Ma’am, Ma’am, Ma’am...” I turned the vacuum off. In quiet moments like this, it felt as if I could imagine my wife at our old house, waiting for me to come home. “This vacuum does not have to be emptied for up to three months, vacuuming every day.”

She looked at me with skepticism. For a moment, I tried to remember if the manual had said three months or three weeks.

You should have read it better, my wife would have said, having read the entire manual and memorized it in an hour.

I didn't have time, I'd say. I had to walk here since the busses still aren't working.

You couldn't have multitasked? she'd ask.

"I'm not good at multitasking," I said.

"What?" Rich Woman asked.

"This vacuum is great at multitasking," I said to her. "It not only vacuums up messes, there is also this little part here," I motioned towards the front. I didn't know exactly where the part was. "That mists your carpet with your choice of fragrance. Revolutionary, I tell you."

She pushed up a sleeve and looked at her watch. "Listen, I've got work in an hour, and I have to fire all of my employees. I'm not in a great mood. If I get this vacuum, will you leave?"

"Oh, sure, sure," I said. "We actually have this particular model half off, currently."

"Whatever," she said, rising from the couch. She walked into her dining room, and I followed her. Her apartment was really nice, other than the spray paint on one wall near the entrance that read WARNING: I OWN A GUN. When I'd knocked on her door, I'd heard at least four locks being undone before the chain lock allowed her to open the door a little in order to speak to me. It took ten minutes of her interrogation before she finally let me in.

Her purse sat on the dining room table, and she reached into it, retrieving her wallet. Turning, she looked at me over the tops of her glasses. "How much?"

I left her apartment vacuumless and slightly giddy. That had been the first sale all week. Yesterday, a woman had pepper-sprayed me when I'd tried to come into her apartment. I

whistled as I walked, content with the frigid temperatures. As I rounded a corner into an alleyway that saved ten minutes of walking around the block, a large man stepped forward and blocked my path. “Alright, buddy,” he said. “Let’s see what you got.”

I looked up at him, running a hand under my nose, which had begun to leak with snot. The snot was a little bloody. I had severe dry skin around my nostrils. “I just sold my only vacuum,” I said.

He took out a metal object. A gun. “Empty your pockets,” he said.

I smiled at him. “You’re good at this,” I said. “You sound just like the people do on *Law and Order*.” He even looked like one—nondescript features, facial hair, black attire with a black beanie.

“I ain’t jokin,’ bud,” he said. He wagged the gun a little, making a cursive *n* into the air. “Just give me what you have and you can go on your way.”

“Alright, alright,” I said. I took out my wallet and gave it to him, as well as my apartment key on a keychain with an engraved vacuum as a decoration. The company had given it to me twenty years ago, when I’d sold my first vacuum.

He looked through the wallet. “All you have is a coupon for dog treats and a receipt from the library from,” he squinted at the top, “looks like a year ago.”

“Oh, those are probably overdue. They never called me.” I sighed. “And my dog died a while ago. You’re welcome to keep that coupon, if you like.”

“You have got to be shitting me,” the Robber Man said. “Seriously. Everything out of your pockets, man.”

I turned my pockets inside out, and a few quarters dropped out and fell to the pavement, one quarter spinning like a top. We both watched it with mild interest. “Salutations,” I said, bending down to pick up the fallen change and holding my palm out to him.

Then he found the check the woman had given me tucked into the back pocket of the wallet. “A check?” he asked.

“Oh, you can have that, too, I suppose. I really don’t feel like being shot today.” I smiled at him.

“The banks ain’t even working. This is useless to me.” He let go of the paper, and it fluttered away in the breeze. I watched it leave with much remorse.

Robber Man brought his arm back and struck me on the temple with the gun’s handle. I don’t recall hitting the pavement.

...

When I came to, everything was dark. At first I thought I might have been blinded, but as I sat up, I saw a streetlight flickering down the way. I was missing my shirt and my shoes. And my apartment key. And my wallet with the coupon. My name badge, thank God, sat on my naked chest.

My socks quickly became soaked with the liquid in the alley as I walked towards the streetlight. I also clipped the name badge to my pants.

Kind of like walking towards the light, right? My wife would joke.

“I’m not dead like you,” I said, touching my temple and wincing. My fingers felt wet with blood.

Don’t be such a sourpuss. At least you have your pants. Would have been embarrassing walking home in your boxers. A laugh from her.

“Yeah,” I said, reaching the streetlight. A payphone sat beside it. I patted my pockets and realized Robber Man had taken all my change. Shivering a little, I walked further down the street until I reached a twenty-four-hour convenience store. Before I could walk through the sliding doors, a small, Asian woman appeared in front of me, leveling a gun at my nose.

“I don’t want any trouble from your people,” she said. The store behind her looked empty, no products, not even shelves, but she still wore an apron with the store’s logo on the front.

I literally stared down the barrel of the gun, feeling like I was starring in a Western. My dad had been a huge fan of John Wayne when he’d been alive. We used to watch them together when I was a kid. “I just want to use your phone. I’ve been robbed. And now it appears I’m about to be shot, again. Well, I didn’t get shot before. Just threatened.”

“Get. Out,” she said, doing the little clicky thing with the gun that meant it was ready to fire. They called that cocking the gun, I thought. John Wayne did that a lot when *shit got real*, as the young people say.

I held my hands up and saluted her with one. Then I walked further down the road. Maybe she didn’t like men with two first names, either. Walking to a gas station full of pumps with OUT OF ORDER signs, I approached the front door. “I am *not* a madman,” I announced as I pushed the door open. A little bell jingled. “I just want to use your phone.”

The place was empty, even as the lights above buzzed and flickered. The shelves had mostly been cleared by this point and the floor felt sticky. Walking around the front counter, I played with the cash register a bit, but couldn’t open it. Not that it mattered.

Stealing is against your code of ethics, my wife would have said, had she been alive. Had she not been murdered.

“So was walking into a store with no shirt and no shoes. They have that phrase, or whatever. I never tested it out before,” I said. Maybe that had been what the woman had meant by *your kind*. The no shirt, no shoes, no service kind of guy.

I found the phone under the register on a little white shelf. After listening to the dial tone, I dialed 911. “Hello, 911, what is your emergency?” the woman answered.

“Hello, yes, I’ve been robbed.” I found a pen next to the phone and clicked it open. Then closed. Open. Closed. Open. Closed. Op—.

Stop that, my wife would have scolded.

I put the pen down as the woman responded, “Are you hurt?”

“Uh.” I felt my temple again, and a thud of pure pain radiated through my skull.

“Mildly.”

“I’m picking up your location in California?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. “I’m at a gas station. It’s empty. I’m guessing because they ran out of gas.”

“Sir.” Her tone remained serious. “Are you in Crusade Point?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I—,” There was a long pause. “I thought we filtered out these calls,” she muttered to herself. “Sir, I’m sorry. We can’t help you.”

“But you’re 911,” I said.

“Yes, sir, but the National Guard has been unable to get through the barricades and into your city—.” She began to say something else about being trapped, but the line went dead. I slammed the phone back onto the other part of the phone. What was that part called? The receiver? No.

I think just the base will do, my wife would have said.

“Oh, yes, yes.” I stood up and held onto the counter until my balance resumed. I walked down the aisles and found some expired cans of peaches. One can conveniently had the little tab thing so I didn’t need a can opener. I made my way back onto the street, sipping peaches from the can. I even saluted some imaginary people and prepared a pretend speech. “911 cannot reach me,” I said. “But at least I have these peaches.” My wife would have laughed.

...

When I reached home, I realized I could not get in because Robber Man had taken my key. He’d also taken my wallet, which included my address on my license. He could have come back here to stay at my place.

I knocked on my door with three quick raps of my knuckles. Perhaps we could make up a roommate agreement. I would sleep on the floor, and he could have my bed. He would *not* be able to touch my vacuums.

No one answered. I knocked for thirty minutes, and the door never opened.

The landlord of the building had disappeared months ago, so I had no immediate plan of action. The speed dating program I’d been at a few weeks before no longer met, and I couldn’t reach the program coordinator on account of the phones not usually working.

I sat on the steps outside my apartment complex that overlooked the parking lot, watching the night sky. No one came outside much anymore. Children were locked indoors by eight. In the distance, I heard gunfire. Maybe Robber Man finding another victim, maybe not. Maybe he was upstairs in my apartment opening my vacuums boxes.

Nelson, a man who lived downstairs, came up the walk, holding a briefcase.

“Hello,” I said to him.

“Hey, John Vincent,” he said. “Where is your shirt? Aren’t you freezing?”

My fingers felt a little numb. My head wound felt a little stabilized. “Mildly,” I said. “A Robber Man took my apartment key. I wish I wouldn’t have lost my car. The busses aren’t running.”

“I know,” Nelson replied. “My office closed today. My boss said we are all deluding ourselves if we think this town is going to survive this.”

I didn’t particularly care about Nelson’s job or know anything about it. My bedroom was full of vacuums I still had left to sell. My heart sank further when I recalled, yet again, my lack of access to them. I was beginning to feel very annoyed and inconvenienced with Robber Man.

Nelson sat down beside me, resting his briefcase on his knees. His hands shook as he ran them over the smooth leather covering the case. “Marge and Robert tried to escape the other day. Marge came back and said they shot Robert at the gate. Those monsters aren’t letting us leave.”

“Hm,” I said. I vaguely recalled hearing about Marge and Robert who I think lived somewhere around here, but I couldn’t picture their individual faces. “Can I interest you in buying a vacuum?”

Nelson looked over at me. “I just lost my job. I no longer have an income.”

“Damn,” I said as we both stared out at the parking lot. “I haven’t been able to send checks to my vacuum company, anyway. I just keep them in a drawer.”

“Why do you even bother?” Nelson asked.

“It’s my job,” I said.

More gunfire down the street. Nelson stood up, holding the briefcase against him. “Do you think they’ll come here?”

“Who?” I asked.

“Them,” he said.

I laughed. “You sound like you belong in some horror movie. We’ll be fine. The busses will come back and the phone lines will open and 911 will find us.”

Nelson watched me for a while and then set down his briefcase. He slipped off his suit jacket and held it out to me. “Stay warm, John Vincent.”

“Thank you,” I said, slipping on the jacket that still held remnants of his body heat.

He left, walking down the hallway to his apartment. I thought about asking if I could stay with him, but I didn’t want to intrude. I took my name badge off of my pants and clipped it onto the suit jacket. I licked the remaining peach juice off my fingers.

...

You’re homeless, my wife would have said for the third night in a row that I slept under the stairs of my apartment building on the concrete. Some people walked by, but none offered me a spare bed. Hardly anyone noticed me at all. I got the suspicion that several people who had lived in this complex no longer stayed here.

It’s temporary, I’d say.

The nights are getting colder, she’d say.

It’s temporary, I’d say.

You’re in danger, she’d say.

I’m doing okay, I’d say.

No, she’d argue, *you’re not, dear*.

One night, I awoke and smelled smoke. Opening my eyes, I saw embers floating above my line of vision. They were beautiful, mostly charred pieces of plaster or paint with just a touch of orange flame around the edges, fluttering to the ground like flower petals.

Sitting up, I saw them in the parking lot, all standing shoulder-to-shoulder. There were eight of them, both men and women naked and covered in war paint of several colors. They held torches in their hands. “This town is ours!” they yelled over and over, their voices sounding like they were coming from one singular guttural beast. They spoke of retribution and of the time for reckoning.

I remembered seeing them in the newspapers, back when the paper had been regularly delivered and I had a house. *Revolutionists*. I always thought it was a skip and a jump away from a quirky school club.

I thought about asking them if they were interested in buying a vacuum, then I remembered where they were. My vacuums, sitting up in my apartment, possibly going up in flames. I got to my feet and adjusted my name badge.

“There’s one!” a woman called as she caught my movement. A few men approached me, and I tried not to stare at their nakedness.

Staring at naked people is rude, my wife would have said had she been alive. Had she not been murdered. Had she not been taken and killed as some kind of blood sacrifice to these people. Had they not burned my house down and forced me to move into this apartment that now only Robber Man had the key for.

“Hello,” I said, waving as they came up to me. They looked about twenty, each with two bright red paint streaks across their cheeks like some ancient warrior tribe. I tapped my name badge with my index fingernail, which needed trimming. “I’m John Vincent. Both John and Vincent are my first name, I know it’s a little confusing.”

One reached up and ripped the name badge off my shirt, throwing it to the ground.

“That was not very nice,” I said. I stepped forward to retrieve it, but the other man stepped up in front of me. I looked up at him, several heads taller than I was. “I’m here for my vacuums.”

“For your what?” he asked.

“Excuse me,” I said, and dashed up the stairs. I heard them barreling after me, two bears uncaged, but I managed to make it to the second floor. One left and one right and there was my door, still intact. The fire must be on the first floor, because here only smoke held evidence of the fire.

I rammed my shoulder into the door, like John Wayne would have done had he been here. The door didn’t budge. “I have to get them,” I said.

John Vincent, my wife would have said, you can’t die trying to save those dumb vacuum cleaners of yours.

But I had to save them. I kicked the door and screamed and clawed at the wood, which ripped my nails to shreds. I knew the men were behind me, waiting and watching. I hit the door over and over and, finally, it gave with a loud splintering of wood.

I rushed into the space and there were my vacuums in my empty living room. All five of them, sitting in their untouched boxes and waiting for me. I smiled as I saw them, as if reunited with old friends. I felt the heat rising from the floor beneath me as I sat down in front of the boxes.

“I’m here,” I said, as I would have said to my wife, had I been there to save her from those people. “It’s going to be alright.”

I smiled at the boxes as I heard footsteps sounding somewhere inside the apartment. “It’s going to be alright,” I said. “It really is.”