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Life, Love, and Loss: Redefining the Trauma

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LIFE, LOVE, AND LOSS: REDEFINING THE TRAUMA

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

Samantha Crystal Rae Barnette

May 2021

LIFE, LOVE, AND LOSS: REDEFINING THE TRAUMA

English

Missouri State University, May 2021

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

This thesis begins with a critical introduction analyzing the use of defamiliarization and the Dostoevskian hero in literature as a catalyst for a change in perception for victims of trauma. I create a relationship between the theories of Viktor Shklovsky and Mikhail Bakhtin as applied to both my own and published works. Short stories from Carmen Maria Machado and Marly Swick and Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* help to situate my own writing within this theoretical approach. The basis of my hypothesis lies in the blurred effect that trauma can have on the individual, causing an automatic response to any incidence similar to the primary trauma. The act of defamiliarization grants a perspective toward the initial trauma, breaking the automatic response (Shklovsky) and allowing the recovery process to begin. This new perspective helps the victim to broaden self-consciousness and transforms them from victim to hero (Bakhtin). Literature that defamiliarizes trauma allows a safe vantage point for sufferers and creates a place for recovery.

KEYWORDS: creative writing, fiction, hero, defamiliarization, trauma

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to my babies: Madeline, Dakota, and Christopher. You taught me that only I define who I am.

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LIFE, LOVE, AND LOSS: REDEFINING THE TRAUMA

Literature is a safe place where the normal can be made abnormal and the experienced made naïve. It is a bubble where the reader can safely explore concepts from thriving in a dystopian society governed by an extreme religious regime to winning a battle against a seven-headed serpent. It is also a haven for readers to make sense of and reevaluate their existence. Fiction does not only provide a tool to circumnavigate our lives, but also offers passage through the most treacherous obstacles we can encounter. Defamiliarization grants the reader a new perspective into traumatic events such as childhood trauma, discrimination, loss, and mental illness. The concept of trauma “is generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impact’s the self’s emotional organization and perception of the external world” (Mambrol). Perception performs an essential role in facilitating coping skills and adjusting to obstacles that disrupt our lives. Trauma is transformed from a stronghold of psychological torment to a strengthening, enlightening resource of guidance and reassurance in ourselves and our environment. Not only does it transform the trauma itself, but we morph from victim to hero. This analysis compares and contrasts the use of defamiliarization in fictionalizing my own experiences, and stories from Carmen Maria Machado, Marly Swick, and Margaret Atwood.

Perception and thought play an essential role in how we see ourselves and how we live. Trauma can skew perception drastically. Viktor Shklovsky, a Czech formalist, theorizes the effect of trauma on thought processes, comparing it to an algebraic formula in that certain characteristics of thought are represented as objects in the mind. This method of representation causes us to “apprehend objects as only shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics” (Shklovsky, 1). We do not

see the trauma in its true light, as an obstacle to overcome. Instead, our perception is altered by the emotion that accompanies the trauma which is usually strong and overwhelming. In order to process the trauma, however, we need to visualize it from safe distance or through a clear, unemotional lens.

Another issue with the storage of trauma in our memory is our response to the same or similar situations is automatized. Shklovsky explains that this automated response to an object, in this case trauma, becomes economic, meaning that it occurs with little to no mental effort. Although this may be true, the constant induction of stressful responses like anxiety, shame, and fear becomes automatized as well, allowing it to become commonplace in our lives. Sometimes the response manifests outwardly like picking at the skin or avoidance of any situation that feels similar to the original traumatic experience. Our response becomes increasingly more automated and then “function[s] as though by formula and do[es] nor even appear in cognition” (Shklovsky, 1).

Fiction has the ability to defamiliarize a concept or situation. It can alter our perception therefore making the familiar unfamiliar. Once we contextualize the idea and its parts, we can gain a new perspective. This means that if we can separate the occurrence from the attached emotion, the trauma may look entirely different. For example, in “The Husband Stitch”, a story in Carmen Maria Machado’s short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties*, the main character talks about her journey to motherhood. She recalls the details of her twenty hour labor and the profanity she yells at her husband as she tries to tear off his hand. This experience is traumatic both physically and emotionally by itself. The main character also explains some of the other side effects of labor and delivery not usually discussed, like the need for an episiotomy during delivery. While episiotomies are common during a vaginal birth, they must be closed and

allowed to heal like any other wound. The problem occurs when the husband asks for an “extra stitch.” The husband stitch is an actual medical procedure in which the doctor closes the opening created by the episiotomy, but adds an extra stitch. The procedure is called the “husband stitch” because it was believed to add to male pleasure after childbirth. The extra stitch is considered a form of female genital mutilation and grouped with other extreme procedures like female circumcision; these procedures can cause lifelong pain and hardship for the victim.

All women in this story are born with a ribbon attached to some location on their body. For the main character, it is tied around her neck and throughout the entire story either her husband or her son tries to remove it. The congruency between the husband stitch and this ribbon is revealed during the last scene. The main character finally relents and allows her husband to untie her protected ribbon. The husband becomes sexually aroused, excited as she tells him to do what he wants. Once the ribbon is untied, her head is no longer secured to her neck and it tips backwards off of her shoulders. The husband’s disregard for his wife’s health and the importance placed on his own gratification is a metaphor for the desires of men over the lives of women. In the case of rape, molestation, or any other form of sexual assault that victimizes women, the common thread is the man’s sexual need and his craving for instant gratification taking priority over the health and safety of the woman. Machado gives visibility to crimes involving the sexual assault of women.

It may not be apparent right away, but by looking at the main character’s final thoughts Machado achieves a sense of the trauma from a new point of view. After the main character asks her husband if he wants her to untie the ribbon, she closes her eyes and remembers their first time. She talks of the boy that “kissed [her] and broke [her] open by that lakeside, who did with [her] what [she] wanted” (Machado 44). The thought allows the reader to visualize her feelings

and her sense of control over her own body unlike after the delivery of her son. In the end, she also feels as if she controls the untying of her ribbon. By removing the emotion from the situation and looking through another's eyes, we can learn to cope with the automatized response to sexual trauma and decide to control how we adjust during future exposures instead of letting it control us, similar to the manner in which the main character in "The Husband Stitch" dictates her own undoing.

Instances of defamiliarization can also come from stories that are more realistic in nature. Marly Swick's short story "Elba" from her collection titled *A Hole in the Language*, is a firm example of realistic defamiliarization but it accomplishes the same goal as "The Husband Stitch": giving perspective to a traumatizing event. This story takes place in Florida where Fran, the main character, and her Mother, Lillian, live. "Elba" revolves around the benefits and pitfalls of familial relationships. Lillian moves Fran from Maryland after her father disowns her for getting pregnant. Over twenty-five years later, Fran gets a photograph from the daughter she put up for adoption. The girl in the photograph, Linda Rose, is holding her newborn and reveals Fran's new status as grandmother.

The first two examples of family in this piece are burdened with loss, shame, and grief. We find out that Fran not only loses her father, but also lost her child. This stirs up memories of packing to leave Maryland and her father shaming her discrepancy. She ran to him begging and asking if he loved her. His response was to grab "a handful of the oversized man's shirt [she] was wearing and sheared a big, ragged hole that exposed [her] pale balloon belly" (Swick 8-9). The loss of a husband also seems to be a stressful topic for Lillian as well. When he shows up at their door step unannounced, Lillian wrings her hands, smearing her wet nail polish and then again as she chips the dried paint on her thumbnails.

The reader does not need to read very deep to see another side of this argument. Marly Swick allows the reader to visualize the situation from Fran's point of view; we get a sense of her losses and how they make her feel. When she is exposed to those losses again, we can see how her perception changes, especially after hearing how her father's life progresses. We are able to feel her anger at her father for disowning her and moving on to a new family. We can also see this anger in her Mother when she "made a few barbed comments" and "tossed off a few poison darts" (Swick 20). Since we are not involved in Fran and Lillian's angst, we are able to get an unemotional perspective into their situations. Fran, apprehensive about the letter from her daughter, mentally fights her past through most of the piece, but when her father shows back into her life and she is exposed again to her feelings of loss and shame, she decides to respond to her daughter, inviting her to visit. In this instance, Fran is using the stress as motivation to better her life and the life of her daughter and grandchild, instead of allowing the automated response of fear to subdue her.

My collection was prepared with defamiliarization in mind, as I wanted to prepare a collection of short stories that not only allows me, as the author, to get a new perspective, but also allows readers to benefit similarly. Defamiliarization plays an essential role in Maggie's life, the main character in "Justice Mints." Maggie's main characteristic is her low self-esteem; when approached by a man on Tinder, she wonders: "Are you blind, Sir? Or just desperate" (Barnette 24). This not only shows her displeasure with her looks, but also perhaps an indication of past dating experiences that ended badly. Unfortunately, her reaction is validated while doing some pre-date shopping. Maggie encounters Michael, the man that she finally recognizes from the dating application, inside the grocery store where pushes his way to the front of line. The conversation ends when Michael thinks he has outwitted Maggie, all the while never recognizing

who she is. He tells Maggie that he “forgot that people of your size don’t have time to read a book between bites” (Barnette 27). The reader is able to see Maggie’s automatic response; she pacifies his ego and avoids a confrontation as an attempt to forego any further embarrassment. Once she relents though, he makes sure to inflict the most damage possible and arrogantly states that she “can’t risk those junior mints melting, after all” (Barnette 27). equating her avoidance of confrontation with gluttony.

The sadness and anger are visible as she cries in the car, ignoring any attempt he makes to contact her. Her automatized response has developed after years of constant weight discrimination from society. Many overweight individuals decide that silence is best and this decision is the result of a diminished self-esteem and doubt in their minds as well as their bodies. Overexposure to harmful situations can become habitual and, after prolonged exposure, will not even register cognitively to the victim. In a story built on societal weight discrimination, Maggie finally responds to Michael, but her response is courageous and novel. She attributes her absence from their date to the advice she received from Michael in the grocery store. When asked why she did not show up for their date, she feigns ignorance and explains that the idea was his: “I thought about it and you were right. I couldn’t risk my chocolate melting” (Barnette 30). The silence in Michael’s realization and his delayed connection between Maggie and the overweight woman are enough to transform the conversation into Maggie’s war hammer. The piece allows us to visualize weight discrimination through the eyes of someone encounters similar situations everyday. It also allows us a different point of view; the gratification is almost tangible as Maggie stands up for herself and *tastes* the justice as she enjoys her box of candy.

The first obstacle in learning to deal with trauma is the ability to visualize it without the terrorizing effects of the associated emotion, but once the trauma is redefined, the process of

redefining our role in the trauma can begin. Mikhail Bakhtin, author of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, explains that it is “not important how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to his hero, and how the hero appears to himself” (47). He theorizes that any point of view the author or narrator expresses, their descriptions or characterizations, or any other definition of the hero should be considered slander because the importance lies in how the hero see themselves, not the views of the author or narrator (Bakhtin 48). This concept can be applied to trauma and its victims as well. The trauma itself is inconsequential as is the time frame or place in which it occurred, or any characteristics that defines the trauma. Our relationship to the trauma and how we perceive its effects on our lives is what needs to be examined. A redefinition occurs when the trauma is no longer permitted to dictate the manner in which our lives proceed; we have the ability to transform ourselves from a sufferer of trauma to a hero that overcame another obstacle in our narrative. Our heroism is not dictated by the consumption of our lives by the trauma, but by “the crises and turning points” thereafter, and the perception of our “lives on the threshold” (Bakhtin 73).

The process of defamiliarization can happen soon after the traumatic incident or it may take a lifetime. Once the sufferer theorizes their ability to visualize the trauma differently and the role its role, healing can begin, allowing for a stronger self-visualization. Carmen Maria Machado’s “Eight Bites” is a solid example of late life transformation. The main character is a woman whose life has been defined by her weight by both societal standards and familial values. The title of the story shares a memory the main character has of her mother and the way she maintained her slender figure. Her mother explained that “Eight bites are all you need to get the sense of what you are eating” (Machado 171). Many overweight individuals are addicted to food either for pleasure or as a coping mechanism linked to stress or trauma. In order to overcome the

addiction, they must re-envision food as a source of nourishment and not as a means to drown emotions. The mother's words indicate that food is merely a social mechanism; it relays an almost anorexic relationship with food and that the taste is the only important part of the food, not the nutritional value.

The main character describes her mother as normal, meaning she was not overweight. Her definition of normal allows the main character to develop an unrealistic, idealized image of her mother and what it means to be thin; the reader can then understand that according to her mother, any body type other than slender is abnormal. It is difficult for a mother, obviously wrought with her own body image issues to help their children develop a healthy relationship with food.

The main character's relationship with food and her weight is important in understanding her journey to heroism. After her weight loss surgery, the main character encounters the fat she lost, hiding in the basement. Since she has been taught that fat is abnormal, she shames her fat in the same manner that she had been shamed before her bariatric surgery. Before shutting the abused mass in the basement, she shames it further, saying "You are unwanted" (Machado 185) similar to the implicit message she felt coming from her family and the world around her. She does not realize, however, that the fat she lost never really leaves. At the end of the story, she dies, seemingly alone, but the mass reappears to carry her away; "arms will lift me from my bed – her arms. They will be mother-soft, like dough and moss" (Machado 187). After years of no communication, the mass comforts her and provides companionship during her last moments. She apologizes to the mass of fat and explains that she did not know.

The last scene can be deciphered in a variety of ways depending on the reader and their experiences, but it has a special meaning to any woman judged by their weight or pressured to

adhere to a standard of beauty. As an overweight individual myself, the mass is a physical representation of the weight loss and the struggle in overcoming an addiction. It is also a representation of the insults, abuse, and other discriminatory acts that an overweight individual endures due to the social stigma surrounding weight. Weight can be lost, but the emotions associated with will continue to affect the person's life, even if it is muted by weight loss.

The fat mass can also be a representation of self-appreciation and love. The main character in "Eight Bites" lives her entire life, unknowingly permitting her family and the standards of society to dictate her relationship with her body and her worth based on her appearance. She does not fully appreciate what she lost from her surgery; she not only lost the weight, but her autonomy. In the end, though, she realizes the weight she lost never left; it waited until she was able to accept herself and to appreciate even those parts of herself society deemed unlovable. This revelation did not occur until her death, but once she realizes her mistake, she transforms the self-loathing and self-deprecating thoughts into a heroic act meant to aid her in her journey of self-love; therefore, transforming her from another victim of societal and familial weight standards to a hero, destined to love herself no matter who tells her otherwise.

Similar to Carmen Maria Machado's short story, "Eight Bites", June is a victim of a particularly heinous form of sexism; June lives in a dystopian nation. Gilead was once a large portion of the United States, but has now been taken over by a Christian extremist regime. *A Handmaid's Tale* is an ideal example of the transformation of victim to hero because we are allowed to visualize the environment through June's eyes. Bakhtin describes the hero as an unfinalized creation in the author's mind, but "the sum total of his consciousness and self-consciousness" (48). Margaret Atwood, the author, sets up June's environment, the numerous ways that women are minimized and dehumanized by extreme manifestations of gender roles

and then develops our knowledge of June's response to this environment. During a Salvaging, a proceeding meant to apply punishment assigned by the court, the handmaidd are responsible for carrying out "justice." June starts to name off some of the crimes of Gilead and their punishments. Atwood reveals in this section that women are not permitted to read in Gilead. June mentions that the female criminal sentenced to death is probably not accused of reading because "that's only a hand cut off, on the third conviction" (Atwood 275).

The criminalization of reading removes a woman's access to knowledge; therefore, significantly reducing any autonomy she had. Other laws exist that cause the same issue. The founders of Gilead create law from their own interpretations of Bible scripture. For instance, many Christians use a passage from the Bible to condemn homosexuality. In *A Handmaid's Tale* queer individuals are called "Gender Traitors," a distinction gaining the offender either a permanent job in the Colonies or a death sentence, unless the woman has viable ovaries, then she would be a Handmaid. The citizens of Gilead do not have the right to choose who they marry. June describes Nick as a low status man, mentioning that "he hasn't been issued a woman, not even one. He doesn't rate; some defect, lack of connection" (Atwood 17). The only citizens of Gilead with the ability to choose their own spouses are Commanders.

Margaret Atwood paints a clear picture of June definition of herself in the caustic environment and how it changes throughout the novel. June details her room and the items in it early in the novel. She talks about the medium-hard mattress, a watercolor picture with no glass, a chair, and white curtains. She then talks about what the objects mean: "I know why there is no glass, in front of the watercolor picture of blue irises, and why the window opens only partly and why the glass in it is shatterproof. It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge" (Atwood 7-8).

Her thought process shows her desperate need to escape from Gilead. She contemplates suicide as a means to achieve freedom. This is even more evident when bombarded with possible arrest late in the novel. Guardians arrive at the Waterford residence to arrest June for ‘violation of state secrets.’ June watches the men pile out of the black van and thinks “I’ve been wasting my time. I should have taken into my own hands while I had the chance” (Atwood 293). She mentions stealing a knife from the kitchen or accessing Serena’s sewing scissors.

June’s outlook changes in the last scene of the novel. She is presented with an opportunity to flee Gilead, thanks to Nick and Mayday, but is hesitant to take advantage. This reasoning may be caused by concern for her unborn child or her relationship with Nick. June talks to a fellow handmaid who assures her that Mayday can get sneak people out of Gilead, especially those in immediate danger. June relays her feelings during this interaction: “The fact is I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” (Atwood 271). This is an important passage because it showcases June’s desire to control her own fate, even though that control is only a decision to not leave.

As Bakhtin has mentioned, heroes are those characters shown in crises and on thresholds. In *A Handmaid’s Tale*, June is constantly in crisis of saying or doing something that may be worthy of punishment according to Gilead law that could result in physical abuse, dismemberment, or even death. She is always fighting for the safety of herself and her daughter, and eventually the life of her unborn child. June starts to lose this battle mentally, deciding to stay in Gilead, but never truly loses her want to leave, especially considering knowing what kind of life her daughter will endure. Her thresholds are seemingly abundant, as well. The main threshold comes in the last scene when she must decide whether she goes with Nick who claims

he is working with Mayday or stay. Either choice could spell disaster for her; an attempted escape could mean death, but in staying, she could meet the same fate.

June decides, in the end, to leave with Nick and the other two guardians. She knows Nick is an Eye, a spy for the government of Gilead. Even though her trust in Nick wanes, the simple act of trusting her life with three men who have proven untrustworthy, ignites her transformation from a victim of Gilead to a hero who decides her own fate. The small amount of trust she has left for Nick and his mention of Mayday is permitted to overshadow her doubt. She takes control of her life and how she plans to overcome years of trauma.

I have composed stories that not only serve as a new perspective into certain types of trauma, but also narratives that allow the reader to observe a sufferer's journey from in the trenches to gain a new vantage point for trauma and learning to cope with it. In "A Mountain and a Molehill," Mari is a young, single mother trying to keep her daughter healthy and happy, while dealing with a mental disorder. Tiles represent emotions from the highs to the lows and everything in between. Mari's emotions are on the living room wall for everyone to see when they walk into her house. She has never seen someone else's "colors" and did not even realize other people had them. A new job means new experiences and a means of meeting new people. Ms. Lee's colors are also laid out in tiles on her living room wall. Mari learns that everyone has a tiled wall of emotions assigned to them at birth much like biological gender and eventually finds her daughter's.

Mari, like some adults, carry their emotions outwardly, unable to hide them. This is not seen a typical trait and therefore stigmatized when compared to societal standards. Many adults keep their emotions to themselves or a select group of friends and family. When exposed to adults that talk a lot, get anxious easily, or have some other seemingly exaggerated display of

emotion, people tend to get uncomfortable. History has taught us that it is easier to much uncomfortable topics and situations to the back, so we do not have to deal with them. This kind of fear of the different can be seen in interactions between different races, different genders, or new ideas like gender neutral bathrooms and the use of they/them pronouns.

This reaction can have a detrimental and traumatic effect on someone who is highly sensitive and carries their emotions outwardly. Friends, family, and strangers tend to pull away because they do not understand them. Sufferers are constantly told to relax or to stop being so dramatic and told they should seek counseling. Even though most of these comments usually come from a place of love and sincerity, people who have exaggerated emotions tend to overthink as well. They start to feel as if society pities them or that they are disabled in some way.

Mari saw the vicious green on her wall and her first thought was that “it looked like lake water, the opaque kind, hiding creatures that would bite without provocation. It looked like fear and despair” (Barnette 35). The desperation Mari already felt for her situation was hard enough without having to see a menacing new tile on her wall. This is what it feels like when a highly sensitive person is told to calm down and relax; they feel the pressure to be like other people and for their response to be normal. Throughout the story, however, Mari learns that there are other people like her in society and not every bad situation, or color in this example, means that the world is ending. By the end of the piece, Mari sits with Brian on a lake shore. The lake is the same color as the menacing tile on her living room wall. This last scene shows Mari’s new vantage point and she begins to associate the opaque green of the lake with less harmful objects: “She looked out over the lake. It was green, the opaque kind. Not full of predatory creatures, but fish, frogs, and turtles that thrive in the water. The dark color was neither scary nor malevolent,

just green” (Barnette 61). Mari no longer feels like a victim of her situation or her emotions. She may feel normal in the scene by the lake, but Mari has successfully started to navigate her own traumatic experiences and allowed herself to see things with new eyes, making her a hero in her own right.

This introduction to my graduate collection serves as an insertion point for my writing into the current conversation on fiction and its infinite possibilities. Fiction can act as a mode of defamiliarization for the reader and allows a reader to view concepts and objects in new ways. Concrete items like tiles and ribbons can become a representation of more abstract concepts like mental illness or the patriarchal view of the woman’s role in society. It can also allow the reader to filter through strong emotion and stereotypes to view their own situations in a new light. Once a new perspective is attained, the sufferer has the tools to work through some of their own traumatic experiences and stop letting them control everything they do. If a hero is defined as the sum of their consciousness and their self-consciousness, then once a sufferer stops allowing the trauma to dictate their existence and starts to dictate their own lives, they have transformed from the victim of trauma to a hero.

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THIRTEEN

I think it's super important to expose children to different cultures and lifestyles. I grew up in central Texas, where jackets go on at 60 degrees and you were lucky to see ice on the ground during the "winter," let alone snow. I was comfortable in Killeen. I knew beside that Wal-Mart was this music store that sold single pieces of sheet music. I was 13 and finally able to learn an instrument in school. I miss that band room. It seems like a symbol of innocence now. Stark, white walls, unhindered laughter, and a dependable feeling of confidence. In that room, I wasn't the quiet girl that ate lunch alone or the fat girl that people were ashamed of, I was a blossoming musician. The last time I felt comfortable in my own skin was holding and playing that cylindrical piece of black-stained wood and silver-plated keys.

I lived with conservative grandparents whose beliefs I would end up opposing when I grew up, but as a child, you don't really have a say in how you are raised. The house, though was always very clean and typical of houses built in the 70s. The walls were white and covered in a yellow film indicative of a house full of smokers. The carpet was a dark green almost like the skin of an olive, something no one wants in their house now. My bedroom was at the end of the hall and I shared a room with my older brother, Mark. Our windows opened to the backyard – a swing set, a sandbox, an in-ground pool, and a little concrete table where we would eat watermelon after swimming in the summer.

In '96, my mother uprooted my siblings and I in order for us to live in Virginia with my dad's side of the family. I had met them before, but too soon in my life for me to actually recollect. It's an odd situation for a young teenager to encounter. You go from living in a house where ladies crossed their legs when they sat, and we ate family dinners together every night at

the kitchen table to a house where being a lady was a relative concept and dinner was eaten in front of the TV. Even beyond the familial setting, the culture shock was startling. I never knew that dogs could sleep outside, people paid to watch cars race, and uncles touched their nieces.

This story really begins in Chester, a somewhat small city in central Virginia. We lived in Greenleigh trailer park – it was pretty run down and looked like your typical white-trash neighborhood. Initially, it was my mom, my older brother, my younger sister, and me. My dad died in '87. I never really knew him, but there were mixed reviews. It is hard for someone to go from having a pool, a piano, and loads of space to sharing a bunk bed with a 9-year-old sister that was spoiled rotten and pissed that we moved away from the grandparents that spoiled her.

My mother started a relationship with my uncle, who, technically, she wasn't related to – only by marriage. I remember them dating and going out every now and then, not obsessively though. Carl was a nice enough man. He treated mom well. When I first met him, he was married to this awful hag of a woman who accused me, a thirteen-year-old, of seducing her husband. Soon after, though, he divorced her and moved in with us.

We got along great. I think. It was a little awkward for me though considering mom's boyfriends barely noticed me; my brother was about 16 or 17 then and was old enough to be cool to hang out with and my sister was the cute one. She was still a little child in mind and body. Me, on the other hand, was the teenage girl who was still managing the demands of puberty. I was chubby and moody, mainly because I was usually by myself. My uncle was different. He let me ride in his Chevy to the store and let me hang out with him in the garage while he fixed engines.

I don't remember when things changed, though. When they changed from a familial relationship to something more and since I really hadn't had a father figure in my life, I wasn't

sure what was normal. So this isn't a story of nonconsensual sex or rape, but of a girl who didn't understand what it meant to love and to be loved back.

I remember one day we were driving back from Dinwiddie where his brother and his family lived, and he asked me if he could have sex with me. I remember wanting to do anything for him that I could. I enjoyed the attention and he never made me feel bad. Now that I think back on it, this was pretty fucked up logic, but I was 13. So, we got back to the trailer, showered, and did the deed. It was unimportant. The feeling of making him happy is what I think of the most. He seemed to enjoy himself.

This started to become a regular occurrence and we would partake wherever he pleased: an empty semi-trailer at his job or the grocery store parking lot. Still, none of this felt important. The sex itself was of no consequence. I could've taken it or left it, but the attention fueled my soul. This mindset screwed up most of my relationships as an adult. This is also where my intense jealousy was born and blossomed, especially when he gave his attention to other women.

Things went on this way for four years. I was essentially being used as a sex doll, but I didn't know better. I thought for sure this was how things were done in everyone's house. I never had boyfriends in high school. I missed that part of my childhood, exploring my sexuality in a safe, healthy way: finding out what and who I liked. I was entrenched in his wants and needs and had no care for my own, or I didn't know I was supposed to.

Occasionally, I would get called to the school counselor's office and they would ask me about my home life. My general response equated to 'Yep. I'm a happy camper.' This happened often and each time I questioned why. That was until my maternal grandfather was diagnosed with lung cancer. That's what happens after 50 years of smoking. My mom moved back to Texas to help her mother take care of him. This is around the time I began to realize that I was nothing

to my uncle, but an in-house source of sexual satiation. The women he brought home caused a rage in me I've never felt, but unaccustomed to speaking up for myself, I sat in my room and stewed in my own rage, crying myself to sleep.

That part was not the worst, by far. When in the company of these unsavory women, he talked to me like I was a child he was babysitting. It had never been an issue before. I had been demoted from a companion to the teenager you ground for not doing the dishes. Don't get me wrong, I was a child and sometimes I deserved to be punished for things I had done like taking the car without permission or having friends over without asking, but it was entirely too late to start micromanaging me now.

I can remember finally having the time for a friend. Her name was Charlotte, and I would tell her everything, including about the life that had been mine for the past 4 years. She was taken aback. She left my house, uncomfortable, and it took me years to realize why. She still spoke to me like we were friends at school. She still listened to me rant about my life and how I wish things were different, but she never came back.

One day, we decided to eat lunch outside as we were allowed to do at my high school. Her face was very intense, and her eyes were full of tears.

"Mags, I'm sorry but I can't listen to these stories you tell me anymore."

"Ok. Is there a reason why? Did I say something wrong?"

"This thing with your uncle is unhealthy and illegal. I won't tell, but I think you should."

Her cheeks now soaked with tears.

"Illegal!?"

"Yes, it is illegal for an adult to have sex with a child. Plus, it is even more illegal to have sex with your family."

I immediately began to cry. It had never crossed my mind. I wasn't upset that my uncle had taken advantage of me, but ashamed that I let it happen. I was so embarrassed. I grabbed my things and left the school. I walked home and locked myself in my bedroom. When Carl came home after work, new girl in tow, he knocked on my door. I didn't answer, not because I didn't want to, but too disappointed to see anyone. He didn't bother me anymore that night.

In the morning, I sat on the side of my bed, still wearing the clothes from yesterday, and instantly felt disgusting. I rushed into the bathroom, disrobed, and scrubbed everything for as long as I could stand it. I made sure the water scalded my skin to clean away the 4 years' worth of filth. Why did I let this happen to me? What the fuck is wrong with me?

My first experience with depression had set in. I scrubbed my body everyday trying to remove every part of him that still existed in my soul. I left the house before he did in the morning and stayed in my room when I was home. I barely ate unless I was forced to eat with him and his newest conquest. People at school started noticing a change in my demeanor. Charlotte tried to talk to me, but I was too ashamed to face her. Eventually, my teachers started to notice too. I was called into the counselor's office one last time.

The woman asked me the same question I had been used to answering, but this time I melted in the chair. I couldn't talk. I couldn't form sentences except for 'I'm sorry.' The last 4 years came spewing out of my mouth. The counselor made a call and let me go to the restroom. I ran home instead. Carl was there and saw me run in the house. I grabbed clothes and stuffed them in a bag, readying myself to run away. Some morbid sense of loyalty washed over me. Carl's face dropped when I told him what had transpired in the counselor's office. He cried and cursed me, Shortly after, two cars pulled into the driveway: one police cruiser and a black sedan. Tears rolled down my face. I thought I was going to jail. It was still beyond me that he was the

one at fault. They cuffed him and loaded him into the cruiser. A kind woman hugged me and helped me into the sedan.

I was placed in a group home until my mom could come get me. I was only there for about 3 days when her and my brother came to get me. Mom took me to the house to gather my things. I grabbed everything I could. I was allowed to bring my little dog Apple Jacks but had to leave my lab, Popi. He was too big for grandma's house. I snuck to the bathroom upstairs and wrote Carl a letter, still convinced I had done something wrong. The trip back to Texas sucked. It was long and tedious.

THE DAY I FOUND OUT HE KNEW

Sometimes I feel like the algorithm for my life was a damaged file and the data engineers just copied and pasted anything they could find. Those scientists gave me a lovely dose of child molestation to instantiate the program. They picked the perfect era, too: puberty. A girl trying to find herself and her way through the world, no longer a child, bombarded with an uncle who loves her the wrong way. I'm not sure how no one knew the four years that I endured. There were 5 people in a small house. We all shared a living room, kitchen and two bathrooms. How can it be ok for a 13-year-old to go everywhere with her uncle? How can it be ok for a 45-year-old man to have sexual inclinations towards girls that hadn't even developed breasts? Welcome to my fucked-up world.

That time blurs in my mind. I have dealt with the trauma and come to terms with it. I know it wasn't my fault, most of the time anyway. I've been to therapy and spoke about it. I've even stood up for myself to the family that still blames me for their beloved uncle, dad, and brother going to prison for 2 years. Trauma is trauma, right? You never forget, but the pain fades a bit... until it doesn't.

Late December 2020, I get a message from my brother's ex, Darcy, from high school. She reminisced about high school and spoke at length about how badly her and my brother's relationship ended. Then, she started to apologize to me. I smiled thinking that she finally felt bad about bullying me for being overweight or acting like I didn't exist when we were all in high school. The conversation veered, though, in a way I hadn't expected. She started saying things like "He told me not to say anything." and "I should've done something." Confused, I asked her what she was apologizing for. I wasn't ready for her response.

“I walked into the living room at your house one day and I saw your uncle touching you. I ran into the bedroom crying and hysterical. I told your brother what I saw. He told me not to say anything because he didn’t want you and your sister to be put in a foster home.”.

A part of me understands; they were just kids themselves. What person at 16 or 17 can handle this situation, let alone make a logical, reasonable decision? On the other hand, though, what about me? What about the childhood that was being ripped away from a girl just growing into her own body? I told her I didn’t blame her, but I did. Foster care might not be ideal, but it would have been better than the situation itself. The dragon had been buried too shallow. He poked his claws out and dug them into the same scars in my back, this time drawing blood filled with anger. My brother Mark was the sibling who never showed he cared for me much over the years. He didn’t tell me congrats when I had my children or call me when my youngest died. He didn’t try to save me from my abusive husband or call me when grandpa and grandma passed. All of those things, I can forgive. Having a means of saving some of my childhood or at least trying to protect your little sister and not following through, is almost unforgivable.

I am thirty-seven years old. Thirty-fuckin-seven-years old and still taunted by things in my childhood. It seems like a common thread throughout my life. It takes a decade to find myself in a world that I didn’t know. I deal with the pain and shame that accompanies childhood trauma. I put it in a closet and closed the door. One message, a couple of sentences, is all it took to let that virus reoccupy its former home. It isn’t the same trauma anymore. I can see these scenes replaying over and over in my mind, but now I see a bigger picture. Before I only saw me and my uncle, but now other people were there. Other people who could’ve helped, should’ve helped, but didn’t. How do you trust anyone when the ones closest to you let you down?

JUSTICE MINTS

Scrolling through Tinder seems to be my monotony for the week. Countless profiles of men and women looking their best, their most fake self, to attract a mate or at least a ride for the night. I look at these muscular men, the ones with the abs you just want to trace, and imagine what they are; I mean, truly, who they are beyond the photo only meant to exercise their penises. Let's not forget about most of the women: self-absorbed people who just want a platform to showcase the hundreds they spent on makeup, hair, and clothing or at least to appear like they have that much disposable income.

A match dings on my screen. Jesus, what now. A chocolate man pops up on my screen. Flawless skin, genuine smile, posing with a Dalmatian puppy. The corner of my screen flashes: new message. I open it.

"Hi, my name is Michael. I'm a civil engineer and work for the city of Richmond. I saw your pic and thought I'd say hi."

Are you blind, Sir? Or just desperate? I reciprocate. "Maggie. Data architecture specialist. Nice to meet you."

We exchange phone numbers, and he calls me immediately. Must be all that desperation. I indulge in the conversation, letting my confidence build. His voice is deep. Not sure whether this is legit or what he thinks I want to hear. We talk about our jobs, our education, our goals for the future. Before we realize it, it's four in the morning. We talk for another couple minutes and eventually find a stopping point. I plug in the phone and try to catch a couple hours of sleep before my alarm steals my sanity.

Another day at the food truck. Today's special: Yesterday's chili. It's a funny name, but a lie all the same. I think he meant last week's chili that's been frozen, defrosted, and reheated. Sounds like a big helping of 'No thank you' and 'Just gimme a coke.' By the look of the truck, even the soda is questionable.

The elementary school sits across the street from the picnic tables where they sit to eat. I make it a habit to not sit with my coworkers to eat, but on this 'Only Coke Day', I can splurge. The Coke fizzes over a little when I open it, par for the course considering it has probably been in that truck since mid-1995. It's nice and cold though and offers a crisp satisfaction. It's recess, meaning the playground is inundated with 5-tear-olds. Girls with little pink and yellow dresses play Ms. Mary Mack and slap their hands together joyfully. How nice it would be to be 'outside' of the world; oblivious to shame and embarrassment, still clinging to their youth.

My phone dings. "So, how would you feel about meeting? Maybe I could take you to dinner?"

I can smell the desperation; Mr. Chocolate wants to meet. Philosophical question for the day: How do I say yes and no in one word? He can wait. I grab my soda and head back into the building.

Work and more work. That's what my life is: a continuous cycle of database analysis and troubleshooting. Fixing what people screw up and analyzing for efficiency. I might like it if it weren't for the lack of estrogen in the office. When I say estrogen, I meant me. Just me.

My phone dings again. "Ignoring me?"

That one word? Must've forgot. "Depends..." Perfect. Not a yes but not no. Let's see how desperate Mr. Chocolate Tinder really is.

"Listening..." Damn. The perfect response.

"Lunch, not dinner. Public. Tomorrow?" He'll probably say some lame chain restaurant.

"Mackey's on Florence. Noon?" The Irish pub. Potential.

"One?"

"Even better. Cya soon Maggie."

That's my kinda conversation: short, sweet, no bullshit. This can't be happening. I check my profile pic to make sure my aesthetic indecency still shines appropriately. Yep. Still there. My mind finally jumps in. Is he legit? A figment of my imagination? Or does he have a fat fetish that he needs to feed? I can't help myself, self-sabotage at its best.

"Michael, why me? My picture is accurate. I checked."

"I like a woman confident enough to post a pic of herself online."

"Tomorrow then :)"

My hair's brushed and curled. Clothes properly covering those parts I don't want showcased. Let's be honest, everything. Little cleavage should suffice. I stop by the grocery store before Mackey's. Odds and ends. Might need a post-date drowning. I grab a bottle of Chardonnay and a box of junior mints. Who am I kidding, I grabbed two.

Line wasn't long. Elderly man, me, and then a warm body behind me. The elderly man pays and leisurely rolls his cart away. The conveyor rolls my things forward.

"Hello ma'am. Did you find..."

The cashier is interrupted by a man with a single red rose. He rushes past the old man, handing the flower to the cashier.

“Thank God. The man at the service desk told me to come to your line. I need a box of the ribbed Trojans and a pack of your cheapest menthols.”

The just-out-of-high-school cashier looks at me. Poor guy. I feel obligated to step in.

"Line starts back there."

“No one was talking to you, lady.”

"But I'm talking to you."

The man looks from the cashier and over at my items. He then looks at my abdomen.

"Look. Those junior mints will be there in 5 minutes. Don't worry you won't lose any mass in that time." He chuckles and smirks at the cashier, hoping to share a funny moment with a like-bodied colleague. This man looks familiar.

“Any mass?”

"Oh, sorry. I forgot that people of your size don't have time to read a book between bites." This time he glares in my eyes, annoyed. His eyes are a dark, sensuous shade of brown. I know these eyes, but he doesn't see me like I see him.

I put my anger aside. "Just ring the man up. He has a date."

His mouth rises to an arrogant smile. “Can't risk that chocolate melting, after all."

The cashier checks his things and bags them. The tornadic man comes in with a strong gust of wind, leaving a trail of destruction behind him.

I sit in my car for a good 30 minutes before starting it. Tears dampen my face. Who knew that still bothered me. Oh well.

My phone dings. “Where are you?” I throw the phone in my bag and take the car out of park.

The house is warm when I get there. I grab the wine and a glass and put my grocery store purchases in the fridge. Bandit, my mutt, lays next to me on the couch.

Phone dings again. "Hello?"

I turn down the volume and turn on the TV. I pour a tall glass of Chardonnay. Looks like I'll make it for the new episode after all. I drink about half of the bottle before falling asleep in front of the TV, the dog curled up behind me with his head on my ankle.

I wake up and rub the sleep from eyes. The TV is still on, now playing reruns of Golden Girls. I look over at the window above my sink. It seems to still be night. I look at my phone. The light blinds me initially. Fourteen missed messages. I skip the ones from Hurricane Michael and read the two from Mom. Same ole sappy love you, sleep well. Thanks mom. I love you more.

I gently rub Bandit until he wakes up to release me from his drool-drenched slumber. Thought I was gonna have to go old-fashioned coyote ugly. I venture off to the bathroom, foot asleep. Funny how bad you have to go after half a bottle of Chardonnay. I wash my hands and catch myself in the mirror. Most of my curls are still intact, some are off doing their own things. Typical. I grab a head scarf from a lower drawer and wrap the mess. Maybe I can salvage the curls in the morning.

By the time I get to the bed Bandit's already splayed across the bed. He jumps up as soon as I come in and meets me to say good night. The bed is high enough that we are face-to-face. He kisses my nose. Even if the whole world thinks I'm a joke and not worth the time, he doesn't. He doesn't care if my hair is messy or if I eat a pint of ice cream; he loves me. He waits for me to get comfortable before laying next to me. He's my little spoon. Night fat boy.

I never get used to how eight in the morning feels. Insanity and death are two words that come to mind. After inspection, I deem the mangled curls unsuitable and settle for messy bun after I get out of the shower. I always have just enough time to feed myself and Bandit a couple scrambled eggs before leaving for work. I quickly grab my junior mints and a bottle of water before heading out the door, book bag and phone in hand.

Work is the same. Men telling me what to do and me doing what I want. One of my faithful clients messages me and insists that one of the fields in their database is inoperable. Sounds like user error if you ask me. Of course, I can't say that to them, very unprofessional. Looks like someone accidentally typed the letter O, instead of zero. Databases don't like when you enter strings where numbers belong. Needless to say, it took me 3 hours to find the error. I took a later lunch.

I buy a grilled cheese from the food truck, I know he cleans his grill. I munch sitting on some steps on the other side of the building. I like watching videos while I eat, helps me drown out the day. My phone buzzes and startles me. I pick up, not looking to see who was calling first.

"Hello?"

"Maggie?" A deep voice fills my ears.

"Yes. May I ask who's calling?" I hate telemarketers.

"It's Michael. You know you could've told me you changed your mind."

"Oh hey. About what?" My ability to feign ignorance is, by far, my best quality.

"Our lunch date. You left me sitting there for 45 minutes."

"I thought you knew. You gave me the idea." I lied: sarcasm is my best quality.

"What are you talking about?"

“I thought about it and you were right. I couldn’t risk my chocolate melting.” The line goes silent, but I can still hear him breathing. I hang up and open my mints. Who knew junior mints tasted like justice.

SMOKE RITUAL

Room is dark, the only glint of light barrels through a tear in the sheets covering my windows. There's just enough light to see the bed and the empty bassinet next to it. It's just enough to remind me what went on here. This is the only place I have to cry. The bare white walls provide promise of starting over. Don't look down.

The tears roll down my cheeks freely, only behind a locked door. The light catches my eye and I watch tiny particles of dust float down the beam. It shines on a table beside me. Alarm clock, inhaler, isopropyl alcohol. A razor blade reflects the light back into my eyes. It stares me down, taunting me like the last piece of chocolate cake in the fridge. *I'm here if you need me.*

The blade is light and sharp. The little hairs on my arm are no match. I lay the cold steel on my thigh and cry. The bassinet, the place where Christopher used to lay next to the bed, within arm's reach, knows my shame. His little blue blanket still bunched up in the bottom. I can still see his feet dangling over the side, wrong side up.

As I draw that sharp blade across my thigh, a furious black smoke escapes from the wound and a stream of blood flows down my fat to soak into the carpet. The smoke coats the wall changing the unmolested white to an accosted black. I put the blade on the table and grab a cotton ball. Doused in alcohol, I brace for the burn. The alcohol keeps the wound clean and prevents the smoke from reclaiming me, at least for a little while. It burns every wound and steals my breath away. The sting releases my brain.

The smoke plays scenes against the white wall like an old movie reel. I can smell it coating everything with its pungent aroma of death. The wound needs a second dose this time. I saw my niece today. She was older by 5 months. I could see her when I closed my eyes, sitting

up, something she just learned to do, in a small, plastic pool with her mom there for support. She splashed and played and spewed water everywhere. The little snaggle tooth smile haunts me. She is so beautiful, so happy, so alive.

I don't wish it were her instead of Christopher, but I wish it was neither. The chubby baby cried because she just wanted her auntie to curl her up in a towel and dry her as she done many times before, but her auntie pulls away, unable to touch her, barely able to look at her, afraid of what her touch will do.

After I cut, I usually have a good cry, cover the evidence. and join the living, but today I couldn't. I laid on the floor. No blanket. No pillow. Just carpet because I can't bring myself to touch the bed. I turn against the wall – watching the smoke antagonize is much easier than looking at a babyless bassinet. No one is home today. The apartment, the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedroom are all empty. No one, but me. And the smoke, of course.

A MOUNTAIN AND A MOLEHILL

Golds and pinks and magentas colored the sky as the sun set. Mari savored the sweet-citrus brandy as the ice clinked against the highball glass, begging for another round. She watched her Lanie serving tea to Mr. Teddy and Mrs. Kitty. A cool breeze pushed past them bringing the sweet smell of the river and the neighbor's apple pie still cooling on her windowsill. This was serenity, a rare, colorless moment. The sun grabbed the color from the sky before hiding behind the horizon.

"C'mon, Lanie. The sun's gone to bed."

"See you tomorrow, Mr. Sun." Lanie grabbed her stuffed friends and ran past her mother into the house.

"Lanie, honey, go put your jamies on. I washed your Froggie ones and laid them on your dresser."

"Yay!" Lanie sprinted out of the room.

Mari, Lanie, and Duke, the chihuahua, curled up on the couch to watch Mr. Frog and Friends, the nightly bedtime routine. Lanie lay across her mother's lap, entrenched in a reading of *The Secret Garden*, as her mother wound small ringlets of ginger curls around her finger.

"Mom, why come Mary's mom doesn't love her?" Lanie questioned.

"How come,"

"How come Mary's mom doesn't love her?" She corrected.

"Mary's mother had a baby very young, but she wasn't ready. She loves Mary but doesn't know how to show it."

“That’s sad, Mom. When I have a daughter, I will make sure I give her bunches of hugs and kisses every day, and she will never be lonely and she will always know I love her.” Lanie’s eyes teared up. “I’m glad you know how to show me, Mom.”

In an attempt to hide her own tears, Mari grabbed Lanie and hugged her as tight as she could. “You know what?”

“What, Mama?”

“I think...,” holding her chin, feigning deep thought, “I think I need to show you now.”

The little girl laughed hysterically as Mari kissed every inch of her face.

“Mom! Stop!” Lanie couldn’t stop laughing. “Mr. Frog is back on, Mom!”

Mari pecked Lanie’s cheek one last time and released her. Lanie grabbed a pillow from the couch and laid on the floor listening intently.

Mari, still smiling, looked up at the wall, half-covered in tiles. She couldn’t help but take inventory of it every night as her and Lanie sat in front of the TV. Shades of blue, green, and red – her stock of emotion. Every tile has meaning: angry red, jealous green, and anxiety, worry, and sadness; their own shades of blue. Two new tiles adorned the wall tonight – happy yellow and a vibrant purple for love. It had been a good day.

The credits scrolled down the screen and Lanie snored on the floor, Duke curled up at her side. She lifted the little girl gently and carried her to the bedroom. Her wobbly bed squeaked as Mari put her down. She glanced one last time before switching off the light.

“Mom?”

“Yes, Lanie?” Mari whispered.

“I love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too baby. Good night.”

“Night, mama.”

Mari flipped off the switch and closed the door. Little feet barreled down the hall and she reopened the door, granting the tiny Chihuahua access.

“Night to you too, Duke.”

As the door shut, Mari could hear the infomercials beginning. A nightly ritual of cheap jewelry, face cream, and anything else you could dream up. Mari walked into the kitchen and flipped on the light over the small kitchen table. She emptied the bottle of brandy into her glass and sat, staring out of the window. It was dark outside now and the light from her window was the only light that illuminated the trees.

The stack of bills on the table caught her attention. Tiny windows revealed the yellow papers beyond their seemingly innocent envelopes. Mari pulled out a couple of the notices and angry words, stamped in red, splayed across the document. She opened her phone and checked the balance in her checking account, as if somehow the \$200 she needed to keep the electricity on would magically appear.

Mari put the bills back in their place before shutting the light off and heading to the living room. She sat in front of the TV mindlessly watching some beautifully manicured hand show off a white gold ring with small red stones. She couldn't afford groceries for the next week let alone pay 59.99 plus shipping and handling.

She reached for the remote and noticed a new tile growing on the wall: a menacing shade of deep green. Mari had never seen that green before. It was vibrant and bold and new like it planned on laying down roots and staying for a while. It looked like lake water, the opaque kind, hiding creatures that would bite without provocation. It looked like fear and despair. The day's yellow and purple had already begun to fade. By morning, they would be gone.

Mari shut her eyes as tight as she could. She tried to forget the electricity, the groceries, the job she couldn't find. She wanted to remember the love, the happy, and the clear romanticizing scent of apple pie, but there was no use. The green had taken over. She kept her eyes shut so she couldn't see the wall. Her eyes teared as she battled. Finally, she just stopped trying. Mari gulped down the rest of her alcohol and laid down on the couch, her face towards the pillows. She cried hard, soaking her shirt and the cushion under her, until her brain couldn't handle anymore. She finally fell asleep in a puddle of tears, gripping tight onto the soft cushion.

"Mama." Lanie whispered peeking over the couch. "Mama!"

"Yes, Lanie. What do you need?" Mari spoke to her daughter through closed eyes.

"There is a new color on the wall. It's so pretty. Look." Lanie pulled on Mari to get up.

Mari, not fully awake yet, rubbed her eyes and adjusted her vision. The green stared at her, bigger than all the others, and she remembered.

"Isn't it pretty, Mama?"

"Yes, baby. Very pretty." Mari forced a smile.

Mari's side started to vibrate, causing her to jump up, thinking it was a bug or a snake or some other sinister creature. Her phone lit up from behind the cushion – a number she didn't recognize.

"Hello?"

"Hello. Can I speak to Marigold Lincoln?" A feminine voice belted from the speakerphone, startling the still tired Duke into a low groan.

"This is she." Mari laid her hand on Duke to contain any startled barking.

"Hi, this is Sherry from PCS Cleaners. Are you available for an interview?"

Mari sat up, apprehensively excited. She had applied for a position cleaning houses the week before. “Of course. When would you like me to come in?”

“Actually, I’m calling to conduct your interview right now. Is this a good time?”

“Oh, yes.” Mari stammered, looking for the right words. “Let’s do it.”

“Good. I just have a couple of questions for you.”

“Ok.” Mari, worried, awaited the questions she didn’t have time to prepare for. She watched as anxious blue crowded in next to fear green.

“Are you still available Monday through Friday from 8 to 3?”

“Yes. I am. Unless Lanie, my daughter, is out of school.”

“You’re welcome to bring her with you. She can either stay in the office with my daughter, Effie – she is 6, or she can ride with you to the job site.”

“Really? That’s awesome.” Mari’s nerves dulled a bit.

“I’m glad you think so. Can I ask about the employment gap that started about six months ago.”

“Yes. I was fired from my previous job.” There was that anxiety again.

“May I ask why?”

Mari’s heart began to pound, and she knew her chance of getting the job had plummeted. “I take medication every day. Six and a half months ago, my doctor decided to switch up my meds and I had some unexpected side effects.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. How are you doing now?”

Mari was unsure how to respond. “The side effects have subsided. It was just a matter of getting used to the new medicine.”

“I understand completely. We can talk more about it later, if you want, on your first day.”

“My first day?” Did she hear this woman correctly? “My first day of...?”

“Work, Ms. Lincoln. We’d like you to start on Tuesday.”

“Oh my God. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome. Make sure you bring your ID, and you should probably wear clothes you don’t mind getting dirty, until I can get you a uniform.”

“Yes, ma’am. See you Tuesday.”

“Have a good weekend, Ms. Lincoln.”

“You, too. Thanks again.”

There it was again. A full, vibrant, blinding yellow. Mari threw her phone on the couch and danced around the living room. She scooped up Duke and grabbed one of his front paws, leading him like a seasoned ballroom dancer. Lanie noticed them and jumped on the couch, swinging her hips to the inaudible music. Scared green wasn’t so bold anymore.

Mari stepped out of the shower, the rug hard and cold under her feet, and grabbed the holey towel from the shelf. After drying her hair, she used the towel to wipe away the condensation on the giant bathroom mirror. She reached for the hairbrush and glimpsed herself. It had been a long time since she had looked at her body. She wasn’t fat, but definitely could use a diet. She brushed her hair and then pulled the lost hair from the brush. It was stringy, and grays tinted the once vibrant auburn locks. Her body almost blended in with the white bathroom. If it weren’t for the hair she had neglected to shave under her armpits or the downward vision of her dark areolas, she couldn’t distinguish her shape from anything else in the room.

Mari, disgusted, turned away from the mirror and started to dress.

“Mom. Mom?” Lanie yelled from Mari’s adjacent bedroom. “Where are you?”

“In the bathroom, Lanie. What do you need?”

Lanie came bustling into the bathroom. “Mom, which dress should I wear? The pink one or the purple?”

“Well, do you feel pink today or purple?”

Lanie looked at both dresses, unable to decide and then noticed something on Mari.

“Mom, what’s that on your leg?”

Mari looked down at the trail of blood running down her thigh. “Nothing to worry about. Just me being a woman.” She grabbed a washcloth from the shelf. “Wear the pink one today, Lanie. I’m gonna wear my pink top.”

Lanie squealed and ran out of the room. Mari sat on the side of the tub to wash and rinse herself again. “What a way to start the day.”

Mari waved as Lanie got out of the car. “Love you baby.”

Lanie ran inside of the school, too intent on seeing her friends to say bye to her mom. It was just as well though. Lanie would see Mari’s fear. Mari glanced in the rearview mirror and fixed a stray hair, the one that never wants to stay in the ponytail. She started to pull out just in time for a van to come storming down the lane beside her. It honked violently and kept driving. Chest pounding and more aware this time, Mari pulled out and drove away.

The road to the cleaners was peaceful, especially once Mari passed the Pentecostal church, Brianing Blanche county line. Mari searched through the radio station for something she liked and, more importantly, something she knew. What she found was better than that though. Her favorite artist, PJ Morton belted out the chorus of How Deep is Your Love. Mari sang along at the top of her lungs.

“Cuz we’re livin’ in a world of fools,
Breakin’ us down when they all should let us be.
We belong to you and me...”

Her voice trailed off, remembering the first time she heard the song. She danced with Lanie’s dad, Malcolm, at their wedding. He pushed the dark red curls from her face, grabbed her chin, and sang to her. His voice echoed in her ears. It was like he was still there with her, still making love to her, still singing naked in front of the stove, whipping batter for blueberry pancakes, still loving her unconditionally.

Mari pulled over, unable to breathe, unable to stop crying. Her eyeliner stained her cheeks, as she laid her head on the wheel. She could see the day it happened vividly, just like the wedding. She saw the doctor’s face, stoic, explaining her husband’s injuries, the adrenaline masking her own. The car came out of nowhere. Malcolm was driving and the truck couldn’t stop on the ice. It hit the driver’s side, launching a jagged piece of metal through several abdominal organs. She watched as he took his last breath.

Mari laid on the wheel, still crying, as the next song began. It was bright and backed by a heavy bass drum, reminiscent of a beating heart. She lifted her head and watched as the morning sun glistened off of the lake. She closed her eyes, as a warm breeze swooped in to dry her face. Mostly recovered from her panic, Mari adjusted the rearview mirror only to see her face. She laughed and reached for the makeup wipes in the console.

After fixing her makeup, Mari continued to Stoverton, the next town over. Stoverton, much like her town, was sparsely populated. Most everything one might need was smashed in around the courthouse; the superBrianet, hardware store, and even a bakery stocked full of donuts and dark roasted coffee. However, outside of downtown, houses were spread far apart,

some having miles between them. Luckily, Mari didn't have to drive far. PCS sat in a small lot just inside the city limits surrounded by farmland. She pulled into the gravel lot and watched a cow graze.

Mari looked at her clock; she still had about 10 minutes. She laid back on the head rest and tried to relax before going in. She heard barking, but considering her surroundings, she didn't bother looking. A couple of minutes later, Mari grabbed her purse. As she locked the door, Mari could hear the movement of rocks and was sure someone was coming out to greet her. Suddenly, a large dog with even larger jowls came around the van. Without time to react, Mari covered her face and the massive Great Dane jumped and bombarded her with kisses.

"Lurch! You dopey bastard, get off the poor girl." A dark-haired man yelled from across the parking lot. "Lurch!"

Realizing there was no danger, except for possible slobber overdose, Mari pushed the dog off. He leaned hard against her, resembling a cat, further knocking Mari into the car.

"That's a good boy." Mari rubbed his ear as he leaned into her.

"Lurch, you stupid mutt. You can't just go 'round kissin' all the girls." The man removed his hat, putting it over his chest. "Sorry bout that ma'am. Lurch loves the ladies."

"That's ok. Him's a good boy."

"You must be Ms. Lincoln, the new hire. Sherry's just inside waitin' on ya. I'm her brother Brian."

"Nice to meet you Brian. Please call me Mari."

"You got it Mari. C'mon Lurch. Let 'er go." Brian slapped his leg and the Great Dane followed faithfully.

Mari checked her car doors and followed Brian into the red brick building, adjusting her clothing and checking for residual slobber.

“Marigold! You made it.” Sherry looked down at Mari’s top and reached across her desk for a tissue. “Looks like Lurch claimed another victim.”

Mari looked down, spotting the glob of drool drying on her shirt. “Well, at least I know he likes me.” She laughed and took the tissue. “Thanks.”

“Marigold. Looks like you filled out almost everything when you applied. I just need you to fill out this W-4 so we can getcha paid.”

Mari reaches for a pen. “Please call me Mari. My mother calls me Marigold.”

“Of course.” Sherry agreed.

Sherry handed the paperwork to Mari and she and Brian leave the room. Mari quickly completes the document and pushes it across the desk. She looked around for her new boss but didn’t see her. The office felt like her mother’s home. Country flowers were strategically placed around the room: red roses, white daisies and yellow tulips. Portraits hung sporadically on the walls. Mari got up to look at the photos while she waited. A large, gold-framed photograph caught her attention. She recognized Sherry and Brian in the back, posed with another dark-haired woman. Mari leaned in close.

“That’s our little family.” Brian startled Mari, causing her to knock over a ceramic rooster on a small table.

Mari jumped. “I didn’t hear you come in. You scared me.”

“Sorry ‘bout that.” Brian grabbed the rooster and put him back on the table.

Sherry reentered the office. “Everything is complete. You’re going to train with Brian today since my other girls are already out and about.”

“Let’s do it.” Mari smiled, looking to Brian.

“Let’s get goin’ then. We have 3 houses to get to today.”

The car ride was pretty quiet except for the low rambling of 90s country on the radio.

“So, you from this area?” Brian broke the silence.

“Yeah. I was born in Maxeen and my family moved to Delton when I was 3. I still live in my childhood home.”

Brian nodded. “It’s good to have someone that understands the region. The other girls are from out of state.”

“Yeah, we have a different culture here. I went to school at Baynard, up north in Fayetteville. Talk about a culture shock.” Mari glanced back out the window, rows of corn fly by. “I had to come back though. I am not a city kinda girl.”

“And ya know we value privacy down here. Summa my best friends never even seen the inside of my home.”

“Yeah. I don’t let anyone inside mine, but our people are kindest and more genuine.”

“Exactly, speaking of privacy, our clients are usually older folks who can’t clean their houses anymore. They already hate us being in their homes, so it’s best to check what each client wants cleaned every single time you go in.”

“Oh, yeah. Completely understood.” Mari nodded her head in agreement. “I hadn’t considered that.”

The first two homes fly by without a hitch. The first was an elderly couple in Maxeen; all they wanted cleaned was the kitchen and both bathrooms. The second was a quadriplegic; he was

injured in Afghanistan. He insisted that the hospice lady did most of the chores, but she didn't have time for the dishes. Brian took her through all of the protocols for each job.

In order to get to the third house, Brian had to take Mueller's Pass, a long stretch of meandering, two-lane road that went straight through the only forest for miles. The first two houses were just outside of Stoverton city limits, but the third was closer to the shop. As they skirted just outside of the city, rows of corn turned into massive redwoods. A lush green canopy sat high above massive trunks, some spanning more than 15 feet in diameter. Mari watched as splotches of sun were allowed to hit the pavement, while in most spots the foliage denied it access. This was the best green she had ever seen, vibrant and natural, best of all, not threatening.

Finally, the road widened, and the redwoods grew smaller and smaller. Eventually they were surrounded again by giant rows of yellow corn. They drove a couple miles and turned into a driveway. The house was about half a mile from the road and sat on top of a small hill surrounded by a dilapidated barn and farm equipment. An African American woman sat on her porch, rocking back and forth, inhaling deeply on a hand-rolled cigarette.

Mari got out of the van and looked up at the house. It was a dingy shade of white, trimmed with what used to be black, but the sun had turned it a muted gray.

"Who's that, Brian?" The woman yelled from the porch. "Who'd you bring to my house?"

"This is Mari, Ms. Kennedy. She's gonna be helpin' me today. That alright with you?"

"I spose it has to be, since my son decided I needed someone else to clean my house. C'mon, let me show ya what I need done today."

“Yes ma’am.”

Ms. Kennedy stopped just inside the door and looked back at Mari. “This is my home. If you respect my home, I’ll respect you.”

Mari smiled back at her. “Agreed. Ms. Kennedy.”

“Y’all c’mon and Brian now you got this girl callin’ me Ms. Kennedy. I’ve told you a dozen times, call me Lee. Ms. Lee, if it suits ya better.”

Brian and Mari nodded. The inside of the house seemed to be in better condition. It smelled of lemon and dust. It reminded Mari of her mother when she mopped the floor every Saturday morning. The large windows granted a lot of light and the rooms were large, but comfortable.

Just after the foyer, Ms. Lee took them into the living room. High ceilings showed off white walls and historical art.

“Brian, you come this way. I need you to look at this kitchen for me. I know you are just here to clean, but I thought you could look at my faucet for me.”

“Of course, Ms. Lee.” Brian followed the older woman out of the room.

Mari looked around the room, glancing at all of the pictures, careful not to touch anything. She spotted something different in a corner. One of the walls wasn’t quite white on first inspection. Mari got closer, careful not to knock over any of Ms Lee’s trinkets on the coffee table. Beside one of the windows was a large section of wall, dingier than the rest. Different sized tiles were stacked up the wall, hard to see from a distance, but vibrant up close.

“Can I help you with something, dear?” Ms. Lee startled Mari as she reentered the room.

“I’m sorry. I was just looking at your wall.”

“Have you never seen someone’s colors before?” Ms. Lee inquired.

“To be honest, I’ve only ever seen one, my own. I didn’t know anyone else had one.”

Ms. Lee laughed with her entire belly. She looked at Mari and saw her expression hadn’t changed. “You’re serious?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“My dear, everyone has colors. Some of us just have ours on display for the whole world to see. Too bad, we can’t choose who sees it.”

Mari looked at Ms. Lee confused. “Everyone? When does someone get their tiles? My mom didn’t have colors.”

“I assure you she did. Hers was just easier to hide. Your colors start from the day you are born.”

Even more confused now, “From birth? I would know if my daughter had one.”

Ms. Lee shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe you haven’t looked hard enough. Or maybe I’m just some crazy old lady, who don’t know shit. C’mon dear, the bathroom isn’t going to clean itself.”

The older woman guided Mari through the house to her private bathroom, where she left her. Mari began cleaning but couldn’t get what the woman said out of her head. Everyone has colors? Even Lanie? She finished up the bathroom and returned to the living room, waiting for Brian to finish with the faucet.

“Hello, Mari is it?” Ms. Lee greeted.

“Yes ma’am. I’m sorry if I offended you earlier.”

“Don’t be child. It’s hard to grow up believing one way and then learn isn’t true.”

“Can I ask you something, Ms. Lee?”

“Sure. I’ll try to answer.”

“Your wall looks similar to mine. Some lighter colors, but most dark, is that normal?”

“Normal for us. Other people process emotion differently. How about next time you come, you bring me a picture of your wall and I guarantee there are even some differences between ours.”

“Does everyone know they have a wall of tiles?”

“No, most people’s emotions are hidden. My mother’s was hidden behind the dresser in her room, the dark spot where no one looked. My sister’s was in her closet and never saw the light of day. Mine, as you can see, is visible and on display for the world. I try to hide them, but that plan never seems to pan out.”

Brian walked into the room; his shirt soaked.

“Ms. Kennedy, that faucet’s gonna need a new gasket. It’ll work for now, but you will need a new one soon. I can pick one up for you.”

“Sounds good, Brian. Thank you for looking at it.” Ms. Lee smiled and hugged Brian like a mother would hug a son.

“No problem. You done Mari.”

Mari was looking at the wall again, taking a mental image to compare with her own.

“Earth to Mari.”

Mari finally turned around. Ms. Lee thanked them again and they headed back to the shop.

Mari picked up Lanie from school and they headed home. Mari warmed up some leftover spaghetti for them and they ate on the back porch, while Duke wondered the yard.

“Lanie, do you have a wall like Mama’s?”

Lanie looked up at her mother, confused. "Of course, Mommy. Everybody has one."

Mari was taken aback. "Do you know where yours is? Can you show me after we eat?"

Lanie nodded with a mouth full of pasta. Duke realized that they were eating and sat close to Mari, waiting for a piece of food. Mari cut up one of her meatballs and gave him the tiniest piece. Duke took the meat gently and seemed content with his portion. He resumed his inspection of the yard. Mari watched her daughter eat and wondered what her colors looked like. Were they like hers: dark and scary? Or were they brighter, happier?

After washing the dishes, Mari handed each dish to Lanie, who dried them. She was careful to dry every inch of every dish and then stack it on the counter. She was so proud after each one, her face full of joy. Doing dishes took forever this way, but watching her so content, made Mari smile.

Mari sat on the couch, flipping through the stations looking for something child appropriate. She desperately wanted to see Lanie's tiles but felt like pushing her was an invasion of her space as if she were reading every juicy detail of a teenager's diary. Lanie ran into the living room out of breath.

"Mom. I uncovered my colors for you. Wanna see?" Lanie extended her hand.

Feigning indifference, Mari nodded and let Lanie lead her to the bedroom. Her room looked like a team of linebackers held practice there; clothes were thrown all over the floor as were the toys and the closet door was open wide.

"In there, Mom." Lanie pointed inside the closet.

Mari's hands shook. She wasn't sure what she was about to see. It was as if Lanie was just about to reveal a large, damning secret she had been keep for years.

“Don’t be scared, Mom. I’ll go with you.”

Lanie grabbed her hand, and before she knew it, Mari was staring at Lanie’s colors. A dainty patch of pinks and yellows and lavenders. These were colors Mari had never seen on her own wall. Even Mari’s yellow paled in comparison to Lanie’s. She laid her hand on the wall as if trying to steal of the color for herself. At the bottom, she noticed a shade of blue so dark, it was almost black. Lanie stood beside Mari and traced the outline of the ominous tile.

“Mom, I miss Daddy.”

Mari eyes teared. “I miss him too, baby. Do you remember him?”

“Of course, Mom. He always made me blueberry pancakes and chocolate milk.” Lanie still traced the dark tile. “This is Daddy’s color.”

Mari sat down in the closet and pulled Lanie to her. “How about we camp in here with Daddy tonight?”

“Camp? In the closet?”

“Yeah. How about you go grab your pillow and blanket and we’ll lay down in here.” Mari smiled at Lanie, hoping she’d agree.

After careful thought, Lanie ran out of the closet. Mari looked at Lanie’s happy colors. She laid her hand on them, feeling the smooth texture of the wall. She eventually landed on the blue and closed her eyes, trying to feel Malcolm again.

A couple of minutes later, Lanie ran back into the closet. Her hands were full: a couple of pillows, a quilt, and her dragon push light. She placed the light on the wall and laid the pillow and blanket out.

“Is this good, Mama?”

“Perfect, but we are missing one thing.”

Lanie scrunched up her nose and looked around the closet. “But I got pillows and a blanket. We got everything.”

“You forgot the most important thing, Mr. Duke.”

“Oh, yeah.” Lanie yelled as loud as she could. “Duke!”

The little feet came barreling into the bedroom and finally found them in the closet. Mari grabbed the chihuahua and laid down on the pillow. Lanie laid down beside her, grabbing her quilt to cover up. Duke curled up between them. Mari held her daughter until she fell asleep. She looked at the colors of the wall, so happy that her own issues hadn’t affected her baby. The deep shade of blue was so dark and depressing, but, in that moment, it made her feel safe. She finally fell asleep, her daughter and Duke along for the ride.

A week later, Mari sat in the PCS lot, still an hour before she had to be there. Lanie had stayed with her Gramma the night before. She had the house to herself, an uncommon occurrence, but couldn’t sleep. She was too excited; Mari had taken pictures of her colors and was excited to talk to Ms. Lee about it. She sat in the car, eyes closed, thinking about what she would say.

A gentle knock startled her out of her daydream. Brian waved as she opened her eyes. Mari rolled down the window.

“You alright? I saw you parked over here.” Brian looked down at his watch. “You know it’s only 7:30, right?”

“Yeah. I had the house to myself last night. It’s hard sleeping in an empty house.”

“I understand that. I ain’t slept in my bed since my wife died a couple years back.”

“I’m sorry. Lanie, my daughter, stayed with her Gramma last night, so I was home alone.”

Brian looked uneasy like he wanted to ask a question. “How about your husband? Was he not at home?”

Surprised, Mari looked directly in Brian’s eyes. “Malcolm died a year ago.”

Brian’s expression dampened. “There I go sticking my foot in my mouth. The hell’s wrong with me. I... I’m sorry Mari.” Brian kicked some rocks and walked away.

“Brian, wait. You didn’t...”

Brian kept walking into the building. Mari looked at her watch, 7:45. She locked up the car and headed inside.

The car ride was quiet. Brian kept his eyes on the road and didn’t even attempt a conversation. The awkward silence was almost too much for Mari. Even after the first two houses and the jokes the quadriplegic told, Brian didn’t loosen up. He looked so tense. Even as they entered the fortress of redwoods, he kept to himself.

“Brian, about this morning...”

“Mari, I shouldn’t have asked. I’m...”

“Brian, stop. You didn’t offend me. If I didn’t want to answer you, I wouldn’t have. We’re good, ok?”

Brian glanced over to gauge her sincerity. A smile finally broke his grimace. “Lord, Mari. I’m sorry about your husband.”

“It’s alright. I do wonder though, why’d you ask?”

Brian’s face flushed red and his eyes returned quickly to the road. “I... I don’t know.”

Mari sensed his need and knew he wanted to take her out. She wanted to fix the situation, but not sure if she was ready to date. She resumed their previous silence until they reached Ms. Lee's driveway.

"Brian, would you like to go for dinner? I don't know if I'm ready to date, but I could eat."

Brian put the van in park and looked over at Mari. "I don't want to rush you. Let's just eat. Just as friends. You bring Lanie. I'll bring my little girl."

"Sounds like a plan." Mari looked at Brian. His gentle eyes knew her pain.

"We had better get in there before Ms. Lee has a conniption."

Ms. Lee was just coming out of the house as they hopped out of the car. She looked different. Her hair was up in a bonnet and she was in a robe and slippers, not the put together woman she met the week before.

"Hello Ms. Lee. Whatcha need done today?" Mari smiled.

Ms. Lee looked past Mari. "Brian, were you able to get that gasket?"

"Yes, ma'am. I did. I'm going to install it. Mari, holler if you need me." Brian patted Mari's shoulder and walked into the house.

"Mari, can we talk?" Ms. Lee turned to Mari, tears filling her eyes.

"Of course, Ms. Lee. Whatever you need."

Ms. Lee stumbled back against the wall. Mari tried to catch her, but she fell hard. Ms. Lee covered her face as tears cascaded down her cheeks.

"Are you ok?" Mari dropped her work bucket, still holding onto Ms. Lee's arm. "Are you hurt?"

“I’m fine, dear. I just hurt my pride.” Ms. Lee grabbed onto Mari’s arm, struggling to get up. She sat in her rocking chair and rubbed her knees. “I just got a little dizzy. I haven’t eaten today.”

“What do you mean you haven’t eaten? Why?”

“Didn’t much feel like it.”

Mari crossed her arms and tapped her foot. “I’ll be right back, Ms. Lee. Stay there.”

Mari walked into Ms. Lee’s house, trying to figure out the way to the kitchen. When she finally found it, Brian was on his back under the sink. Mari opened Ms. Lee’s fridge. Her fridge was empty except for a box of baking soda and a bottle of water. She checked the cupboards and the pantry. They were empty except for a can of tomato soup. Mari found a bowl and heated up the soup.

On her way back outside, Mari glanced at Ms. Lee’s wall. A similar patch of deep green plagued her wall; it wasn’t the same, but still just as menacing. Ms. Lee still sat on the porch. She basked, eyes shut, in the cool breeze that blew the intoxicating smell of lavender from her neighbors.

“You know that’s one of the reasons Gerald and I bought this house? The lavender fields are so beautiful and fragrant this time of year.” Ms. Lee still sat with her eyes closed as Mari placed the bowl of tomato soup beside her.

“It smells wonderful.” Mari sat on the steps and leaned up against the house, facing the older woman. “Ms. Lee, I brought you some soup. Please eat.”

“I’m saving that tomorrow. Be a dear and put it in the fridge.”

Mari didn’t move from the porch. “I saw the green on your wall, Ms. Lee. I saw your fridge and your cupboards too.”

Ms. Lee opened up her eyes, her expression darkened. “You had no right going through my kitchen. This is not your house ma’am.”

“I realize that and I apologize, but I was worried about you.”

“I’m fine.” Ms. Lee reclosed her eyes and leaned back against the chair.

“Ms. Lee, if you don’t eat that soup, I will be forced to call an ambulance for you.” Mari grew anxious. Her hands began to shake, and she placed them on her lap.

“You won’t because you value your job.”

“Your life means more to me than my job ever will.” Tears ran down her face. “Please?”

The older woman reopened her eyes again. “Fine.” She grabbed the bowl of soup and smelled the warmed air the rose off of the hot liquid. “This would be nice with a grilled cheese.”

Mari laughed as Ms. Lee slurped on her soup. They sat in silence while she ate. Mari watched Ms. Lee eat. It seemed like eating hurt her. She wasn’t sure if it was because it was her last can or for some other reason. Mari looked out over what was left of the farm. The farm equipment looked like it hadn’t been used in years and the barn had storm damage. It was a sad little farm. No animals. No people. No food. It was only Ms. Lee and her desperate green.

The bowl hitting the metal table brought Mari back just in time for Brian to emerge from the house.

“Sitting down on the job?” Brian was covered in water again. “I got that gasket fixed Ms. Lee. Can we do anything else for you today?”

“No, Brian. Thank you.” She looked down at Mari and smiled. “You’ve given me the world.”

“I’m glad we could help.” Brian walked down the steps towards the van.

Mari stood up and approached Ms. Lee, her face still freshly red from the tears. She leaned down and took Ms. Lee in her arms, hugging her deeply.

“It’s all going to be fine. We’ll get past this storm, too.”

Ms. Lee hugged back firmly. “I hope so dear.”

Mari picked up Lanie from school and headed home. Lanie was full of stories and giggles. She watched out the window as she did every day, pointing out the flowers she saw and the people she thought she knew. Mari didn’t hear most of it though, as she was still stuck on Ms. Lee.

After they had reached the house, Mari stepped into her own kitchen, pondering what to make for dinner. She opened the fridge and weighed her options. Mari sat and looked at her full fridge. Milk, butter, bread, and Lanie’s juice. Mari closed the fridge deciding she wouldn’t cook anything, but they would eat tomato soup. Lanie was excited about it; it took a lot to make her upset.

Mari sat on the couch looking at her own wall; the deep shade of green had disappeared, and her colors seemed lighter except for a shade of sad looming over a vibrant red. She hadn’t seen that red since Malcolm was alive. She looked over at the clock. 8 o’clock on the dot. Lanie laid with Duke asleep in front of the TV.

Mari slipped into her bedroom, searching her phone for Brian’s number. The phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Mari. I hope I didn’t call too late.”

“No, course not. What’s up?”

“Are you busy tomorrow? Like around 9 or so in the morning?” Mari bit her lip, unsure what he would say, her voice shaky.

“Not really, unless you count consuming beer and watching Lurch chase his tail.”

“Ms. Lee almost collapses today. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to betray her trust, but she hadn’t eaten all day. I went to fix her something and her fridge and cabinets were bare. I have some money for gas. I want to buy her some groceries, but my car has been acting up lately.”

“I knew something was off about her this afternoon. Ok, I’ll be there about 9.”

“Thanks Brian.”

“Of course. See ya soon.”

“You too.” Mari smiled in mild relief as she ended the call.

Mari woke to a loud banging noise. She threw her feet out of bed quickly and headed towards the living room. It barely dawned outside, but the light flickering from the TV illuminated the room. The banging sounded again. It was someone at the front door. She folded her arm over her chest to conceal her braless-ness and opened the door. Half a dozen people stood in her front yard and at least two dozen brown grocery bags filled to the brim, sitting on her porch.

“What’s all this?” Mari attempted to wipe the sleep from her eyes.

A short blond woman spoke in almost a whisper. “Brian told us what you were doing. He didn’t tell you were helping, but that doesn’t matter. We want to give this food to your friend. Thank you for being so kind.”

Mari eyes teared. A few moments later, Brian pulled up in his dark red van. He waved and smiled at Mari. She watched as he greeted everyone and shook their hands, thanking them profusely for their generosity. He turned and waved at everyone as they left.

“I didn’t expect all of this.” Brian’s face beaming.

“No one was supposed to know Ms. Lee needed help.”

“I didn’t tell them who needed help, only that someone in our community did and that you were in charge of gathering donations.” Brian looked gently into Mari’s eyes.

“Ok. I hope Ms. Lee believes that story too. You know how private she is.”

“I do, but she has helped before with other needy folks. She’ll understand. Now let me get these things in the van, so we can get going.” Brian grabbed two bags and took them to the van.

Mari got dressed and woke up Lanie. Lanie’s Gramma was staying with her while they ran to Ms. Lee’s. Lanie grabbed her dolls and ran to the front door. Just as she opened it, Lurch came barreling into the house. Lanie screamed as loud as she could and ran, Duke behind her, into her room, slamming the door.

“Lurch! No!” Brian yelled from the front yard. “This isn’t our house.”

Mari, sitting on the couch, was pounced on by the 150-pound Great Dane. When Brian finally got in the house, Mari was flat on the floor, Lurch laid on top of her licking her face. Mari laughed hysterically as Lurch chased her face that thrashed left and right. Lanie emerged from her room, peeking into the living room.

“Mama, are you ok?” Lanie yelled over Mari’s laughter.

Lurch heard her and jumped off of Mari.

“Lurch, easy.” Brian yelled at Lurch unsure if he would make it to Lanie before he did.

Lanie, terrified, closed her eyes tight with her back against the wall. To everyone's surprise, Lurch stopped when he heard Lanie's sniffled terror. He sat in front of her, taller by at least 7 inches, and cocked his head. He sniffed the hand covering her face and then kissed it gently as if he were apologizing. Lanie slowly uncovered her face and was face to face with a massive drool machine. Brian and Mari watched as the two interacted. Lurch sat looking at her. He nudged her hand and rubbed up against her. Lanie started rubbing his ear gently, causing a low satisfied moan from Lurch.

Lanie looked over at Brian. "I like your dog. He is so big."

Brian relieved, "Yeah, he's just a big baby."

Just then, a car honked from the driveway. Lurch, being the country dog he was, barreled towards the sound, but Brian was able to grab his collar before he got out the door.

"Lanie, Gramma's here. Go tell her to wait a second." Mari pointed out the door, laughing.

The ride to Ms. Lee's was different. The morning light caused the corn to glow, making it feel animated. Brian played Duke Ellington on the radio and Mari stared out of the window watching the color take over the sky.

"So, uh, about that friendly dinner. What do you think about the lake? It can be beautiful this time of year and Lurch will have plenty of room to run. I could bring a picnic."

"That sounds amazing. It's supposed to be in the 60s tomorrow?" Mari offered, still intoxicated by the clearness of the moment.

"I can do tomorrow. Why don't we shoot for 6? We can eat and the girls can tire themselves out just in time for bed."

“It’s a date.” The smell of lavender took over the van as they got closer to the Lee farm.

They pulled in front the run down house and Lurch, of course, pushed his way out of the van and up the stairs. Mari watched him scratch at the door, desperately trying to gain entrance. Ms. Lee opened her door and voicelessly pointed downward. The massive bundle of energy and slobber dropped to the ground and allowed Ms. Lee to open the screen.

“That’s my good boy.” His tail thumped loudly against the porch and he leaned into Ms. Lee’s affections. “Did I lose a week? Or is this a friendly visit?” Ms. Lee yelled.

Brian came around the van, loaded with 3 full bags. “Lurch wanted to visit.”

Ms. Lee covered her mouth, her glistening with tears. “Mari, did you tell community outreach I needed food? Please tell me you didn’t.”

“Ok. I didn’t.” Mari carried a couple of bags as well.

Ms. Lee led them to the kitchen where they starting setting down bags. Mari and Ms. Lee started putting things in their place.

“Mari, I...”

“Ms. Lee, I asked Brian last night to come get me today, so I could buy you groceries. Next thing I know, half a dozen people were banging on my door at 7 am delivering groceries. Brian didn’t tell them who they were for, but that someone needed them.”

“Oh God, Mari. I don’t know what...” Ms. Lee couldn’t find her words and instead hugged Mari fiercely.

“You’re very welcome, Ms. Lee.”

Ms. Lee wiped her eyes. “Let’s put these away. Don’t want ‘em to go bad.” She reached inside and pulled out a dark avocado and started laughing with her entire body. “Fuckin green.” They both enjoyed a laugh at the expense of the ironic vegetable.

Sunday evening came. Mari curled and primped in the mirror, something she hadn’t done since Malcom was alive. She twisted in checking her back, as well. The red hair flowed down the middle of the her back, laying perfectly in ringlets. Lanie was in and out of the bathroom trying to figure out what to wear, a teenage girl in training. Mari heard Brian pull up as she was putting Lanie’s hair in a ponytail.

Brian knocked on the door and waited patiently, wiping his sweaty palms on his blue jeans. His nerves went away as soon as Mari opened the door, though. She smiled and pulled her curls over her shoulder. Brian took off his hat and wiped his brow. All Mari could do was blush.

“Did you bring Lurch?” Lanie pushed past Mari.

“Yes, he’s in the van.”

Brian’s daughter sat in the backseat with Lurch and invited Lanie in while she held onto Lurch. Brian opened the door for Mari and shut it behind her.

The lake was deep in the redwood forest, surrounded by monster-sized trees on all sides. They found a place close to the water’s edge where they could watch the girls play and keep an eye on the dog. The gray blanket was soft with little pink roses on it. Brian packed crackers and cheese and turkey and bread. He even thought to bring mayo and napkins. They ate and watched trees blow in the evening breeze. The lively canopy above them swayed to and fro.

The girls ran off to play fetch with Lurch after dinner. It took them no time to get wet and muddy, matching Lurch's strides through tiny puddles of water. Mari watched her daughter playing happily and snuck glances of Brian as he watched them play, a smile permanently affixed on his face. She looked out over the lake. It was green, the opaque kind. Not full of predatory creatures, but fish, frogs, and turtles that thrived in the water. The dark color was neither scary nor malevolent, just green.