

2018

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Recommended Citation

Dohman, Sawyer Germaine, "Spearfish" (2018). *Senior Projects Spring 2018*. 287.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2018/287

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Spearfish

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2018

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my mom, for her constant reading, rereading, and re-rereading of this story, top to bottom, inside-out, and upside-down. Cami Jean is my greatest and most tireless source of energy, inspiration, and love. Without her involvement, there would be nothing here to read.

I would also like to thank my project advisors, Rivka Galchen and Susan Rogers, for the constant encouragement that got these words down on paper and the vigilant editing that made my idea into a story.

Additionally, I would like to thank Nathel Coca, Tristyn Reman, my dad, and my brothers for their continued love and support.

It was evening by the time I crossed the border into South Dakota. There was a welcome sign, a rectangle with a tail on the bottom right corner, shaped like the state itself, blue paint fading to a washed out, desert-sky-at-high-noon color. Around the same time, the speed limit racked up another ten miles an hour, making it an even 80. I don't remember which came first, the welcome sign or the speed change, but I know I saw both before my tire blew out.

There's a certain kind of weariness that one experiences when driving alone for hours on end day after day. It's a full-body adjustment, like the deceleration felt after driving any length on the interstate. Following the terror of going through Chicago the day before, everything felt muted, even nearly being sideswiped by careless semi truck drivers all the way through Wisconsin. That was why, as my car started to shudder violently and then fishtail, I welcomed the rush of adrenaline with exasperation and not nearly as much fear as I normally would have.

"Goddammit," I said, foot off the gas and reminding myself not to punch the brake. A couple of cars got into the left lane to pass me as I gently nudged my car toward the shoulder of the road, and one honked. "Shit *fuck*."

It was getting dusky as I sat there on the side of the road, cars going by at 85, sometimes 90 miles an hour on the purpling expanse of land, like the entire stretch of highway, field, and sky was one giant bruise in the middle of the country. I only needed to make it to Sioux Falls that night, because I had a cousin there and wouldn't have to waste any more money on hotels, but of course I hadn't brought a spare tire with me. Logically, it was a dangerous place to be, on the side of the Interstate as the light drained around me, but I could only pull up a vague sense of gratitude that it hadn't happened in a busier part of the country.

I picked up an empty soda bottle from the passenger seat and tossed it at the emergency lights I'd forgotten to turn on right away and when the bottle bounced off and to the floor, I all but punched the button. I then unbuckled and twisted, trying to find my phone between the seats where I thought I'd seen my phone fall in the chaos.

Eventually, I found it, but only after searching the entire floor of the car twice. There were two messages from Jesse, my ex-colleague and ex-roommate, one from Trent, my cousin in Sioux Falls, and a missed call from a New York number. Swiping the notifications away, I pulled open Safari and googled "what to do when you get a flat on the interstate." And then I googled "chevy roadside assistance phone." Finally, I googled "roadside assistance chevy no warranty" and found that, whether I was under warranty or not, they would at least still send someone out for me, even if it might cost money, but I decided I didn't care about that as much as I cared about sitting on the side of I-90 all night and the next day and for the rest of forever, and that I would have to call eventually or hitchhike. I called the number listed.

It took them almost forty minutes to get someone out to me, and when the man arrived I was sitting against my car, back to the traffic and front to a corn field; I remembered hearing somewhere that I shouldn't sit in the car or put additional weight on it after getting a flat tire. I was just starting to nod off, my head tipped back, probably smearing dirt and smushed bugs into my hair.

"Hey," he called. And, upon seeing me slumped against the back door, "Evening."

"Howdy," I said, getting up and stretching out my back. Then I remembered that most people in South Dakota don't say 'howdy' except for my grandfather way back in the day, and that I only started saying it because I liked to play up being the anomaly from the Black Hills,

but this man from the Chevy roadside assistance place seemed too busy laughing at me about being half asleep next to my car at 8 PM to laugh at me about the way I had greeted him.

“Take a wrong turn?” he asked. It was well and truly dark by then, but his teeth stood out yellow-white when he smiled. He stood there, hands planted on his hips as he took in the situation, looking down at where I was sitting.

“Uh,” I said. “What?”

“Little far from home, aren’t you?” he said, gesturing toward the back of my car.

“Oh,” I said. I had New York license plates. “Not really, I’m from Spearfish.”

“Ahh, I see.”

“Yeah,” I said, standing up and dusting the dirt off the seat of my pants. “I’ve got a cousin right outside Sioux Falls, though. I don’t have too much farther to go tonight.”

“Hm,” he said. “Let’s get you fixed up and on the road.”

He walked around to the back of his own van and came back with a black tool kit and a red carjack.

“Your engine’s off, right?”

“Correct.”

“Good job,” he said. I slapped a mosquito that had landed on my arm and flicked it at his back as he crouched down. There was a hoodie somewhere in the backseat, I was sure, but east river was always so humid, and even though it was only spring, it had been a nice year so far, too warm for sleeves to be comfortable and warm enough for the bugs to be a problem.

He got the ’jack in place and poked around for no more than five minutes before resurfacing, checking the pressure on the other three tires, prodded at the remains of the rubber

clinging to the flat and shining a flashlight up into the well, though I couldn't have said what he was looking at up there. Eventually he stood, wiping his hands on his pants, and faced me.

“We’re gonna have to tow it,” he told me.

“Why?” I said.

“You should be able to pick it up tomorrow afternoon.”

“Where?” I said.

“They’ll probably take it to Billion Auto.” He lowered the carjack again and gathered his tools up. “I’ll have someone come and tow it in the morning.”

“Why do you have to tow it, though?” I said again. “I just need a tire, right?”

“Yeah,” he said, “but you don’t have a spare.”

“No,” I said. “Don’t you?”

“Nah,” he said. “Nah, that’s not part of the roadside assistance. We gotta tow it.”

“Um,” I said. “Okay.”

“I can give you a lift back to the dealership,” he said.

Why the hell don’t you have a spare tire in your van, I wanted to say.

“Sure,” I said instead, and took out my phone to text Trent. “What’s the address for the dealership?”

I had to ask two more times to get a straight answer and, even then, it was the name of the building he finally let slip, so I googled that and sent the address to my cousin along with a short apology and request for a ride.

I spent a good few minutes digging around the back of my car, grabbing a bag of toiletries from my backpack and putting it into my duffle bag, ripping my phone charger out of

its port, putting both my more respectable and my dirtiest clothes in the duffle. When I was done the man from the Chevy roadside assistance place offered to carry it the three yards from my car to his van, and I let him because I didn't know where there would be room for it.

“So what were you doin’ out in New York?” he asked.

“Just, y’know, goin’ to school and then working,” I said. “When I moved away from home I just kept going till I hit an ocean and had to stop.”

He smiled back at me, eyes more on me than on the road. He looked like most mechanics I’d known, though I wasn’t sure if he even was one. Mid-50s, dwindling muscle, skin loose on his bones but sun-worn and leathery looking too, condescending eyes so blue you might think he was blind if you caught him staring off into space, but not the kind of person to get caught staring off into space.

“Alrighty then,” he said, smiling in a way that reminded me of a second grade teacher when she asks a student what he’s done over summer vacation. “What brings you back to the Great Plains?”

“Just getting away from New York. Haven’t hit an ocean yet, so. Here I am.”

“Parker!”

Trent smiled and hugged me when I got to the Nearest Chevy Dealer. He was tall enough that he had to stoop, and his arms were long enough that he had to wrap them around me in a spindly way that's always reminded me of a praying mantis.

The roadside assistant went to carry my duffle bag the short distance from his van to my cousin’s oversized Ford, but I told him I could do it, which my cousin took to mean he was to

carry my duffle bag the short distance from the van to his Ford, but I beat them both to it, just barely.

“He tell ya what happened to your car?” Trent asked as soon as I’d climbed into his truck.

“It was just a flat tire,” I said.

“Yeah, but why did you get a flat? There’s gotta be a reason. Tires don’t just pop if they’re in good condition, y’know?”

“Yeah,” I said. “He didn’t say anything. He seemed a little—scatterbrained to me, though. On the phone, I don’t know if it was him I was talking to, but I said my tire was flat and he showed up without one.”

“Do you not keep a spare?”

Trent lived on a farm a few miles outside Sioux Falls with his wife, Marisa, and their two sons. There was a small lake behind their house that they also owned, and Marisa had made a beach of the shore closest to their back patio, complete with imported sand. But the front of the place looked exactly like every other farm surrounding Sioux Falls: fresh paint illuminated in the night by lightning bugs, a winding gravel driveway, and barn cats, calico and white and gray and ginger cats, cutting their paths between the tires of the slowly plodding truck. (No black cats, though; bad luck.)

The kids were athletes. The elder played golf and the younger was into baseball. I can’t recall having ever had a successful conversation with either of them, not once. Mostly, we stood respectful distances apart in crowded rooms and admired one another like people from far off, foreign lands versed in two completely different kinds of etiquette. They were competitive and

driven, blond haired and blue eyed, content and confident in the way only blond haired and blue eyed boys from Sioux Falls can be. And I, for my part, guess I was just the cousin who lived in New York and went to cellular biology conferences and talked about genetic compatibility, but mostly I think they were interested in the way I rolled my eyes at their dad and got away with it.

I was nearly a whole ten years younger than Trent due to an equal age difference between our mothers who were sisters on opposite ends of a seven sibling family our grandparents fostered. The age gap was enough to keep the two of us on the vaguest of terms. Growing up, Trent had always been a distant and patronizing presence. Our relationship worked best when we kept each other at arm's length. His wife, however, never seemed to get that memo.

Marisa's arms went all the way around me when she hugged me; she clasped one of her hands around her other wrist and rocked us back and forth.

"Parker!" she said into my ear, low and breathy. "Oh, God, it's been so long! You look terrific."

"Oh," I said into her shoulder, pressing my hands into her back, "thanks. You—"

"Hey, kids!" Trent yelled. His hand clasped down on my shoulder and pulled me to the side, making his wife stumble briefly. "Guess who I found!"

He tucked me into his side and jostled me with a laugh.

"Who!" came a high, loud voice from the staircase.

"Come see!" Trent called back, losing patience. I leaned away from him as far as I could without being rude, and Marisa made sorry eyes at me.

The kids came down eventually. First only one, but Trent was dissatisfied with that, so he made the kid go get his brother, and then they both came down. I stared at them, and them at me

in the way we always had but then, because I'm a female relative and female relatives get hugs, Marisa reminded them to hug me, and they did though they didn't really seem to know how. I supposed that fell to me, but I didn't know how to hug people who didn't know how to hug. They were probably used to their mom's hugs. Marisa, though a little overbearing, created an objectively lovely atmosphere of safety and acceptance within the circle of her arms, an enclosure I resigned myself to when required, but not one I knew how to recreate.

“So how's school?” I asked when we were through with hugging.

“I have good teachers this year,” the younger one told me. The older kid grimaced and snuck a look at his dad.

“What sports are even in season right now?” I asked.

“Baseball, almost,” said the younger boy.

“Nothing fun,” said the older.

This was as far as we made it before stuttering to a halt. Marisa stepped in. I must be so tired, she said, and the boys should be getting ready for bed anyway. I agreed, and the kids didn't even groan about being told it was their bedtime; we parted ways gratefully.

Marisa, Trent, and I ended up in the living room overlooking their lake. There were endless bottles of wine around the farmhouse, and Marisa proudly presented something or other, pouring us each a glass.

“What brings you home?” Trent asked eventually. He'd been gearing up for it for a few minutes, I could tell. He looked straight at me in a way he normally didn't. He was interested, or at least curious. It wasn't every day or even every year I was the one to break our arm's length truce. I bobbed my head from side to side, touching my ears to my shoulders a few times as I

thought about how drunk I was and how much I could get away with. I hadn't said anything in our messages about why I was coming home, only that I would be driving through and if they were going to be around, could I maybe crash in a guest room? That's how our family has always worked; when someone comes to town, you let them stay, or at least meet up for coffee. Up until then I hadn't offered a reason for my visit and Trent hadn't asked. Now that I was there, questions were not only fair game, but polite conversation, all a part of catching up.

"One of my friends from high school," I said. "She's just getting out of prison and needs a roommate for some things, y'know?"

"Oh, that's nice of you," Marisa said. "It must be a really tough adjustment to get back into society like that."

"It's bullshit what happened out in New York," Trent said.

"A little bit," I said, though I didn't want to talk about it.

"Just thinking they can scapegoat you like this," he said. "It's bullshit."

"They didn't," I said. "The entire company just dissolved."

"And over what?" Trent said, warming himself up over the idea of it. "Some parakeets got hurt, boo-hoo. Who cares? What's a bird against your entire livelihood?"

"Well," I said, but didn't continue. It had been a huge mess, the last place I'd worked, and in Trent's defense, they had tried to scapegoat me to keep themselves afloat. There'd been a trial, a whole public affair to wash their hands of me, but it hadn't been enough to save them in the end. Too many people had pulled out of business deals or otherwise distanced themselves. They'd made it about two months after kicking me to the curb before swiftly falling to pieces.

Trent went on for a good while, talking himself into a frenzy and then calming himself down before getting worked up all over again. Marisa's eyes glazed over after only a few minutes, and I was jealous of the way she retreated from her surroundings like it was a well-practiced meditation.

It went from my plight to business regulation to taxation of corporations to the way everything needed to be controlled nowadays. Darwinism (or a version of it), monopolies, the war on small business, "bureaucratic decision makers," the whole nine yards.

"Call out culture!" he said, half jumping out of his chair and pointing straight at me. "You've been branded—happens all the time, but only when it wasn't really your fault. God, you'll be lucky if you ever get another job in your field. Or any job at all."

I wanted to wrinkle my nose but nodded instead; he wasn't actually wrong about that last part. I was unemployable. Marisa surfaced just long enough to glare at her husband and pour me more wine.

After another ten minutes, while Trent paused to take a sip, I seized my chance.

"Can I have a ride to the dealership tomorrow?"

Trent grunted, his sip turning into a long pull. "Of course," he said when he was done.

"They'll call me when it's fixed," I said, trying to make my voice apologetic for the inconvenience.

"When it's fixed," Trent said, scoffed. "It's a *flat tire*, Park, it takes five minutes if they do it during their morning coffee."

"Speaking of," Marisa said, coming alive again all at once and leaning forward eagerly. "We'd love to take you out to coffee in the morning. There's this place right on Minnesota Ave

and you'd just fit right in. Sometimes we go in and I point to the corner table by the window, right, Trent? I point and I say 'Parker would be right at home there,' don't I?"

Trent made a noise in the back of his throat and Marisa interpreted it as agreement. By this point it was nearly 11:30, and Trent had to get up early to do chores around the farm, so he went to bed. Marisa rolled her eyes as soon as he was out of the room, and it was a full-body production. She rolled her eyes which rolled her head which rolled all the way down her body like a wave: shoulders, spine, hips. I kept my eyes trained firmly on the door her husband had just gone through, so I didn't see if it went any lower than that.

"I'm sorry," she said. And then, "I'm so glad you're here!"

And the floodgates opened. She unfurled from her armchair and came to sit next to me on the couch, talking in a low, fevered voice. Marisa told me about how rotten her kids were turning out (just like their father), about the money she donated in secret to foundations for breast cancer research (because Trent had read some nonsense online and suddenly thought breast cancer research foundations were a scam), about the trans kid at the local middle school being outed, about how much she missed me, and having someone to talk to, and about the dinner party they were throwing tomorrow night.

"You should come," she said suddenly, interrupting her own train of thought.

"You do make it sound so much fun," I said, "but I told my friend I'd be in Spearfish tomorrow."

"Just one more night," Marisa said, hand on my bicep, manicured nails digging in. "Oh, God, Parker, you have to see these people, you have no idea. It's ridiculous, they're all the same."

“I remember,” I said, laughing it off.

Eventually, though, I relented. Marisa really did seem generally miserable, and so happy to see me. I didn’t want to disappoint her, and it wasn’t like I was in any great rush to get to Spearfish. This entire trip was constructed to kill time, and now that I was staying somewhere for free, there was no reason to rush off.

I slept deeply that night and convinced myself it was because my body knew I was on home soil again, that I was safe from the evils of the world, that I would be taken care of, even if my brain knew better.

The window in my room faced the lake out back, and in the morning sunlight bounced off the rippling waves (not real waves made by the moon, only the fluttering ripples made by the wind) and filtered powerfully onto my throw pillows. I opened the window first thing and leaned over the dresser to press my nose to the screen, telling myself that I could taste the air and that it tasted soft and sweet, like dew.

When I went to the dining room, the younger boy and Trent were having a mad stare down. The kid claimed to have done all of his chores, and Trent was reminding his son in that way of his that he had, in fact, missed one.

“Nuh-uh,” the kid said, and I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from either laughing or sighing. Trent scowled.

“It’s survival of the fittest, Dad,” he said, a sarcastic lilt to his voice that sounded a lot like his mom. “If he’s too weak, then he’s gonna die and we should just let him.”

“Hey,” Trent said. His mouth was pinched and he started barking out words instead of saying them. “I don’t wanna hear you talking that way, understand? He’s our animal and so we take care of him.”

“Good morning,” I said quietly, sitting next to Marisa. She slid a plate of food in front of me and started whispering. Apparently, one of the goats had had twins this spring, which meant the mom could only make milk enough for one, and the other (the smaller) had to be bottle fed.

“Ah,” I said, and nodded sagely. And then, to my cousin, “I can do it.”

“I don’t care how you feel about it,” Trent said, not to me. “This is how it works. There’s nothin’ wrong with it, and no reasons to let it starve.”

“It can’t even take care—”

“None of them could!” Trent said. “They’re goats. They belong in mountains, anyway, not the plains. Every single one of them would die if we didn’t—”

“I wouldn’t mind feeding the goat,” I said.

“—provide them with food.”

“Let Parker do it,” said the kid.

“What,” Trent said.

“I can do it,” I said again.

“You don’t want to do that.”

“But, I mean. Yeah, I do. I don’t mind.”

“Well, fine,” Trent said, and his kids took this as their cue to sprint from the table.

“This conversation isn’t over!” Trent yelled at the stairs.

The goat barn was past the peacock pens but before the zebras' enclosure. As Trent led me past the birds to show me Henry-the-smaller-twin, a terrible, croaking *squaw* came from the pens. Trent, who hadn't even broken stride, took a few seconds to notice that I'd stopped dead in my tracks.

"What're they doing?" I asked, and pointed. There were two male peacocks in a single narrow pen, walking in a circle and facing each other in a way that was strangely reminiscent of an old kung-fu movie. One of them had noticeably longer tail feathers than the other, and they were both quiet now, only their gullets moving rapidly like silent frogs singing.

"Territory fight," Trent said.

There appeared to be an empty pen next to the birds as they parried and dodged, which I pointed out.

"Yeah," he said. "Marisa's working on a project and needs a few train feathers, though."

"Do peacocks not molt?" I asked.

"They do." He looked tired when he said that.

The baby goat's name was Henry. He was a soft peach color, somewhere between the beginnings of sunset and clay-crusting dirt.

There was a dusty stool in the corner and I brushed some wood chips off to sit down. Trent watched me carefully for a few seconds, maybe to make sure I wouldn't drown the kid with milk, but left soon after Henry latched onto the bottle's nipple.

Goats are commonly thought of as relating to the devil and hell. Something about the eyes, often described as creepy, empty, soulless. Though my cousin would never let the bad luck of a black cat onto his property, here he was, bottle feeding a barnful of demons.

The kid warmed up to me pretty quickly, humans having only played the part of benevolent milk bearers in his time, and I warmed up to him immediately. Despite having no experience with goats, I decided that this one was particularly cute, though I think the only unique thing about him was how small he was.

“Don’t take it personally,” I told Henry. “If survival of the fittest meant what he thinks it means, he would’ve died when he was two months old and got that infection.”

Henry didn’t reply, of course, except to continue making his insistent noises as he suckled. I had to wonder if they were feeding him enough; he seemed ravenous. Both of my hands were braced on the bottle, and my elbows were braced on my knees, just to keep it in place.

“I probably wouldn’t be here either,” I said. “I was born early, they had to put me in a box for a week.”

The goats around us moved in a loose mass, wiggling this way and that, sidestepping one another, kids headbutting playfully or bleating for their moms to come and find them in the crowd. All of them gave us a wide berth, getting only close enough to snuffle the ground a yard or two away before traipsing off again into the throngs of what reminded me of a school of fish.

I found myself scanning the crowd, looking for the same peachy-dirt color of Henry’s coat, and coming up empty. Most were mixes of deep brown and off-white. I wanted, badly in that moment, to hate her, this goat, any kind of mother who could abandon a baby to starve. The

most I could conjure up was a fierce, protective fondness for Henry as his front hooves scrabbled and slid on top of the big rubber galoshes I'd borrowed, along with a deep disappointment in myself for my lack of indignation.

You deserve better, I thought.

"Slow down," I murmured instead. "Jesus, you're gonna choke and I'll never be allowed in here again."

"We'll stop and pick your car up on the way back," Trent told me.

"Sounds good," I said. I really hoped he meant it. Trent was a frankly terrible driver, but one who refused to admit it or let his wife drive instead.

Not having my car made me feel nauseous, a little like a kid who has to hold her mom's hand in a crowd lest she be stuck there forever, and depending on Trent of all people didn't sit well with me.

The cafe was huge and overbearingly well lit. There were at least two dozen tables, all set up in rows and tucked away into corners. It felt industrial, like a conveyor belt for human feedings.

"There!" Marisa said, pointing out what she always imagined as my favorite seat. It was along the front window, visible to passersby, back to the door and most of the room, directly under one of the overhead lights. It was, personally speaking, the worst seat in the entire cafe. I could see, however, that my 18- or 19-year-old self would've been fine there.

When I first moved to New York, everything had felt claustrophobic, cramped and like I was bumping into people wherever I turned. It took me quite a while to get used to mass

coexistence. After almost five years, I learned to accept myself as part of the crowd instead of someone outside of it. I learned eventually that everyone there was just minding their own business, the same as I was. As I grew more confident in New York, my trips to South Dakota took on an undertone of exposure, a feeling of being on display. Often, I would walk into a store and find myself the sole customer, feeling watched as I browsed the shelves or racks.

Driving in the northeast still felt overwhelming at times, the trees too tall and too close to the road, all the bends hiding turnoffs and oncoming traffic. I definitely preferred the wide expanses of land that came with I-90 on the plains, where I could see the cars half a mile, a mile ahead of and behind me, but the rest of it—the shoulder bumping, the subways, the sounds of living around at all hours—had become familiar scenery, like sleeping with a white noise machine.

The seat Marisa loved to picture me at was everything that made me uncomfortable about South Dakota: the spotlight of standing alone in a Midwestern expanse coupled with the need to keep people at arm's length from one another, to separate them, segregate them and observe, the way you keep samples separate in a lab.

Living on my own in small apartment buildings, I never had neighbors as nosy as the ones I remembered from my own childhood, the kind who would peer over fences and stop my mom on her walks to gossip or bring baked goods to the front door just to glimpse inside.

There were likenesses of flamingos all over the farmhouse. The mirror in the hall had elegantly painted flamingos along the periphery; there were candy jars in the kitchen made of glass blown to look like stout, curving flamingos; at least one of the bathrooms was flamingo-

themed; and flamingo art made by the two kids through the years hanging throughout the entire place.

Sadly, nobody but Marisa seemed to care about the flamingos. Everywhere I looked, people seemed to be talking about work, the goats, the pieces of flamingo-unrelated art lining the mantle, even the peacock feathers collected in vases in scattered corners. The flamingoes hovered bright pink on the periphery of everyone's vision, ignored, obnoxious, and beautiful.

"It's a waste is what it is," a man would say, wearing a flannel shirt or a white button-up with the sleeves rolled up, and he would be referring to a mass deportation of Mexicans on a construction crew, or the quarantine of a farm going through a CL outbreak, or a business deal lost to red tape.

"A shame," a woman would agree then, wearing Black Hills gold or turquoise from a sister in New Mexico or a round amber pendant, and I would share a sympathetic smile with them all.

I was passed around the room, pushed ahead of Marisa or pulled into a circle by Trent. I kept a wine glass balanced between the fingers of one hand while my other arm acted as a leash. I'd gotten free reign of Marisa's closet for an hour earlier. Luckily for me, Marisa threw nothing away, and her walk-in closet was filled with at least a decade and a half's worth of options. Trent and Marisa's gathering wasn't formal by any means, but it did call for a certain standard, and it was not a standard I'd had in mind during my wrathful packing a week ago. I was wearing my own jeans and low heels, but one of Marisa's pre-pregnancy shirts, bright green silk, and matching earrings.

“This is my cousin,” Trent would say. “Diane’s kid; you know her father. The food salesman west river, helps out with the rally orders.”

“Parker!” Marisa would say, peering over my shoulder, resting her chin there. “Alex, this is Parker. She’s just passing through from New York.”

I was overwhelmed but determined to ride the wave of it. People’s attention were tides, especially groups of people. Marisa, unfortunately, was a different story. Her attention was more of a laser than anything naturally occurring, and even as everyone else was getting tired of my novelty, my cousin-in-law could not be deterred. People started subtly sighing through their noses as she went on, and after a while I wanted to join.

“Hi,” a woman said. I couldn’t tell if her nose was crooked or if her slanted grin just made the bridge seem skewed. She reached forward with her left hand and Marisa had to let go of my arm so I could shake it. I rolled my shoulder dramatically, trying to convey the relief of having my arm back, and she wrinkled her nose underneath her laughing eyes. “Bethany.”

“Bethany,” I echoed. “So good to meet you.”

There’s a way in which all the interactions I was having with the women present felt conspiratorial. It was a pattern; the men got riled up, impassioned talking about something, anything, and his date would flutter her eyes closed in exasperation or take a long, delicate sip from her wine while making sympathetic eye contact with another woman on the fringes of the conversation, jumping in only briefly when their contributions would be indisputable, a correction of a name or date.

It was in these moments when I understood intimately the appeal of clearly coded gender. It was nice, simple in a way interactions weren’t when you tried to make everyone equal in your

head, in your practice. I had slipped into this role again much more smoothly than I assumed I would. In part I was disappointed in myself for that because I really had thought I'd come such a long way living in New York, changing my world view, becoming *better* than the haphazard acceptance I'd seen play out my entire childhood. The rest of me was plainly relieved.

Even this encounter between myself and Bethany felt clandestine, like we were compatriot spies in enemy territory, strangers but allies. She might have been Trent's age, but I suspected she was somewhere between his and mine, late twenties, early thirties. Her hair was cropped short so just the tops of her ears were hidden, and she was wearing a flowing, deep yellow shirt with spaghetti straps and no bra straps in sight.

I made sure my eyes crinkled at the corners when I smiled at Bethany and cocked my head just so my earring would bounce against the side of my jaw and I could milk the feeling of being delicate, secretive, powerful.

When Trent introduced me to someone he would try to make a connection, say something like, oh, yes, you're both dog people, Mike here has the craziest dog you've ever seen, you wouldn't believe what he did last week. When Marisa introduced me, however, she had a spiel, the same one every time, and people either picked up something interesting from it or hummed politely. It either stuck or it didn't.

As it was, something Marisa said had Bethany's eyes lighting up.

"You're a scientist?" she asked. She had cut Marisa off mid-spiel, and I could feel the glare coming over my shoulder like a physical touch, but decided to ignore it.

"Yeah," I said.

"What do you study?"

And so I told her. We topped off our wine glasses and moved to the porch overlooking the fake beach, and I talked about my zebrafish and the obesity studies I'd most recently been a part of. She laughed in all the right places, her eyes going squinty in what I perceived to be genuine humor.

At one point I was telling a story about how one zebrafish in particular would risk his life for that extra food we were giving him, and we had, at some point, amassed a crowd. By this time I was really warming up to the story, using my hands to exaggerate points. Bethany was bracing a hand against my shoulder, nearly doubled up from laughter, and I felt breathless.

"Wasn't that the lab they shut down about a couple weeks ago?" said a man's voice. I couldn't see who'd spoken; the crowd was a circle now, a few rings deep. My stomach sank, and I thought maybe I shouldn't have drunk so much wine.

"Yeah," I admitted, "it was the—"

"Government regulations, I heard," another man said.

No, I thought. It wasn't.

"Wasn't that the place that got caught doing experiments on animals?" Bethany said, voice hushed in a way that told me we were now part of a splinter conversation despite the fact that it had been ours to begin with.

"'Caught' makes it sound like we were doing something nefarious," I said, smiling the mouth, crinkling the eyes, but Bethany only laughed disjointedly and took a step back. A couple of the other women were shifting away too, interpreting what the men were saying and gathering the barebones of the story as told online, that the labs had been caught testing on animals, never mind the legality or scientific ethics involved, they'd *been caught testing on animals*, and that

after that anybody with a respectable bone in their body wouldn't be caught dead contributing to their funding, and the labs had slowly gone bankrupt, the remaining animals euthanized, the experiments all abandoned or secretly taken over by some other conglomerate at no small risk to their own integrity.

What had Bethany thought the zebrafish were *for* anyway? To keep me company while I studied the effects of timed calorie intake and stress through some crystal ball?

The men went on, about human rights over animal rights and necessary sacrifices, and they made it sound particularly heartless and savage, even to my own ears. By the time they'd gone on to use the gun control analogy, Bethany was long gone, and a few of the women left wouldn't meet my eyes. Though a couple of them did, looking proud, but I couldn't tell who they were proud of, me or themselves or their husbands. Whoever it was for, I didn't want anything to do with it, and quickly looked away each time.

Eventually, I found Marisa and poured us both another glass.

I left Sioux Falls the next morning.

Marisa was hungover with all the grace of someone familiar with it, and she sat pleasantly, dryly at the breakfast table with a ridiculously large bottle of cucumber lemon water. Her kids seemed to take some particular joy in this, either understanding the situation for what it was or otherwise intuiting it, and they spent the meal chattier than I'd ever seen them, even openly inviting me into conversation several times. Trent had, for all intents and purposes, lost control of his family in that moment, and he knew it, opting to spend his energy flipping through

the news on an iPad like my dad used to do with a newspaper, and drinking cup after cup of scalding coffee.

It was a truce of a morning, and I jumped at the opportunity presenting itself.

“Of course,” Trent replied. “As soon as I get out of these work clothes.”

Whenever that would be, he didn’t say, though he went right on flipping through articles, pouring another cup of coffee. I smiled my thanks and kept my eyes carefully away from where I could see Marisa looking at me.

Soon after I made a hasty retreat to the goat barn, bottle in hand. I explained to Henry very thoroughly that I was leaving, but not because he’d done anything wrong, or because he was inherently wrong in any way. It bothered me greatly, more so that morning than most other times, this language barrier between me and the animals I grew attached to.

To be perfectly frank about it, I was annoyed by Marisa and her mournful eyes because she understood the terms of my visit, understood it as a visit, and so had hardly any right to look at me like I was betraying her. Henry, on the other hand, had no idea, and I had no idea how to soften that abandonment, no tools to explain.

“He’ll feed you again,” I said instead, helplessly. “He’s just a kid, you both are, and he’s a little more screwed up, but human kids usually are, no matter how many human parents are willing to feed them.”

So I did leave Sioux Falls that morning, eventually. I got to fist bump the kids and I hugged Marisa, rubbing her back and murmuring sweet things because she seemed to need it from me and who was I to withhold it from her? And then, finally, Trent drove me to pick up my car. He went into the dealership with me and handed over his debit card for the tire (which was

not covered by my warranty after all, go figure) before I could stop him. The man behind the desk handed my keys off to Trent, who then passed them off to me once we were outside.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I said. I wanted it to be annoyed, sharp, but I had the feeling it was more resigned than anything.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” my cousin told me.

When I hit I-90 I took a deep breath, held it. I rolled the front windows down half an inch, turned on the radio to some college station, and breathed again as Lorde filled the car with a steady, demanding beat. The roadside was half-barren, half-golden, all yellowed grass and soft expanses of wheat, mesmerizingly neat rows of corn that flashed by when you drove parallel to them. I imagined small, peachy blurs darting through the wheat with backward-bending knees, and I wished I wasn’t driving so I could’ve looked up the legality of having goats as pets. Chelsea wouldn’t mind, I knew. If anything, she’d think it was funny, just another one of my quirks.

I hadn’t been on the road very long at all when I decided to stop for lunch at a strip mall right off the interstate. I would only be traveling for a total of six hours anyway, and my thoughts would be eaten up by Henry-the-goat until I got my answers.

There was a grocery store connected to a restaurant, Al’s Oasis, and they both had the feeling of having been around for much longer than I’d been alive, but that could’ve just as easily been part of the tourist trap of it all. The outside looked like an old west saloon, and there was a big buffalo statue out front for people to pose with for pictures. I’d been here before as a kid on trips across the state for family reunions, but I forgot about the taxidermy until I walked through the doors. The stuffed animals were everywhere once I was seated; there was a high

shelf running around the perimeter of the main room of the restaurant, and a visceral fear gripped me as I was led to my seat, reminding me abruptly that as a kid I'd been terrified of taxidermy. My fear came less from the dead-body aspect of the taxidermy, and even less from the fear of a mounted head coming back to life, and more from the sheer size of the animals. When I was young I refused to sit underneath mounted heads in restaurants, or to walk beneath them in gas stations. They loomed over me, oppressive and constantly threatening, the heads and horns of mighty beasts, slain in battle and unbalanced on the wall, unnaturally fitted as trophies by creatures who, according to common sense, should not have been able to best them.

"I'm Lacey," a pleasant, smooth voice said, "I'll be taking care of you today. Something to drink besides water?"

Surprised by the waitress's sudden appearance, I laughed, a little too loud.

"Um," I said. She smiled sweetly, patiently, the look of a waitress right before the lunch rush, reveling in the ability to stand still, hip cocked, shoulders loose. She was obviously younger than me, with the cascading, dark brown hair of a pageant queen or a dancer. A college girl, maybe, though I couldn't remember if there were any colleges very near here.

"We've got Coca-Cola products, lemonade..." She trailed off.

"Dr. Pepper," I said. And then, "Sorry, I. The taxidermy kinda freaks me out."

Lacey looked amused by that, at least.

"Not for everyone," she said.

I smiled, relieved, and pulled out my phone as she left.

The RSPCA website was vague and unhelpful, with things like *you can keep a goat as a pet if x, y, and z criteria are met*. It looked, tentatively, like my owning Henry would be illegal, if

only because Chelsea's place was an apartment and the laws seemed to have something about laws regarding the registration of the land on which the goat would live. Looking into the South Dakota specific ordinances, there was Ordinance 4 written for Pennington County, which told me very little except that each county seemed to be in charge of their own animal control ordinances. What it boiled down to looked a lot to me like fuel to keep a roomful of lawyers arguing in circles. It would be, at the same time, both legal and illegal to keep a small goat as a pet. Knowing my luck, though, it would probably be ruled illegal.

I ordered a buffalo burger and took my time eating. The lunch rush I'd been expecting to show up didn't seem to be in any sort of rush, so Lacey came to check on me more than was strictly necessary, and we got to chatting.

"I don't think so," she said. "I don't think I've ever even known anyone who *wanted* a goat as a pet."

"They're very cute," I assured her. "And I really can't imagine they'd be any more difficult than a dog. If you've got a yard, I can't see why you shouldn't be able to have a goat."

"Okay, but...house training! Can goats be house trained?" she asked, laughing even as she asked it.

"Probably?" I said. "I actually have no idea, but I think so."

Still laughing, she had to leave to take care of another table that had just walked in, but she returned a few minutes later to refill my half empty soda.

"So," she said, "you have any pets or are you holding out for that goat?"

"Had a dog," I said lightly, twirling my straw around through the ice cubes and Dr. Pepper. "Up until last week."

“Oh,” Lacey said, shoulders sagging. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay,” I rushed to say. “She didn’t die or anything. I—there was some trouble where I was working, this. Scandal or whatever, and I worked with animals. Sophie—that was my dog’s name—was kidnapped by pissed off PETA members. Or, I guess stolen is the right word? But.” I sighed, sad and angry all over again. “It is what it is. They left a ransom note behind, except it was less of a ransom note and more of a ‘you don’t deserve the company of a dog in your pathetic life’ note.”

“Your dog got kidnapped by PETA members? Seriously?” She wasn’t laughing anymore, but she was clearly entertained. I couldn’t blame her; it was a pretty fucked up story.

“Yep,” I said. Then, “God, they’ve probably got her on a vegan diet or something.”

“Poor Sophie,” Lacey said.

When I got to Exit 14 I had to get off the interstate to regain my bearings. I drove in a knot down the ramp, and then went straight into the Phillips 66 parking lot, the same gas station where, during her life, my aunt used to be a legend for the sheer number of beer cases she bought from them. In the wake of my deceleration I felt shaky and as if I was still lurching along, like every twitch of my wrist would change my entire trajectory. My head was fuzzy too. I couldn’t tell if I was zipping along the interstate, coming up on the landscape of the Queen City, my home, breathing fresh air for the first time in months, or if I was sitting absolutely still in a parking lot, a fly on the wall in the past. I expected to look up and see my aunt there, one foot out the door, hair tall and straw-like, smiling wide, calling something harsh and fond over her shoulder to the cashier, all while holding a case of Bud Light under her arm like it weighed

nothing. As a young child, I thought that my parents' childhoods had happened in sepia tones because that's how movies and TV always depicted scenes from the past, and that's how this moment felt. Washed out, like one of those old-timey photo places where they let people dress up like they're from the wild west and use props.

In the cupholder I found a folded piece of paper on which I'd written Chelsea's address. I smoothed it out with buzzing hands and read the street name, read it again. When I still couldn't remember where that was, I put the address into my phone, feeling like some kind of impostor. For a few seconds it was almost too much, I was lightheaded and hot as I pulled out of the lot, thinking I must be some sort of an in-between creature, a changeling belonging nowhere, not even the place I'd come from.

Halfway down Colorado Blvd., I had enough clarity to realize I was being silly. There was Sandstone Hills on my right, Hillcrest St. on my left, and then Colorado bled into Main St. This was as familiar as my own name. Spearfish wasn't *that* small. It was a town of 11,000 people, and even when I'd lived here I hadn't had a map of the town memorized. But this was why it had taken me a week to drive from New York; I got tense on the road, and after five or six hours I hit a wall. I would stop the car and the tension would bleed away until I became a trembling, bleary ghost in yet another Hilton Inn hallway. It was lovely in how thoroughly exhausting it was, how it left no room for almost anything else.

Chelsea's apartment was up by the college and on a very steep hill. I parked in a spot marked RESIDENTS ONLY, VIOLATORS WILL BE TOWED AT OWNER'S EXPENSE, and trudged up the wooden steps to the second floor with my backpack, purse, and duffle bag straps slung across

my torso. There were sounds coming from inside, and I put the duffle bag down so I could knock hard enough to be heard. I waited a second and then knocked a second time, harder and more insistent. Some of the noise died down, and my eye caught the doorbell I'd missed before. Quickly, I rang it, and wondered if she'd find it believable that my footsteps up the stairs had just been particularly loud with all my bags.

The door cracked open, then swung open to fit just the width of a man's broad shoulders. He looked me up and down, smiled, and didn't open the door any wider.

"Hi," I said, smiling back.

"Hey," he said. "What's up?"

"I dunno if I have the right—"

"Hey, hey, wait," another voice came from behind the man. "Who's here?"

"Not sure," the man said.

I knew it was Chelsea even before she levered him away from the door using both of her arms and all of her strength, and took his place, one hand braced on either side of the doorframe, grinning slow and pleased like a cat, panting like an excited dog.

"Oh shit," she said, and I laughed. "Parker!"

"Chelsea!" I said.

She grabbed my shoulder to pull me inside, but I tripped over the duffle and had to catch myself on the doorknob. Chelsea was pulling me in then. Up and in. She was taller than me, and rail thin, her hair a dark, choppy bob that made it look like she'd taken a sword to it. I'd almost expected to see her bulked up some way, tattooed maybe, but prison didn't seem to have any

physical effect on her. There's no reason it should've, really; Chelsea had never needed more than her wit, speed, and clever tongue to get out of a situation before.

Chelsea pretended to help as I dragged my bags inside, but for the most part she was talking: it was good to see me, my drive was probably good, wasn't it, the weather's been so nice lately, and this is Andrew, he doesn't actually live here for real, but he does come around a bit, I didn't mind, did I?

"Oh, man," she said. "It's so good to have you back."

And then she embraced me for real, and I remembered that Chelsea is the eye of her own storm. Right up against her everything was calm and muffled, and she stroked my hair with one hand and squeezed my neck with the other. When she released me I was suddenly, painfully aware of the chaos of the apartment. There was incense burning, and Andrew was playing video games at full volume while violently fast folk music came from the kitchen, and everything smelt of weed and bleach.

"Good to see you," I said. And, before I could get too overwhelmed, threw out, "Nice to meet you, Andrew."

He replied, but it was at the same time as something in the game exploded, so I hoped it was nothing that required a response. I untangled myself from the straps and luggage, and went to find what would be my room.

Chelsea bolted not long after I arrived, yelling about going to the store, and I yelled back acknowledgement. I unpacked most of my things and kicked my bags under the bed. When I smelled one of the pillows on my new bed, it smelled clean enough but weird in the way other

people's houses always smell weird. Kind of dry, dusty. I'd go to the store eventually, buy some detergent, something lemon scented. It would do for now, though.

When I went back out to the living room, Andrew was still there, wandering through the wilderness on screen. I'd put on sweats and a big sweatshirt, taken off my bra, and flopped bonelessly onto the far end of the couch. I hadn't even driven much that day, but I was exhausted all the same. After a week straight of moving, it was almost hard to convince myself that this was the end of the line for now, that I'd reached my destination, that I didn't have to sit down with a map tonight or google the largest city in the area or make a playlist designed to keep me calm for the first four hours and then simply awake for the next four.

"You play?" Andrew asked after a couple minutes.

I looked at the screen, at the snowy wasteland, the trees. It looked familiar, but I couldn't tell if that was because I'd seen the game online or because it looked like the Black Hills in January, which it kind of did.

"No," I said. "It's pretty, though. Mind if I watch?"

"Uhh," he said, and looked sideways at me like I'd grown a second head. He snorted, and looked back at the screen. "Be my guest."

It was a game about dragons, and about defeating those dragons by screaming at them, which was at least a little hilarious. Andrew's avatar also fought with a crossbow, but mostly he shrieked at things he wanted to kill. It really was pretty, and soothing to watch, manufacturing a feeling close enough to being on the road. Barren landscape, some rummaging, trying not to fall off cliffs. There was some social interaction involved in the game, but Andrew blew through the dialogue options faster than I could read them.

All in all, it didn't seem to take Chelsea any time at all until she was kicking the door open, phone in one hand, plastic bags in the other, declaring Operation Return To The Nest a go.

"And what's that?" I asked, hoping my first assumption was wrong.

"Your welcome home party," Chelsea said, taking a bottle of Gordon's Gin out of one of her plastic bags. I unfolded from the couch and went to stand over her shoulder: limes, frozen pizzas, corndogs, tequila, margarita mix. When I went back to the couch, I kicked Andrew in the ankle before flopping back down.

"You knew about this," I accused him, and he laughed.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "She's been talking 'bout it for a week."

And that settled it, because there was not a force on God's green earth that could stop Chelsea when she got an idea in her head, at least not one I'd found, and I had devoted quite a bit of time and energy to that cause in my younger years. Luckily, experience also told me that Chelsea would forget about my existence the moment the party started, and I would be able to lock myself in my room or sit in the corner until I blended into the background.

The party wasn't what I'd expected. For one thing, I knew exactly no one who showed up. There were two names I recognized because they'd been a grade behind me and Chelsea in high school, but I'd never spoken to Jeff or Cassidy once before that night. The lights were turned down, lamps and candles lit, electro swing bumping from the speakers. By the time the first guests arrived, Andrew had shut off his game, and I felt like this was some great loss.

We stayed at the house barely an hour before moving, pack-like, down the hill and toward the bars on Main St. I had changed into jeans with the cuffs rolled up and a slightly too-big t-

shirt with a cactus on it and holes down near the hem, a ratty sports bra poking out underneath the collar of the shirt. Comfortable but, I reasoned, more acceptable than the sweats. Everyone else came expecting the party, wearing party clothes, shorts, off-the-shoulder shirts, heels. Andrew was wearing clothes most similar to me, but with his quiet, cool charm it fit better. Chelsea introduced me to everyone as her “friend from New York,” and some of them seemed reluctant to believe it.

We went to False Bottom first, where we were apparently meeting up with some other people, and where we lost Cassidy to a chance encounter with her ex. Jeff soured at this considerably and bought me two shots out of pure spite. Andrew found this hilarious. Chelsea was...somewhere in the crowd, continuously flitting from conversation to conversation. Overall, we blew through the bar pretty quickly, which I was thankful for, and wound up at the Back Porch next, just across the street from the first bar. Downtown Spearfish is home to a disproportionate number of bars, all familiar to me in some capacity after an ill-fated summer spent at home when I was twenty-one. I felt vaguely humiliated walking through the doors, but in a way that only encouraged me to drink more and forget faster what a drunken idiot I’d been.

There were a dozen or so people in our group by the time we hit that second bar, and this one had live music going, so I didn’t even pretend to talk to anyone. Jeff bought me another drink, and Andrew grew more and more talkative as he drank an endless stream of Coronas broken up only by Jagerbombs. The two of us stood off to the side and he pointed out the guitarist he knew on stage. The kid looked twenty at most, long and lanky and too thin, hair long, dirty blond, but also dirty dirty.

“He’s opening up a guitar shop in town,” Andrew said, tipping his head in close and speak-shouting over the bass. “Spent a few years homeless, teaching music lessons in people’s houses ’cause he was living out of his van.”

“How old did you say he was?” I asked. Andrew laughed.

“I didn’t.”

Jessica wanted to dance then. Jessica was Cassidy’s cousin, and had no time for my argument that this wasn’t exactly the best music for dancing. So we danced like we were at a club until Jeff appeared, two drinks in hand, and gave one to me and the other to Jessica, and she followed him when he took her hand. By then I was drunk enough to dance on my own—in for a penny, in for a pound—and the next time I stopped was when the set was over.

A few from the original group were milling around, we’d collected some new people, and even more still were nowhere to be seen. Chelsea was missing, and I was unsurprised by that, but Andrew was still there. He hardly acted drunk, but his hair was mussed and he looked pleasantly sleepy. When we made eye contact his grin widened and he spread his arms. I laughed, breathless in the sawdust-bar air, and walked into the hug, wiping my sweaty forehead on his t-shirt. He snorted and steered us toward the bar.

“Frank!” he yelled, and the guitarist looked up from where he’d swiped a water bottle.

“This is Parker, Chelsea’s girl.”

I rolled my eyes at the introduction and Frank laughed in delight. His teeth were dazzlingly bright, a stark contrast to his scraggly hair and tan skin, and he was shiny with sweat. There was a joke about Chelsea’s girls and me being trouble, and I threw my head back and

howled with laughter. He looked over at the piles of instruments and equipment, and then back to me conspiratorially.

“I gotta get outta here before they find me and make me help pack up,” he stage whispered.

Brilliantly, I took this as my cue to yell to whoever was in my group that it was time for Flanagan’s Pub. Unfortunately, I couldn’t remember who all was in my group, or what newcomers we’d picked up, so I yelled this to the entire bar. The pub wasn’t on Main St., but it was about half a block away, and had a fenced-in yard with lights strewn overhead. The inside was small and strange, but overall I liked it more than the others. When we got there, stumbling and laughing, we seemed to take up the entire place. It felt like our numbers had doubled since the beginning of the night. There was a small pile of equipment in the corner that suggested we’d just missed the music here, too, but nobody was bothered about it; Flanagan’s liked to invite musicians who were willing to play Irish music.

One of the girls I’d been introduced to earlier did breakfast shots with me while Andrew and Frank cheered, and then a bunch of us got beers and waters and took them out to sit around a giant table on the back porch.

“Play any instruments?” Frank asked eventually.

“Just the recorder in second grade,” I said, and he laughed like I’d said something hilarious.

“I played clarinet in high school band,” he whispered, like this was his deepest, darkest secret, and I giggled in faux shock. “Never once cleaned my instrument.”

“What?” I said. “Nasty, don’t tell me that.”

“In fact, last concert of my big band career, senior year, I got a split lip, and it got infected with the same virus that gives you strep throat.”

“Oh my God,” I said, laughing for real now, so hard my stomach hurt.

“Lost feeling in my bottom lip,” he said leaning forward, tapping the very middle. And then, whispering, “Right here.”

And then he kissed me. It seemed like a very logical sequence of events at the time. He really wanted to bite my bottom lip and suck on my tongue, but my drunk self was fascinated with the crooked tooth I’d found in the left side of his mouth with my tongue.

He asked if I wanted to get out of there, and I answered with an emphatic yes, on the condition that we go get a quick bite to eat.

“If I don’t get something greasy in me now, I might never be able to eat again,” I said.

I’d lost track of time, and my phone was too deep in my purse to dig out, but it must have gotten late at some point, because we started walking up the hill toward the Millstone, the only restaurant open 24 hours a day. I was more sleepy by then, and a little punch-drunk on top of being drunk-drunk, so I told the story about the Sno Ball dance I went to in high school, and how we came here too, and took shots of hot sauce like the idiot fifteen-year-olds we were.

We ate french fries and bacon and pancakes, and I didn’t even pretend like I was planning on paying for any of it. And then, when we left, I simply followed him home because that’s how that arrangement worked. Girls get things for free, and they follow. I wanted to comment on how ridiculous this seemed to me, but I couldn’t think of a way to make it relatable and funny and not sound like I wasn’t going to follow him home, so I went quiet on the walk there; he didn’t seem to mind.

Frank lived in the trailer park over by the dog park, and so it took a little while to get there. Time skipped like a movie montage, the way it does when you're the happy, floating kind of drunk. We linked elbows after I stumbled, and we both stayed upright then even though it took us longer to travel that way.

It was even later then, just after 1:30 AM when we left the Millstone. The bars didn't close until two, but it must've been close enough to time that people were calling it a night. The streets weren't packed by any means, but they weren't deserted either. We passed four or five groups on our way: a quiet couple, one that showcased the full range of drunk girls' emotions, a small herd of construction workers, a few women talking in terrible British accents.

When the construction workers passed us, Frank put an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close into his side. His fingers curled around the outside of my arm, four points of pressure and the bar of his thumb over the top of my shoulder. I made sure to laugh loudly when I ducked and twirled out of his hold. I had to steady myself with a hand on the grass, and he made sure to laugh loudly back as he helped me up and farther down the sidewalk from the group.

"You know them?" I asked, a little breathless. He seemed tense, enough that I noticed, even as drunk as I was.

"Nah," he said. "Just don't trust 'em when they're drunk."

"Oh," I said, blinking. "Yeah, group of dudes that big, I guess."

"No, not," he flapped his hand like he was searching for the word, "not that."

“Then—” I turned back, walking backwards to keep up with Frank and also get a look at the men we’d just passed. Big guys, sure, most of the construction workers were. Broad shouldered, dark haired. I turned back to Frank and jogged to catch up, and then it hit me.

“Because they’re Mexican?” I asked, shocked both at his admission and at my own boldness.

“They’re not Mexican,” Frank said.

“Um,” I said, because most of the construction workers I knew out here had been Mexican. Then again, every couple years when I was a kid there would be mass roundups and deportations. It was entirely possible that the pattern had continued in my absence. But that still didn’t explain anything. Their skin had certainly looked dark enough to be Mexican.

“Then—” I said, parsing the possibilities in my head. I felt slow and a little stupid, but also like Frank was a little stupid, so I pushed it aside. “The Natives?”

He shrugged.

“That’s,” I said, “yikes.”

“Oh, please,” he said, and I didn’t look but it sounded like he was rolling his eyes.

And then he changed the subject, talking about dogs as we walked past the empty dog park. I let him, because I didn’t think that at that moment I would be able win an argument about racism with a Spearfish guy, and also because I love dogs. Especially when I’m not sober. Sadly, he didn’t have a dog, and I told him how shameful that was, and what a waste of real estate opportunity. Then we got to his house, a little brick thing next to the trailer park. The grass outside was too long, and there were vines winding up every available surface, but no weeds in sight.

He kicked his shoes off onto a mat by the door and asked if I wanted a drink. I had to sit on the floor to get my shoes untied and laughed when I told him no, I better not. I thought, I should go to the bathroom, and then, that sounds like a bad idea, and then, I really have to though.

“Hey,” I said, pulling myself up. “Where’s your bathroom?”

I’d been right on both accounts: I had to pee like a racehorse, and it was a bad idea anyway. You know the saying, you never know how drunk you truly are until you go to the bathroom alone? Very true that night. And not only that, but when I got that bit of distance I had a moment of clarity so pure it could only exist in an altered state. There I was, in this boy’s home, having lost Chelsea hours ago, and having lost the plot a good month before that.

Carefully, I ran the cold water and splashed some onto the back of my neck. Then I ran the water a little warmer and cleaned up my face where some of my makeup had smeared. When I left the bathroom a trail of illuminated hallway lights led me to Frank’s bedroom where he was lounging on his unmade bed, scrolling through Netflix on his laptop. And there, above his headboard, was a dreamcatcher, white with iridescent beads. I flopped onto my back next to him so I was lying with the lower half of my legs dangling over the edge.

“I thought you weren’t a fan of Natives Americans,” I said, eyes half open, and I was watching out of my peripherals that time, trying to be sneaky, when I caught him rolling his eyes in response.

“Look,” he said, with the air of a man who’s explained a rule to a petulant child before many, many times, “it’s nothing personal. It’s not like I’m being—racist, or whatever. I’m just cautious.”

I snorted, and was momentarily embarrassed, though I got over it quickly; Frank didn't care what I said or didn't say, how ladylike my laugh was or if milk came shooting out my nose. I was a girl and I'd come home with him, willingly, and my opinions beyond that were going to fall on deaf ears.

It made me bold.

"Cautious of their race?" I prompted.

"You just don't get it," he said. "PC is nice, it all sounds very nice when you're sitting on the internet, but you're gonna get yourself killed."

"Not cautious of their dreamcatchers though," I noted.

"Shut up, I practically saved your life."

"Oh my God." I grimaced up at the ceiling, but he didn't see. "They were not going to kill me."

And then he laughed and asked how I managed to stay alive as long as I had, and he seemed to be getting himself all wound up. I found myself wishing there was another woman or two in the room so I could get some of that sympathetic eye contact. I was afraid of losing touch with reality, like being alone in a room with this man was going to ruin my sense for linear thinking. So I forced a laugh that interrupted whatever he was saying.

"So what're we watching?" I asked, rolling onto my side to reach for his computer.

The first thing I noticed was a weight on my chest. Not the metaphorical kind, but the what-the-hell-is-that kind. The question slowly pulled at my brain, and then I was very, very

awake very, very suddenly. I just about launched the little orange tabby off the bed, but she mewed mournfully at my sharp movement and I managed to catch her without crushing her.

“Oh, dear God almighty in heaven,” I said, adrenaline going full throttle to the tips of my toes and alcohol sloshing in my stomach as I slowly lowered myself back into a horizontal position.

Frank, who was already awake and just on his phone, had the audacity to laugh at me. I would’ve been offended if that was an emotion that took less energy. This was normally the time I would’ve made my excuses and slipped out the door, but moving was going to have to wait a while, and by the time I could roll over without feeling like I was going to die, Frank was offering me greasy breakfast foods.

I was hardly in a position to refuse.

He turned out to be a good cook. And kind of a jerk. I’d figured that out the night before, but it was more grating in the light of day. But, he liked funny TV and his cat had a soft tummy, so there were worse places to be hungover. We drank coffee and ate, and took turns showering.

“Mica!” Frank said, and his cat meowed at the injustice, but hopped off the counter.

“Yeah! That’s right.”

And then he hissed after her because, as I’d been told, that’s how you communicate to a cat they’ve done something unwelcome. Frank was making food again, some sort of salad with a lot of cheese.

“So,” he said conversationally, like he hadn’t just been having a very heated argument in cat-speak, “you wanna go out tonight?”

Not really, I didn't say. But that wasn't the deciding factor. Did I want to go out with Frank less than I wanted to go back to Chelsea's place?

"What did you have in mind?"

"Bars'll be open in a couple hours," he said. "Stadium's already open, I dunno."

"Are you kidding me," I said, and was so surprised I forgot to make it into a question.

"You're shitting me. For a brief moment this morning I really thought, this is it, this is how I die. And you wanna drink again tonight?"

"Well," he said, "you got quite the head start on me last night—"

"You're insane."

That should have been the last straw but I stayed for another couple hours, long enough to watch a John Mulaney show and eat the second round of food. I finally ran for the hills when Frank plucked a goldfish out of a fish tank under the window and tossed it, still alive, into a small dish on the ground for Mica-the-cat.

"Okay," I said, watching the fish bounce around. "I think I'm gonna go now."

I found my purse by the door and put on my shoes.

"Can I get your number?" Frank asked.

I laughed, and shut the door a little harder than necessary on my way out.

I'd always secretly thought I would be able to pull off homelessness pretty well in Spearfish. It had always seemed like an exercise in espionage and if there was one thing I was good at, it was blending in, looking busy, keeping my head down.

When I went home that night after walking halfway across town on sore feet, Chelsea didn't come to the door. She didn't answer her cell either. She was effectively MIA and I spent a good twenty minutes walking the perimeter of the building, trying to find possible points of entry. Maybe I could've fit through the bathroom window if I'd been able to reach it, but it was on the second story.

I had with me a purse, and in it a phone charger, my wallet, a moleskin, chapstick, four tampons, a pen I stole from a hotel in Ohio somewhere, a chain of seven paperclips, and an unpolished chunk of rose quartz. Unfortunately, my car keys were in the apartment. But, on the bright side, I was wearing layers. And by layers I mean I'd accidentally stolen Frank's hoodie when bolting earlier.

Inventory complete, I started walking, no real destination in mind.

It occurred to me only briefly that this might be childish and stupid. Surely Chelsea would be back soon, except that for all Chelsea's always been a slacker, she's never been one to half ass anything. If she disappeared then she wouldn't surface until her adventure was complete. Perhaps what I should have done was find another old high school friend to let me sleep on their couch, but the very idea made my stomach shrivel up in dread. I hated charity but, more than that, I loathed owing people. The only reason the situation between Chelsea and me didn't feel that way was because it was mutually beneficial and she was flying high on a small inheritance she'd received on her release from prison. It wasn't a hardship for her, and she'd never really cared about anything like money anyway.

So, a few hours of wandering, having nowhere to go, that was something I'd thought before for sure. I remember thinking it could be fun.

Homelessness in Spearfish was an art form. Officially, there was no housing problem in my hometown. Unofficially, when cops pick up panhandlers or obviously homeless persons, they drove them forty minutes to Rapid City and left them there. The trick, therefore, was to appear not homeless and to not get picked up by the cops, an easy feat for me. Then again, how many other tales of vagabonds begin with the assurance that it'll be quickly resolved? Wandering down Jackson Blvd, I got the first twinges of anxiety on the matter. I'd spent most of my cash the night before, and had thoroughly been relying on Chelsea for a place to stay. This was, frankly, a terrible decision.

But, I told myself. Adventure.

Unbidden, people kept coming to mind. My parents, another cousin living down past Lueders grocery store, a girl named Emily I used to babysit with—an endless list of people I could call up for help, people who would no doubt accept me at any time, and probably feed me too.

If I didn't come crying home to my parents during the past six months, not during the investigation into the fire that burnt my lab to ash or the resulting trial that accidentally gained national notoriety and labeled me a neo-Cartesian sadist, not when each and every piece of evidence was dragged up from the depths or when my dog went missing, what right did I think I had to do it now, when this was a mild inconvenience at most? They would think I had finally cracked, and maybe they'd be right. More than anything, I hated proving people right. My mom had faithfully called me once a week to tell me it was alright if things didn't work out, that I could always come home again. The phone calls only stopped when I stopped answering, and we'd since found a compromise with the occasional text.

Downtown the sky was darkening to a deep purple, and so I ducked into the library. Just inside the door there was a community board full of events and lawn mowing opportunities, and just beyond that was a mounted and stuffed mountain lion, hit by a car and preserved in the 1960s. There were low tables with boxy looking desktop computers on them just past the circulation desk. A family was running around somewhere, the pitter-patter of small feet traipsing across the carpeted floors, and a couple of older women at the computers.

I ended up, after several left turns, at a suitably hidden table between the fiction books and the DVDs. On the way I'd managed to pick up seven copies of *National Geographic* and two of *WIRED*, organized in haphazard piles. The magazine in front of me was open to an article on Siberia showing diagrams of permafrost and pictures of frozen wastelands with great trees or beasts depicted, but more as a source of reference than as subject matter. It was vast and beautiful and barren looking. I decided then that if Spearfish didn't work out I could save up some money and buy a one-way ticket to Siberia.

Fat raindrops were plunking down on the sidewalk outside, and thunder rolled in the distance. One of the issues of *WIRED* had a cover story about unethical animal testing in the United States and what constitutes unlawful imprisonment in the case of nonhumans. I wondered where I'd be able to sleep that night. There were a few options, some more appealing than others, from picnic shelters to abandoned buildings and even a couple good trees with platformesque branches.

The library closed eventually, and I went out into the rain. It was coming down in steady swaths of water, and I pulled up my hood like that would keep me dry for more than five

minutes. The library and the police station were the same building, so I turned and walked in the opposite direction.

Over to Main St. and up on Hudson, eventually I came to the abandoned elementary school. I'd attended East Elementary for three years, from third grade through fifth, and it had been the high school when my parents went there. There had been rumors when I was in high school that the old building was housing squatters. Of course, I hoped this wasn't true, not anymore, at least.

The building was standard brickwork, built in the 20s, or half of it was. There was an addition, but that was newer and I supposed I shouldn't touch that part.

It wasn't dark out yet, but because of the thunderstorm it wasn't really light either. The best thing for it, far as I could see, was to just walk up confidently and try the door.

Unsurprisingly, it was locked. So were the other three doors of the older part. The building's built on a hill, and once you go up the steps you can reach a low part of the roof just by hopping up. I did this, and then paused. This would've gotten me into exceptional trouble when I was ten years old; the roof was strictly off limits. Some inner child in me wanted to bask in it. All at once, I was thrilled to be in the rain. I was excited, something I hadn't been feeling much of lately, and that realization riled me up even more. Breaking a rule I'd been following since I was eight, looking to break and enter, and standing on a roof in the middle of a thunderstorm, I felt better than I had in weeks, maybe months. I stood there, and raised my face to let my hood fall back, and told myself that the rain felt refreshing.

The roof was relatively low, and there was another part of the building that went higher so that there was a wall with some windows next to this section of roof. The windows were too

slippery to even try and slide open. There was, however, a crowbar-shaped branch lying behind some bushes. After a couple of practice swings I decided it was well balanced, and moved to work one end into the seam between the window and the sill. The wood of the frame splintered suddenly, and the window flew open to let out an ear piercing shriek. An alarm was going off in high, sharp notes. I dropped the branch and ran, sliding and nearly crashing on the hill as I tore down it and away from the school.

When I stopped a couple blocks over, my clothes leaden with water and my shoes squelching with every step, I was trying to catch my breath and laugh at the same time. I was covered in mud now too, but there wasn't much I could do about it besides scrape some of the larger chunks off with a stick. Everything was an even deeper purple now, like the world was being put through a camera filter, and the pause between lightning and thunder was shorter than it was before. Around me were only houses. An older part of town, where every house is unique and either brown or a bold, bright color. I aimed myself toward the city park, willing enough to admit that I was getting cold out in the open.

The picnic shelter nearest the playground was dry until I walked in. I plugged in my phone and tried to get ahold of Chelsea once more, but no answer. It wasn't surprising, but I wasn't exactly pleased. The only other person I saw was a jogger out with their dog, hood up and tennis shoes slapping against the puddles, and they didn't linger.

I had barely been at the park for two hours, but I was already a shivering, cold mess. My fingertips had gone deflated and bloodless, making them a waxy white. There weren't drops of freezing water going down my back anymore, but nevertheless I was periodically shuddering and

it seemed to come from my spine and bloom up and out, like a flower, making my cheeks shake. The sun had gone down by this point, and I wasn't laughing anymore. Sodden, hungry, freezing, I was taken with the familiar, gut-pulling certainty that I should have known better. Sure, it was Chelsea's fault she had gone missing, but what had I honestly been expecting? She asked me to come out to help her lie to her parole officer, and that says more than I ever needed to know about her relationship to responsibility. It came to mind again fleetingly, as it always did, that perhaps the blame was mine. I was enabling her when she should be getting better, when she should be taking her part in society seriously. But that wasn't right either, and I recoiled from the thought. If there's one thing Chelsea's always done for me, unfailingly, it's that she has always accepted the choices I make as my own. It was, in return, the very least I could do for her. Maybe she was throwing her own life away on substances and parties, and maybe I'd fucked my career up beyond repair, but those had been our choices, our consequences. She wasn't getting messed up because I made excuses for her, and I hadn't run from my life because she was promising to keep me safe and secure and tell me none of it was my fault.

Beyond that, then, I still felt like I should've known better. Being around Chelsea had never been particularly good for me. She was like some kind of a natural disaster. A hurricane, maybe. She swept people up all the time and dumped them when they were far from home. As unmoored as I'd been in the months leading up to my trip, I felt like there was hardly a home to keep me from anymore, and the absolute drought New York had become for me made any kind of water seem appealing. If I had stopped to think about it for a few minutes, I should have realized what I was getting myself into.

The rain continued all night, sometimes slowing to a drizzle, other times lighting up the entire sky with brilliant flashes of lightning. I dozed, but didn't really sleep as far as I could tell. I got up fairly early, reasoning that if I was going to be awake and miserable anyway, I might as well try to warm up. Everything was damp and dewy, but it had at least stopped raining.

By the time the sun had officially risen I was walking through the fish hatchery, reading from an informational plaque about how there are 32,000 different kinds of fish in the world. My feet were sore, the kind of irritated that only comes from wearing shoes all night, and there was a cut on my finger from one of the wooden benches, but it was so pale and cold that it hadn't bled once yet, though it stung.

"Howdy," said a voice from behind me. It was an old man sitting on a bench, a paper bag of bread crumbs open on his lap. He looked stooped, like a giant candle that was wilted from its own flame. "Here for the ducklings?"

"No," I said, and was too surprised by the man's presence to find the words to elaborate further. I was positive he hadn't been sitting there when I'd arrived. Surely a man so old and so hunched would make noise when he walked, and I hadn't exactly been reading the fish plaque intently, by any means.

"Pity," he said, "it's a good week for 'em." My clothes weren't damp anymore—the morning was actually quite sunny and warm—but there was still mud crusted on in some places. The old man beamed at me as he shook some bread crumbs into his open palm. "Young still, and damned if they wouldn't follow the devil if that's who they happen to imprint on."

Here he began the arduous task of leaning forward in his bench. I politely looked away, not knowing how to offer assistance or if I would be turned down, and realized he wasn't wrong.

There were mallards everywhere, and their ducklings traipsing all over the place, flapping their tiny wings on the footpaths and jumping startling distances back into the water. I watched them, having no idea how I hadn't noticed them before, until the old man grunted. I stole a quick glance to make sure he was alright, and then turned to him fully. There was a duckling, brown and yellow and alert, in his hand.

“Here,” the old man said, “take some bread.”

I did, and he skillfully transferred the duckling into my hands. He was soft and warm from the early sun, and so, so small. His tiny body moved rapidly under my fingertips with each breath, and I sank, slowly and smoothly and carefully, so I was sitting on the ground.

I settled in, brushing my thumbs along his thin spine, and listened as the old man cheerfully told me about how it was the best week of the year for human-duckling interactions. He didn't pick up another duckling though he had more bread, but just watched me and mine, instructing me when I should give it another piece to mash between its bill.

The duckling reared back suddenly; if it had been a horse, I would've been on my ass. A loud honk alerted me and I looked up to find an adult female mallard charging straight at me. The duckling in my hand pushed up to stand tall on his feet and flapped his wings like he was shrugging me off.

This was also the moment my phone started ringing from my jacket pocket. I flinched, and the duckling opened his mouth wide, soundless. The adult duck clamped her bill down on my shin hard enough to hurt and I jumped. Afraid of accidentally crushing the duckling's skull, I dropped him altogether. He half-flailed, half-bounced on the ground and I shut my eyes tightly as

the momma duck screamed at me again. I could feel the old man staring at me from his bench, but I didn't want to see his expression so I didn't look.

It was Chelsea calling.

"Hey," I said, watching the duck watch me suspiciously as her duckling scurried off.

"Parker!" Chelsea said. "How are you? Sorry I didn't answer the phone last night, I forgot it at Jack's place."

"Who the fuck is—" I said, and then, "Never mind. I'm peachy, how are you this fine morning?"

"Great! Wonderful, I'm good." She laughed. "I haven't slept yet, so I'm, y'know."

"Yeah."

"But hey, listen, right? So could you give me a ride do you think?"

"What?" I said. "Where are you?"

"Deadwood?" There was some rustling over the line. "I'm in Deadwood. I can get the house number if you just hold on a—"

"My keys are locked in your apartment, Chels," I said.

"Oh," she said. "What? Where are you?"

"What? I'm—nowhere. I just stayed out all night."

"Okay," she said slowly. "Why do you sound so tired then? Jesus, girl, I thought I woke you up or something."

"Oh my God," I said, putting the phone down against my knee just long enough to compose myself and take a breath. I caught sight of the old man, who had angled his body so that his back was turned to me. I ground my teeth together and pushed myself to my feet.

“Listen,” I said into the phone, “you have to find another ride home.”

“Jesus Christ,” she said, “fine. I’ll see you later.”

“Fine,” I said, and hung up.

I turned back to the old man, already drawing in breath to apologize, but he was still turned away, shoulders hunched, coaxing more ducklings close, but it looked like slow going.

“Sorry!” I called over my shoulder, already jogging back towards the bridge.

There was a ridiculously expensive cafe on Main Street that served alcohol and homemade pop tarts. It was one of the closest to the park, and I suddenly didn’t care so much if I spent all my money on overpriced pastries.

I got a cheese platter and a mimosa that went straight to my head, making me sweaty and dizzy where I sat only partially in the shade of the sheet metal awning in front of the cafe. It was only about ten o’clock, but I was already overheated in that specific way that meant I’d slept outside and woken up under the sun. The puddles had all quickly lifted into the air, and it was shaping up to be a heavy, muggy day.

The old man was bothering me. He’d been so disappointed. Normally, I would shrug and say *that’s fair*, because it seemed that many gray-haired men found me lacking.

It was the change that stung. What had it been about my mud-crusting pants or my rain frizzed hair that had seemed so promising to the elderly man in the park, and how had my startled reaction and cursing proved him wrong? It hardly mattered, but the thought circled through my head on a loop, sometimes raised in pitch like a betrayed accusation, sometimes

down low in the voice I used to mutter parts of mathematical formulas I haven't quite understood yet: He'd been so kind.

This wasn't a new feeling. It was familiar and hot and sharp, like waxing a body part clean of hair. The cool breeze after the fact was always a slower ache, one that left a longer hurt behind, oversensitive and swollen. A lot of my process of growing up included the steady, prolonged discovery that so many of the adults who sheltered me as a child actually harbored a deep disregard for most human beings.

Many people, especially Good Christians, love the limitless potential of a child, and they lose that love as the child grows and adopts sins. What they really love are the tiny faultless saints who run around Sunday school and know nothing of how conditional their God's love truly is, but then they inevitably grow and, as adults, have too much sex, or don't want children, or don't want to get married, or have too much sex with the wrong kind of people, or do want to get married and have kids but with the wrong kind of spouse. This isn't a new story, but that doesn't make it any less terrible to realize; a person with kind eyes, someone who seems encouraging and loving, who can hold a duckling in a cupped palm and not worry—or even think—about accidentally crushing it.

Bar hopping was an entirely valid way to waste time, meet people, and have some fun. If I had enough alcohol in my system, and just a dash of self-loathing, I could really let loose. Other people tended to enjoy this version of me, too. I'd let it slip, the last time we were all out getting drunk, that some people I'd gone to college with had christened my drunk-self Perry, and

everyone on campus loved Perry, loved to roll their eyes at Perry, and laugh at Perry, and dare Perry to do ridiculous things like skinny dip with the koi fish.

Perry was fantastically fun and perfectly happy to hook up with morally dubious men until the cows came home, but as Parker I was growing tired of it, and tired of the people in general. The vast majority of people who came around to Chelsea's place were liberal, completely-cool-and-comfortable-with-the-gays kind of progressive, all the potheads and hippies of Spearfish, but as far as I could tell, none of them were actually queer in any way. Which, in short, meant I couldn't find a single woman in my hometown who was attracted to women.

But. What else was new. There were, of course, some members of the LGBT community in the Black Hills, but most of the known ones were white gay men and even then most of the gay community existed in Rapid City. The women weren't hidden, not exactly, but more not as loud, or not as heard as the men were. It's said that Queen Victoria didn't outlaw lesbian sex the same way as homosexual sodomy because she couldn't figure out how two women were supposedly having sex without a penis in the mix. I've often felt that South Dakota has the same sexually-insatiable-but-overwhelmingly-unimaginative mindset. Gay men were scandals, and so either hid it or embraced it. The only mention of gay adults I remember from my childhood were when men divorced their wives of a decade or two to finally stop lying about who they were, leave their families, and come out of the closet.

His poor wife, my mom would say.

Her poor husband, I would say back, casually, defiantly, my face hidden behind a book, my laptop screen.

There's a habit I adopted right around the time I'd moved to New York. When my roommate was being insufferable, or when something particularly bad was in the news, or when I was just bummed out, I would gravitate to the LGBT center with its spacious architecture and film festivals and kind people. In my experience anyway, people seemed to leave their bitterness at the door. Sure, there were some regulars there who clearly avoided each other, but nobody ever seemed to want to start a fight. The place was a known safe haven for some, many of them young. A sanctuary, like some medieval church in a far-off European city. The harsher, angrier parts of life never penetrated the walls, at least not for me.

It hit me in the middle of one week, a craving for that feeling of security, that bubble. It was closer to summer, then, and the rain had slowed considerably. There were thunderstorms some afternoons, but it was morning and I was sitting on the patio at Common Grounds, scrolling through my phone when the desire hit. I'd gone out with Chelsea, Emma, and Clarence the night before—again—and was trying to drown my hangover in caffeine. The LGBT center had always been a safe place but, more than that, it had been a fun one, an activity-centered one. And, importantly, not activities that revolved around pot or alcohol or other substances. Not that there was any problem with that; it was fun to cut loose every now and again, but it got boring if that was my only form of social interaction, and especially when I was restricted to alcohol.

I couldn't remember there being any sort of LGBT center in town, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. The town had grown in the years since I'd lived there last, and it was still a college town. It was certainly possible, and maybe even likely, to have some kind of designated queer space, or resource center, or something.

The cafe I was at was on Hudson, only half a block from Main Street, so I decided to do a sweep of the area before Googling it. I'd started doing that more and more, investigating, wandering the town instead of doing an Internet search, often on foot instead of driving. My days weren't exactly dull, but without a job I had a lot of free time on my hands. Between the severance payment I'd gotten from the lab as part of our deal—money for me and a cooperative scapegoat for them—that had finally come through and Chelsea's dead grandmother's money, I'd felt no need to even pretend to look for a job, even though I knew it couldn't last. Chelsea's plans were never designed to be feasible for longterm success, and she blew money impressively fast.

The walking had the added bonus of making me feel more independent, somehow. My early years were spent with desktop computers and flip phones, so I didn't grow up with the world in my pocket, per se, but I'd gotten used to it, and to never needing to know the layout of a city, or where a certain store was, or what year a certain band broke up. It was nice to know there were some things I could still do myself.

Except that this time I couldn't. Some of the sandstone storefronts held the same businesses they'd housed my entire life, like the wedding and prom dress shop, a couple of the antique stores, the shoe store, and more than one of the bars. Others changed out every couple years or so, the used book stores, the cafes, the boutiques. I walked down one side of Main Street, iced coffee in hand, and then up the other side of the street, with no luck. I went back up Hudson, over to Jackson, and almost all the way up the hill to Black Hills State University. If there was any place like the one I was searching for, I'd thought it would be near the college at least. If I wanted to search the rest of town, I was going to need to walk back home and get my car, so I decided I'd lost this round and pulled out my phone.

The place I was looking for didn't exist. The first two results looked to be for gay treatment centers, and my stomach twisted. I glanced over my shoulder, my healthy sense of paranoia from high school coming back full force for a moment before I managed to quell it. Such drastic measures were uncommon these days, even in Spearfish. It was a logical balancing act; many residents stated that they disagreed with the lifestyle of a gay person, though most would be appalled by something like conversion therapy, especially from where I stood in the parking lot on the edge of a college campus. Even the more traditional members of the community tended to look down on the controlling conservatism they saw as exclusively Southern. Although I had a handle on the sharper parts of my suspicion, the sudden discomfort was slow to fade. My decision to leave this town had been strategic in a way; there were many legitimate points against Spearfish, against South Dakota, against this entire section of the country.

I took a deep breath, threw a small rock at the brick wall of the science building, and kept scrolling. The next results were for the Black Hills Center for Equality—closer to what I was looking for, but located in Rapid City. I put my phone to sleep and slipped it back into my pocket instead of looking at the events calendar like I'd intended to. It was hardly noon, but I was quickly losing my resolve to find people to hang out with outside the bar scene. There was a reason everyone drank and did drugs around there, a sense of pervasive boredom and emptiness of the townscape. The sun was out and the air was dead still. I felt too caffeinated, like my bones were set to vibrate.

I'd thought classes would be out for sure with the time of year, but a huddle of girls streamed out of Jonas, a couple of them wearing lab coats with the sleeves scrunched up to the

elbows. All but one had long hair, a few wore heels, and a couple were wearing full makeup—and suddenly I hated them with the very core of my being, the part that burns white hot and uncontrolled, a part that should've been burned out. I picked up another rock as they got closer, the most jagged one I could spot at a glance, and tossed it in the air a couple times, casual as can be.

They'd be easy to hit. I bet I could even wind up the toss like a major league pitcher and they still wouldn't try to dodge. They wouldn't know a stone had been thrown until one of them was flat on her ass, and then they'd just be confused. I stopped tossing the rock and squeezed it in my palm, angry at myself suddenly for imagining it. They hadn't done anything wrong.

Neither had I, I thought. I scoffed at myself immediately after because, yeah, nothing but almost test the sticks-and-stones theory on a bunch of undergrads. One of the women looked over at the sound I made and gave me an unsure smile. I smiled back and crushed the rock further into my palm as they continued on their way.

I admittedly felt better than them, better and stronger and more open-minded, and my gut screamed that I was being somehow punished for it. My entire being raged against being policed, and I missed Chelsea in that moment even though I was only out of the house to avoid her. Despite her disregard for just about everyone and everything around her, my anger was never out of place with her, my feelings of unfairness never met resistance. Chelsea's life philosophy was to screw authority, and I longed for the freedom of that.

Now that the rain was mostly done, the town was desert dry, and my hair felt brittle, and I was dusty, like my movements were grinding me down. I'd spent most of the morning wandering around town, up and down hills, absorbing sunlight. I felt real and wanted to reject them as

anything close to the same. I saw myself without my work and eroded by the elements, and I saw them doing whatever BHSU told them to do, with their faces covered, their hair styled. I saw them standing around for hours on end, walking from one end of Jonas to the other in heels, bending one knee and then the other to relieve the strain on their muscles. I saw us as different—and I hated myself for it. Wasn't I past this? Was I really regressing into my high school self the longer I spent in my hometown? How could I be better than them if I wasn't even better than that?

“Hey!” I said, and jogged to catch up. One of the women heard me, and the rest stopped when they realized one of their colleagues had dropped off.

“Oh,” said the one who'd smiled at me before, “hi.”

“Hi,” I parroted, feeling only slightly like an idiot. There was a beat of silence.

“Uh,” I said. “Sorry, is there—anywhere on campus, like, an LGBT group, or club?”

“Well—there might be?” said the woman who'd smiled with me. She looked over her shoulder to one of her other friends. “Hey, Kate, didn't Jackson go to a thing before? Last fall?”

“Yeah!” Kate said quickly. “He went once, but I think the person in charge had just graduated or something. There wasn't really anybody there, it sounded like.”

“Ah, alright,” I said.

“Sorry,” the first woman said.

“Nothing to be sorry about,” I said, waving her off.

“Um,” said a third woman. She was still wearing her lab coat and was just starting to blush. And then, all in a rush, “I've got Alexa's number. If you want it—she's gay.”

One of the other women snorted, and the third's blush got brighter.

“No,” I said, long and drawn out and *no*. “Thank you, no.”

“Right, of course.”

“Thanks anyway,” I said. I waved over my shoulder as I turned away.

“No problem!” one of them called back.

When they were gone I dropped the rock. My fingers ached from clenching my hand around it, and there were jagged indentations left in my palm. I pulled out my phone again and kicked at the rock as I walked. Across from the college was one of the elementary schools, and I made it to a jungle gym before I found it on BHSU’s website: the Gay-Straight Alliance, under the heading of Special Interest Clubs. I closed out of the page and climbed onto a swing, resigning myself to racist men with dirty hair who indulge their cats’ natural huntress instincts by giving them live fish to play with, as Chelsea had explained it to me when I recounted the incident.

And then I decided I was tired of casual hookups anyway.

Chelsea and I fell into a rhythm after only a couple of weeks. I remembered how forcefully optimistic she was, except first thing in the morning, and she remembered that I sometimes needed to take breaks from social interaction, but that it wasn’t to be taken as a personal affront. I learned how much pee she needed to take to her PO for a drug test, and she lectured me on the unhealthy color of my urine. I learned that Chelsea had an open door policy for anyone she considered a friend, and Chelsea learned that I couldn’t accurately intuit who was to be considered a friend. Some of these things were a matter of recollection, others were things we had to learn. There was a fair amount of stepping on each other’s toes, but there wasn’t the

buildup of frustration I got with most other people. I'd never been afraid of yelling at Chelsea, and she'd never hesitated on calling me out for my arrogance and standoffishness. It was refreshing at the same time that it was exhausting.

Smoking wasn't allowed in the house, not even with a sploof, because Chelsea was paranoid about the smell. Weed was kept in the bottom of an acoustic guitar neither of us knew how to play, and alcohol went in the ceiling tiles. I didn't know what else there was and she had the good sense to not flaunt it, so I didn't ask. Despite all that, the place still smelled like weed, especially when Andrew was around, which was most of the time. It wasn't because he smoked inside, as I'd originally thought; the scent clung to him, followed him like a cloud, so we lit a stick of incense every time we heard him approach, taking the steps two at a time, and then hopping to a stop before he could slam into the front door.

The apartment was a constant party. The people who were considered friends breezed in and out at all hours, whether Chelsea was home or not. They came in packs of threes and fours. Andrew was one of the only people who regularly came by alone. Some of the visitors would come already high, some would show up long enough to pack a bowl from the guitar stash and then disappear long enough to smoke it behind some trees, and some would leave more pot than they smoked. There never seemed to be too much in the guitar at any one time but, to my knowledge, it never ran out either.

I got to know a few of the regulars—the Cassidy I'd met that first night, who was sweet if in a constant state of pining for some guy who barely seemed to tolerate her, and her group of gal pals, all of whom were very polite and inclusive—but I was most comfortable around Andrew, who was usually quiet and always seemed amused, and never minded that I wouldn't play video

games but hung around to watch him play. Where Chelsea liked to drag me out into the daylight so I felt exposed and alive and strangely present, Andrew let me rest in the dark and just—be. There was no force behind it, only open invitation.

In fact, everyone seemed to feel similarly about Andrew. People became relaxed around him, or otherwise seemed to breathe deeper. Cassidy's friends all said he was the yin to Chelsea's yang. It seemed logical enough to me; I convinced myself they were both somehow forces of nature, the quiet one and the loud one, the calm and the wild, the morning dew and the hurricane. I nearly forgot they were people by the time they erupted into all-out war.

I missed the very beginning of the fight. By the time I left the bathroom, they'd moved beyond that, anyway, and into attacks on each other's character. Chelsea was loud, dramatic, extravagant; everyone knew better than to take her seriously. However, up until that point, I'd never heard Andrew shout. He was the chill one, the stoic with a limited range of emotional intensity. He yelled that she was stupidly reckless, she came back with *at least I'm genuine*; he laughed and said she was immature, and she told him he was afraid to live. It was the nasty kind of fight where their voices had diminished so they were almost hissing as they psychoanalyzed each other's greatest defects, rather accurately and cruelly.

This entire time I'd been standing in the doorway to the living room, adrenaline pumping even though no one was yelling at me. There were a couple men there who'd been hanging out with Andrew while Chelsea had been at a job interview. I didn't know either of them all that well, but I met their eyes hoping for some kind of clue. They just glanced at each other and then shrugged.

Thinking back, the fight was probably a long time coming.

“Oh, please,” Chelsea said, low and furious, “you think Parker would be here at all if I made her uncomfortable?” She laughed. “Please, nobody can make the girl do something she doesn’t want, I’ve been trying since we were thirteen. Tell him, Parker.”

“Jesus Christ,” Andrew said, much louder but just as angry. “Would you stop *putting her on the spot* like that?”

“Would you *shut up?*” Chelsea said back, rising to match his volume. Then, turning back to me, “Parker?”

“Uh,” I said, and made eye contact with one of Andrew’s friends again. He was starting to look less amused and more concerned with the situation. *Run*, he mouthed.

“That’s my cue to leave,” I announced. I swiped my boots on my way out the door but didn’t stop to put them on, instead flying down the steps and toward my car in socked feet. It was rude, and maybe uncalled for, but that was the joy of living with Chelsea; she was rude all the time, so I didn’t feel nearly as bad as I should’ve. And Andrew was normally so understanding and *stop putting her on the spot*.

I put my shoes on the passenger seat and pulled away from the apartment. With only my socks between by toes and the gas pedal, I felt somehow more in control of my car, closer to it. It was easier to fill my lungs. I was shocked by the suddenness and intensity of whatever disagreement had erupted between them, but at the same time I didn’t know what I’d expected from them. It was obvious that they never quite agreed, but they always threw out sarcastic jabs or made faces and that seemed to be the end of it. They were made to push and pull at each other, that seemed right. Yin and yang only exist in constant tension with one another, swirling, balancing. That’s what all the small gestures seemed to be: a balancing act. With this fight came

the feeling of wrongness I hadn't felt with them before. But, I told myself, these were people, not forces of nature, not animals, not the physical embodiments of feminine or masculine energy.

People. And people were more complex than that, had more needs than that, had limits.

I had those too, supposedly, but I didn't so much blow up in an argument as I ducked out when I could feel the pressure building and my seams straining. I tried it out, as a thought experiment, transplanting my idea of a person onto myself, but it didn't feel the same. Perhaps because I'd always cut it off at the pass, swallowed it down, brushed it off. Of course I felt that way from time to time, but I would try most anything to keep it from happening. By and large, my rebellions were quiet: I moved away right after graduating high school to go to college and missed one of my closest friend's weddings; I cut off all my hair when my Lit professor made a point to tell me how beautifully it framed my face in office hours; I sat in the courtroom and dutifully said *no, of course we never abused our test subjects*, all the while tapping out another Tweet from my anonymous account with another picture of a bloody animal attached, fanning the flames of the controversy; I accepted the generous severance package from the lab even as they threw me under the bus after the wing with all my parakeets burnt to the ground and did everything in my power to encourage the public's hatred at what appeared to be gross animal abuse.

For the most part, though, I left people alone, and I never, ever struck the first blow. Sometimes it felt dishonest and downright vile, and others I felt righteous, like some kind of physical embodiment of karmic retribution. The other benefit of living with Chelsea was that I so rarely reached the point of vindication. With her there was always a pressure release valve in the

form of snide comments and returned sarcasm, and she never took any of it to heart—at least not until now, with whatever was going on with Andrew.

The more I thought of their fight, the more the idea settled into my bones, solidified and I realized that it made sense. For Andrew to yell at or insult anyone but Chelsea would be unthinkable, but for anyone to fight with Chelsea was simply natural. She loved to argue, and loved confrontation. I learned long ago that it's better to give into her prodding and poking, to let her get a rise out me about the small stuff, so it didn't turn into anything big because not only did Chelsea enjoy arguing, insulting, fighting, but she was good at it too. I kept the jabs light and swift and brutally honest with her, and it normally turned out fine. Certainly nothing like this, not since we'd been fifteen, anyway.

It was Saturday evening as I drove in loops through old, familiar-but-not neighborhoods. I had close to a full tank, and didn't feel like I was in any kind of rush, so I got a milkshake from the Dairy Queen drive thru and decided to cruise. The main roads were the same, but the edges of everything had expanded, and small, new developments had somehow cropped up in the spaces between the old ones. The old Sandstone buildings on Main Street were the same. Some of the storefronts had held the same businesses since my parents were kids, some of them seemed to be something new every couple of years. On the fringes of town they'd built a few large apartment complexes that looked fairly nice, and further up into the hills they'd continued constructing increasingly precarious, winding roads for the nesting doll mansions, each bigger than the last.

When I was a kid, my friends and I would hike to the edges of the richer neighborhoods on Halloween: Sandstone Hills, mostly. The first couple streets were middle class families and

some old-folks homes, and they never had anything super good, but it made them happy to get visitors. Some would even give you a handful or two of candy. The higher we climbed, the more loaded the residents were until, close to the top, we'd be getting full-sized chocolate bars. I retraced the route. The lower roads and the ones that had reached the tops of the hills were the same, but some of the places that used to be dead ends weren't anymore. Some of the old crowning glories were living in the shadows of bigger mansions now, and a couple of the roads even snaked out to the other side of the hills.

Before, there'd only been the Woodland Loop that went past that first layer of hill. The entire road was precarious, downright dangerous in winter, and, despite the fact that it dipped low between the hills, held some of the most expensive houses. My windows were all down, the radio turned up, set to Hot 93.1. I took a deep breath that didn't reach the bottom of my lungs, emptied them out, tried again. Held it. Popped my ears, something I never had to do so much in New York. It was somehow easier to get a satisfying lungful of oxygen out there, whether because I finally had enough space between me and the fighting, or because enough time had passed and the adrenaline was draining away, or because I subconsciously thought the rich people air was more effective, or some combination of all three.

When I saw the sign, though, I paused. I was feeling more at peace, windblown, more part of the world than I had in a while. It was like I was brushing up against a sense of calm, remembering what it was, and I wanted more of it. So when I drove past the sign and found it was ten minutes until the second service of the night was set to start, I pulled into the parking lot for Countryside Community Church, pulled on my boots, silenced my phone, and went inside.

There was a steady stream of people heading for the door, and the parking lot was over half full. A man with a square jaw and a checkered button-down shirt was holding the door open. He smiled at me in a warm, practiced way when I got close, and held his hand out for me to shake.

“How are you doing tonight?” he asked.

“Good,” I said, and made sure to smile with my whole face.

It was less of a coincidence that I had been driving past right before a service was set to begin, and more of an inevitability. When I’d come here as a kid, there had first been a couple different service times, and then another, and then one on Saturday evening for those who couldn’t make it at all on Sunday. The church’s expansion hadn’t stopped when I left, though, and they had six different services every weekend: two on Saturday evening, three on Sunday morning, and one late Sunday afternoon. It was by far the most modern church in Spearfish, in both sensibility and style. People wore jeans, and the services were held on a stage overlooking a basketball court where people sat in green lawn chairs. The chairs were reminiscent of a time when the church had been young, mobile, small. We used to meet at the Young Center (the closest thing Spearfish had to a YMCA) every Sunday, roll out the lawn chairs and a collapsible stage, and Sunday school was held upstairs in the hallways around the pool. The smell of chlorine still calmed me considerably, brought about a peace I couldn’t conjure anywhere else. We’d spent years fundraising for a building of our own, but when we finally got it I found I missed the smell of the pool and the sense of community.

I’d been involved in church from a young age. My mom was a devout Christian, but not unafraid of disagreeing with them. We’d even taught Sunday school together for a few years, to

the kindergarteners. We'd passed out tambourines and taught them about sharing and taped the scripts for our little skits to the inside cover of a Bible so we wouldn't have to memorize lines. This had been my first quiet rebellion, right before high school: quitting church. I stopped going, half because I was becoming a devout scientist, and half because of some disquiet I began harboring, the kind of unrest of the soul that threatened to boil over into rage the longer I sat through sermons I wasn't sure I agreed with anymore.

The building was familiar and fit perfectly against my memory of it, unlike the rest of the town. There was a mounted fireplace to the left of the doors, and a small cafe to the right, in addition to the free coffee, tea, and cookies set out. I grabbed some for myself—two chocolate chip cookies and a cup of coffee—before going into the basketball courts. There were instruments laid out on stage and a tranquil animation of a wheat field on the screens to either side of the stage. I picked a green lawn chair about halfway back on the right side.

The air seemed to buzz faintly as people walked by and chatted. It was a low, steady energy that loosened something tight in my core. I watched the people around me and found no trace of maliciousness in their stances, their expressions, their tones. Some of the men were gaunt and tired looking, some of the women slumped in their chairs or smiling vacantly at whoever they were talking to, but none of them were holding anything back or down; if anything, they'd left it at the door, all their anger and bitterness and resentment, there to pick up on their way back out into the real world. Nobody rolled their eyes or sneered or scoffed.

The pastor walked onstage a couple minutes later, inviting any newcomers to fill out the welcome cards and greeting all returning friends. He was grayer and a little more weary around the eyes, but it was the same pastor from my churchgoing days with his short, weirdly spiked

hair and his ill-fitting shirts. He didn't stay long, but proceeded to welcome the worship band, a man with curly hair almost down to his shoulders who played an electric acoustic guitar, a small woman completely dwarfed by her bass guitar, a stout man behind a drum set, and a line of five singers. To either side of the stage, the screens showed the lyrics for everyone to see.

Three people scattered throughout the crowd raised their hands high, eyes closed, swaying as they sang. They'd always been my favorite. Not these people specifically, but this kind of person, the ones who were here for a connection with their God, their Father, who felt the joy of connection and belonging deeply. Even when my feelings toward the church morphed from skepticism to betrayal, I never felt spite or annoyance towards the people who sang with their arms wide open.

In college, years after I'd cut ties with this group, I heard from an old friend that a member of the worship team had come out as gay and subsequently been asked to step down from his position. He was still welcome in the church, of course, but there were concerns about his performing in front of the churchgoing children. This wasn't especially cruel; it was hardly notable in the world of religious homophobia. Nonetheless, I had been crushed. I'd cried harshly for ten minutes, and then intermittently for an hour after that tears leaked out of my eyes.

A week later I called my mom to have her confirm the story, and while I didn't cry anymore, I did write a scathing and embarrassing-for-all-parties-involved review for the church on Google. I still got an email every once in a while to inform me when a couple hundred new people had seen the review. The reminders of what I wrote in a white-hot rage when I was 20 years old did little other than make me cringe anymore, but I still never deleted it. It may have been ridiculously worded, overly passionate, reeking of the hurt I felt from a group of people

who promised me that God would love me no matter what and then who turned around and proved they had no conception of what *no matter what* means, or how they should treat people God supposedly loved—despite all that, the words were still true, and I still felt it was unfair to let people go in blind, to not warn them of the conditional attached to the promise.

I contemplated feeling some kind of shame now that I was here again, seeking peace from the place I'd very publicly denounced as fake years ago, but I couldn't convince myself to feel anything other than defiant. The odds were the pastor didn't read his church's reviews on Google anyway. Even if he did, and if he was the same as I remembered him from my early teens, he would smile, claim it was a fair criticism on my part, and decide we would just have to agree to disagree about some things.

The service itself was fairly positive, lighthearted, standard from what I remember. A lot about how great God's grace is, how His love is all encompassing, and how we should be agents of His mercy and acceptance on earth. I snorted at a couple different points, but either nobody heard me or they kept politely turned toward the stage. That was why it had hurt so much, I decided. Growing up I'd always prided myself on the fact that I'd been part of a church community that wasn't like the others, wasn't what anyone pictured when they thought of the religious scene in South Dakota. Sure, I'd been swindled by the fake promises religion held over me like a carrot, but at least it had been *this* church with its soft cookies and volunteer work and love.

At the time it had felt raw and bitter and like betrayal. Now I was over it mostly. At least, it had become less and less relevant to my life the longer I stayed away and had other, more immediate things to focus on. Still, I found myself coming up with some very clever, very mean

comebacks to different lines of the service that would show them all the truth of the place. Knowing them, knowing here, I almost had to imagine that they already knew, of course an openly gay boy couldn't worship on the stage for everyone and their children to see, was I mad?

The pastor must've been in a good mood that day, because near the end of the service he encouraged everyone to turn to a stranger around them and talk, introduce themselves. I turned to a young woman sitting in my row, only one empty seat between us. Next to her, her husband surreptitiously checked his phone and sank lower in his chair, but the woman herself smiled brightly and held out her hand. I grabbed it and smiled back, though I couldn't help thinking, What do you know about this church? What kind of God do you think you worship?

Her name was Tacey, and she hadn't been to church in *months*, what with their new baby girl and all. The baby's name was Taylor, after the dad's uncle who served in Afghanistan. I smiled back with lots of teeth and said something about visiting family, having gone here as a kid. Her eyes got wide and she practically shoved her husband my way until he relented and shook my hand.

As a rule, everything about Countryside Community Church was easily digestible. The basketball court floor we were all on had a slight squish to it when we walked, the music was mostly from a moderate Christian rock station, the lessons were taught as more of guidelines than listen-here-or-you'll-rot-in-hell rules, short services. Even so, it seemed to drag on as we all faced forward again. The thing—the place, the people, the words, the *air*—seemed to grow heavy and syrupy, like the service would go on forever, like I was slowly going to be crushed underneath the force of the sermon and the faux aura of acceptance. I'd walked in there somehow expecting to smell chlorine, and instead the weight being lifted from everyone's

shoulders was looming over my head, crashing into what seemed to be God's very own expectations, trapping me, closing in.

I wound myself up more and more, becoming tenser and tenser in my lawn chair as I fought to appear just as calm and at peace as everyone around me seemed. By the time the final prayer of the service rolled around, I was dazed by the headache I'd managed to work myself up to. When I lowered my head and let my eyes go unfocused in an attempt to evade the sharpness of the pain at the base of my skull, everything felt misaligned, like my body was two inches to the left of me. As soon as we were dismissed, I stood, floated, and nearly made it out of the basketball court before someone called my name.

"Mom," I said at the same moment I realized who it was. I turned around, rotating on an axis, and my mom was right there, looking hesitant and unsure. The guilt I felt was immediate and just as potent as the last time I saw her, like no time had passed at all.

"Parker," she said again, surprise melting into an authoritative kind of reassurance. She threw her uncertainty out the window and, with it, much of my own unease. Diane swept forward and put a hand on my shoulder, squeezing briefly. "When did you come back to town?"

"I haven't been here long," I said. I raised my hand so the back of my knuckles rested against her wrist. She smelled like home and I realized I had to get out of there, had to *leave* before everything in me crumbled to dust at my mom's feet. "Was just visiting some old friends."

My mom looked around with a raised eyebrow like she expected anyone I'd been friends with in high school to come within a hundred yards of a church, and the thought made me choke on laughter.

“Not,” I said, and flapped a hand. “They’re not here. There was some drama and I needed to get away for a bit.”

“So you came here?” She didn’t say it incredulously, but the words themselves held enough disbelief to get her point across.

“I was just,” I said, “driving by and saw the parking lot filling up.” Mom was smiling at me then and I felt the absurd need to defend myself against her unsubtle pleasure. “There are only so many things to do in this town, and it seemed a little too early to hit the bars. It was either church or a movie, and Big Robert hasn’t exactly brought the ticket prices down since—ever, I guess.”

“And he won’t until the day he dies,” Mom said, because that was the automatic response. The piece of banter was familiar and well-worn, even if it had been a while. And it wasn’t that I never spoke to my own mother; we texted every week or two, but mostly about inconsequential things. *Your dad’s dog is a spoiled brat and you wouldn’t believe what the kid in this cafe just screamed for everyone to hear and saw your weather forecast—stay warm!*

I rolled my eyes, because that was also part of this banter, and smiled back at her.

“So,” she said, looking smug, “is it late enough for bar hopping yet?”

No, I thought, fiercely. No, no.

“Actually,” I said, and made a show of pulling out my phone and checking notifications. I pulled a face at whatever I was supposedly seeing there. “I think I’m being missed. I should probably head back; I just sorta walked out on ’em earlier.”

“Of course,” Mom said, the same smile in place, “They’re probably worried about you.”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling guilty all over again.

There was another piece to this banter. The script continues with my mom saying *I sure as hell didn't raise you that way, so you better get out of here*, but she didn't say it this time. It didn't seem like a thing she could say in jest anymore; it came too close to being serious. She really hadn't raised me to be so secretive. Independent, maybe, but not sneaky.

"Sorry," I said quietly. All around us people were filing out of the building or standing around, conversing, and I felt all of ten years old. My mom's smile became a little softer, a little more genuine.

"I don't see what you have to be sorry about," she said instead of calling me on my months and months of bullshit. Diane was nothing if not merciful, and this was pure grace rolling off her in waves. Something in me loosened, the tension I used to hold myself together drooped, even as the guilt got stronger and mixed with the perennial sense of homesickness I got whenever I talked to my family.

"If you're free tomorrow night, your dad and I would love to have you over for dinner," she said. "Or to stay, of course, but it's okay if you've already got something arranged."

"I—"

You need to get out of here, I thought.

"I'll text you," I said, and turned away from her so fast the room blurred.

It stopped being like floating and was really more like gliding, being propelled out the door. I could've been flung by a slingshot for all the control I had over my trajectory as I strode out of and away from the building, under the awning, across the parking lot. I fumbled with my keys when I tried getting them out of my pocket.

In my car, I held my breath until the pattern made the rest of my body, heart, fingers remember how to slow down, and then I put the car in drive and I drove. There was no question as to where I was driving. I couldn't go back to Chelsea's right then; she and my mom had always quietly, coldly hated one another for ruining me. And, knowing Chelsea the way I did, I knew she could very well still be screaming at Andrew. I didn't know Andrew half as well, but he seemed the type to save up his anger for something that really mattered to him, so I somehow doubted he would lose steam so easily.

I turned left at the golf course and rolled my windows down. I was small and defenseless in that moment, a way I often felt after facing a church, but made more pronounced by seeing my mom's eyes assessing me, seeing my exhaustion. It probably didn't help that I'd also run from another one of Chelsea's outbursts, fled her volatility like she'd turned into a bear in the living room instead of gotten mad at a mutual friend.

The country club passed by on the left and across the street was the driving range. My dad and I had famously little in common besides a love for dogs, but he'd still tried to include me in his recreational activities, at least when I was younger. He wasn't religious like Mom was, and he had to work all day on Sundays anyway, so he got away with going to church once or twice a year on holidays, a behavior I later copied. To put it simply, we weren't teaching Sunday school together by any means. But one of my dad's favorite things to do was golf. He used to take me out of school the first warm day of the year and we'd run through the course.

When he first brought me along, I was too young for much more than putting and would mostly sit in the cart and chat at him between holes or while waiting for the people ahead of us to get a move on. Once, one of the first years I tagged along, I was excited and the special kind of

manic only a kid with spring fever can be overtaken by, the all-consuming, sugar high kind of happy to be alive. The way Dad tells the story, it had been a long winter, making me all the more hyper and him all the rustier with a driver. The man's road rage was matched only by his golf rage, and it definitely wasn't his best game. When given no outlet for his anger, the clubs ended up taking the worst of it a time or two, something I found hilarious to report to my mom when we returned home.

This particular day, I'd spoken too much or too loudly, been too *something* when my dad had taken his swing. I don't remember the details, and he told the story differently every time. All I recalled was him marching back to the golf cart, mouth pinched in the way that meant he wanted to yell, and he had *hissed* at me, that I was to be quiet on a golf course, and I wasn't to be distracting. I would, in fact, not speak again for the rest of the hole, or I would be in *trouble*. And then he'd gone off to putt, but when he'd come back, I was sitting where he left me, mouth shut, eyes wide, holding my breath. Just as my dad was starting to get worried that I'd pass out, I unsealed my lips and a bee flew out. It had flown in while his back had been turned, and I'd been too afraid of punishment to make a noise, and then too afraid of being stung.

Whenever he told that story, Dad laughed with a pure fondness he rarely expressed, and I laughed at the irony. He'd had to sit me down and explain that I wouldn't be in trouble for asking for help, even if he'd told me to be quiet. Later on, it became evident that I was, to put it mildly, a shitty golfer, despite the summer classes I'd taken. It was okay, though; I was still good for driving the cart and raking the sand traps, and I liked getting a free pass out of school. It was mutually beneficial, and we could fix our eyes on the horizon, gauging wind and shielding our eyes against the sun when we talked about what we'd been up to recently.

It took hardly a minute for the golf course to fade into woods, which quickly blended with rock as the walls of the canyon rose to either side of the road. I passed the abandoned Chophouse Steakhouse where it still stood, peanut shells still covering the floor inside though it had gone out of business when I was in high school. After that my phone service was quick to disappear and I went through the pass that signaled my entry into the canyon proper. It was just starting to get dark, but there wasn't any fear of getting lost, not unless I wandered straight into the trees where there wasn't even a hint of a trail.

I passed the first set of waterfalls, normally the thinnest of them all, though it was currently gushing over the edge of the rock shelf, bolstered by a rainstorm a couple days ago. There was a strip of gravel next to the road for parking and even a viewing platform. It was certainly beautiful, but too out in the open for my tastes. It was comforting to look at but there wasn't any satisfaction in the action. I wanted a hideaway, somewhere to just be, but more than that I wanted to have to work to get there. A challenge, or a hike at the very least. These falls were too easy to get to, and anyone could've found me there. That in mind, I drove right past Bridal Veil Falls.

The place I really wanted to go was Devil's Bathtub. Mostly because it had been a while and it really was a trek to get to. It's not a difficult hike, but one where you had to pay attention or land on your ass; it requires at least a few different creek crossings to get to the bathtub itself. In the past few years it had slowly become a tourist destination, but it was late enough that it would no longer be crawling with people, too nervous or sensible to be that far from the road after dark. I wondered if anyone camped up there. It would be cool, and the sounds would be soothing, but I had to question if there was anywhere to pitch a tent. Maybe halfway up the hike

before it became all rock? Or maybe the way to do it was to just go all the way up with a sleeping bag and a prayer that it wouldn't rain. Then again, maybe staying the night would be considered overstaying my welcome in the devil's space.

The devil's properties always amused me, but the bathtub the most. Devil's Tower at least looked otherworldly and menacing. The ridges looked like they'd been left by huge, desperate claws, and it rose imposingly over the flat of the Wyoming plains. Devil's Bathtub was really just an opening in the canyon, a place where Spearfish Creek opened up and became a pool, complete with natural waterslide, smoothed and softened after millions and millions of years' worth of water cutting through a channel in the rocks.

It was bound to be peaceful at night, though I couldn't remember which turnoff I was supposed to take to get to it. I even pulled over shortly after those first falls, trying to remember. Eventually I gave up and got back onto the road, reasoning with myself that it would probably be dangerous to go up that hike in the dark, and that I wouldn't want to cross the creek on foot with the boots I had with me—they were comfortable and easy to pull on and off, but were slick and smooth on the bottom; I would only fall on my ass if I tried to walk on the wet rocks.

It wasn't until I passed the street sign that said Cleopatra that I remembered it was the right turnoff—and I was reminded of this happening before, each and every time I'd tried going to Devil's Bathtub alone. Cleopatra Rd. was the turnoff, but I always forgot until it was right in front of me, too late to make the turn, and I passed it. By that point though I'd made up my mind to keep searching. I drove until I got to the Lodge, which was practically impossible to miss about a half hour up the canyon; it had plenty of parking. The Spearfish Canyon Lodge itself was built to look like a giant log cabin, homey and warm despite its size, but still grand and dignified.

When I'd been in middle school, shortly before I stopped going to church Youth Group, we'd done our formal dance there, where we wore dresses and promised ourselves to Jesus. We'd gotten rings and everything.

Right across the street from the Lodge was 76 Trail: a steep hill with a path you could hike through pine trees and around fallen logs, all the way to the top where they'd set up a viewing platform. It was a good, hard-but-short hike, and all of Spearfish was visible from the platform, but I turned the other way and crossed the rest of the parking lot. The second waterfalls were down and around the back of the Lodge. It was more heavily hiked than 76, but the sense memory pulled at me suddenly: mist floating through the air, the sound like diving underwater, and the familiar relief of open space after the feeling of descending through the trees, a sensation like lowering into a cave.

A couple times the flat bottoms of my boots skidded over piles of pine needles and I slipped on the way down the hills. It took me longer than it might have in full daylight or with proper shoes, but I made it down to the base of the waterfall. This one was flowing harder than normal too, rainwater giving it an extra kick so that the falls were overflowing, splashing over at the edges onto the sharper, less eroded parts of the stone wall. I walked forward and sat on the wooden fence between the path and the water, my legs stuck through one of the gaps, my arms folded over the top, and my chin pressing down into my forearm. It was flowing hard enough that the spray of mist was reaching well beyond the fence, but the slow, controlled hiking had warmed me up considerably, even in the night air as it was cooled and shaded by the canyon walls. It was refreshing, almost invigorating.

It was also visually stunning. I'd never been there at night before, but I'd clearly been missing out. It was as if the waterfall drew in and reflected all the moonlight there was to find, and then some. Like a painting being shown under blacklight. Crickets were singing somewhere underneath the rush-swoosh of the water and I breathed deeply through a sudden wave of exhaustion. The air around me was light, floating, cooling, and the air was calm, and I was so, so heavy—my eyelids, my spine, my hair. I let gravity pull me down as far as it could, down over and around the swollen, scraggly beams of wood I was still sitting on. I hooked my elbows farther over the top so I didn't have to use my muscles to hold up my body, and I let my eyes drip the rest of the way closed.

I woke up drooling on my own arm. I could feel that it was the middle of the night before I even opened my eyes, though when I did I was surprised at the brightness around me. There was a silver luminescence to everything, and a matching sound somewhere above my head, off to the left. I was chilly and my neck was stiff, but other than that everything seemed remarkably calm, like the feeling of peace when it's nice enough to sleep with the window open. I opened my eyes.

Oh, I thought. The way the water glimmered was almost too bright, but it was a soft kind of light. I hadn't even registered the sound of the waterfall until I had my eyes on it, the hallmark of effective white noise. Rolling my shoulders, I stared at the light skittering over the continual crashing of the water, trying to convince myself to wake up the rest of the way. There was a gray, polished-looking rock floating in the water, past the ripples from the waterfall, bobbing gently in the still waters close to the shore.

Gradually, my awareness spread out and around, expanding. The sound I'd heard before the waterfall was from the trees; a breeze was rattling pine needles and cones together, a sound I felt like I shouldn't have been able to hear over everything else. My clothes were unnaturally heavy, and not just with sleep. They were moist. My hair was almost completely wet, curling against my forehead and dripping every few seconds. I'd been collecting mist.

Just as slowly as I came awake, I started to realize that rocks don't float. It was a revelation that came in stages. I watched the scene in front of me for a few minutes before zeroing in on the sleek gray thing—which had a head and was definitely not a rock. It was a bird, bobbing on the surface of the water, round and with a short, cartoonish beak. It wasn't moving a whole lot on its own or making any noise, but that wasn't surprising at whatever time it must've been. The real question would probably be why it was in the water at all right now. Waterfowl, as far as I knew, weren't nocturnal creatures. Why would this one be going for a midnight swim?

Though, speaking as the stupid human who'd been perched on a wooden fence in the middle of the night, I probably didn't have a lot of room to talk about normal behavior.

Once the bird drifted close enough to the edge of the water, it stood. Still making no noise, its body hovered over the surface on surprisingly long legs and looked right, left, right in bobbing motions. It wasn't any kind of duck. In fact, it looked like some kind of weird shorebird, which was strange in itself. Wrong part of the country, I thought, but the little guy looked very at home, so I made a conscious decision not to judge him. I watched him as I began the long process of detangling myself from the fence. The bird, for his part, ignored me entirely as I unlocked my joints and immediately almost fell to the ground. It could probably tell I wasn't any kind of threat; animals knew things like that.

I was sore in an all-over, pain-halo kind of way, but that was all buried under just how cold I was. There was a moment of pure petulance on my part, like a small child who's tired enough to be cranky but cranky enough to not want to sleep without a fight. I couldn't stand the thought of leaving, but there was no way I could stay, wet and miserable and unprepared as I was. Already knowing it was in vain, I took out my phone and snapped a couple pictures, but my gut instinct had been right; taking iPhone pictures of the moonlit waterfall was about as effective as trying to take iPhone pictures of a full moon. The photo would never compare to the real thing. I put my phone away without deleting the pictures and watched the bird dip its front half under the water one time, two, three, four. Then, shivering, I turned to half-jog and half-stumble up the path and back to my car.

It felt even colder away from the water, though maybe that was the breeze created by my halfhearted run up the hill. By the time I made it to the parking lot I could barely feel the buttons on my key fob to get the doors to unlock. Inside I turned on the heat to blast and revved the engine to encourage it to warm up. While it was still blowing cold air, I twisted in my seat and rooted around until I dug up the hoodie I'd thrown back there and then traded it out for my damp shirt.

The road was predictably quiet at 3:20 AM, thankfully so. My car's heating kicked on pretty fast since it wasn't even cold out to begin with, but the more I dried off and warmed up, the sleepier I got. I drifted over the center line twice, jerking the wheel back into my lane each time, before I changed it from the radio to the CD player and cranked the volume, singing along as loudly as I could to the opening lines of *Hamilton*. That did the trick, and despite the heavy warmth pulling at me and the softness of the hoodie against my bare skin, I stayed awake. I'd

only ever known one person to fall asleep while blasting the musical, and that was after a solid forty-eight hours awake.

It went on like that for a good twenty minutes, long enough that I was thawed and could feel my toes, and even turned the heat down a couple notches. I was just about to pass the Chophouse again when I picked up a cell signal and my phone started to buzz. I kept my eyes forward, resolutely not looking at my phone, but not being able to help theorizing about who the texts were from, even as I sang out Aaron Burr's emotional backstory. I was looking forward but multitasking and very tired when I felt the car jolt. Another shock of adrenaline went through me, bigger and more demanding than the ones from my sleepy drifting earlier.

I hit the brakes and barely remembered to pull onto the shoulder of the road until the last second. Car safely in park, I twisted around in my seat to look at the road behind me. Not immediately seeing a crater in the middle of the road, I flipped my hazard lights on and got out of the car. After the aid of headlights my eyes had a hard time with the darkness. I pulled out my phone for the flashlight and tried to ignore the notifications there—a text from Andrew, multiple messages from Chelsea, nothing from my mom—as I started scanning the road.

I'd hit a turkey, and it had either gone flying pretty far after being struck by my car, or I'd taken longer to pull over than I'd thought. It was fairly far away, on its fat side on the very edge of the road. It was big and brown and didn't look essentially, irrevocably dead in any way I could identify.

“What the fuck,” I whispered.

Had all of the birds suddenly become nocturnal? Were they usually up at this time? I knew some of the more obnoxious songbirds would start singing by 4:30, but turkeys? The weird rock-bird? Was I just cursed? I was probably just cursed.

Cursed or not, I needed to make sure the bird was actually dead, which was, apparently, easier said than done. I was terrified that it wouldn't be, and that I would have to do something about that. There was probably a phone number to call about things like that. Or was I just supposed to kill it somehow? I felt jittery and anxious, and even though I knew I was overreacting, I couldn't just walk up to the thing and check.

Sure, my lab subjects kicked the bucket every now and then, but there were clear, outlined protocols so that I always knew what to do, so that I never felt like this. Plus, when fish died you just scooped them out of the tank. While the parakeets were a little sadder to clean up, it was fundamentally different to be dealing with a creature that went up to my knees whose bones I'd just shattered.

It was hours since church had gotten out, and I didn't have even a single text from my mom.

I started a dance of sorts, moving closer to the turkey and skittering away whenever the wind picked up or I thought the body moved, and then I would start creeping forward all over again. Not very long into this jig, a pickup came driving up the road behind me. It passed me, and I shot the woman behind the wheel a wave as she did. She passed me and then pulled over right in front of my own car. My heart rate picked up a second time, with the turkey at my back as I watched the woman hop out of her front seat, a giant thermos in her hand.

“Morning!” she called as she started over, leaving her car behind, walking past my car, eyeing the lump past my shoulder before looking back at me.

Tall and rail-thin, she had long brown hair and tattoos poking out from underneath the sleeves of a denim jacket as she got closer. The ink on her skin looked indistinct, even closer up, like the black lines had been sanded down, probably smoothed over and softened by the sun. The last thing that night needed was a wildcard person there to watch me freak out. I knew what I was doing awake and about at that ridiculous hour, but I was sure as hell going to be suspicious—and rightfully so, I would argue—of anyone else driving around in the pitch dark.

“Morning,” I said, then scoffed. “If that’s what we’re calling it.”

“Well,” she said, “it’s morning for me, at least. Probably night for some.”

“That’s fair, I guess.”

“So what’s goin’ on?” she asked, pointing with her chin to the hopefully dead bird still a few yards behind me. “Hit something?”

“Turkey, I think,” I said. “I was just gonna...check to see if it was dead, but I kept chickening out.”

Travel mug to her lips, she laughed.

“No pun intended,” I said. I was half-charmed by the laugh because she was cute, but half-annoyed because it was very early in the morning and we were standing in the dark on the side of a dusty road.

“Okay,” she said, “let’s see about this turkey.”

She started walking forward in long, swift strides. By the time she was passing me to get to the bird, I had pushed down my panic enough to follow. I felt childish, defiant and like I

needed to prove myself to some stranger, and angry at myself for feeling any of those things. So I followed, staring at the back of her head and the soft-looking brown hair tied back there.

The woman stopped, took a swig from her travel mug, and then looked down, hand on her hip. There was a noise that came from somewhere near her feet.

“Not dead yet,” the woman says, making a face. “But he’s getting there. Slowly.”

I looked down. It was a mess of blood and split feathers and kicking feet. It made more noise the closer we got, but couldn’t do much more than flop its head around in distress.

“Dammit,” I said sadly.

“It’s alright,” the woman said. “I think I have a shovel in the back of my truck.”

“A shovel?” I said. “It’s a turkey.”

“To kill it,” she said, sounding scandalized, “not to bury it.”

I didn’t reply; dignity was apparently not something I’d brought with me up the canyon. My mom probably still had it, and there was only so much humiliation I was willing to take in one night. I kicked a rock as I waited, but it hit the turkey’s leg and spooked the poor thing. I shoved my hands in my pockets and became very, very still until the woman came back, a shovel slung over her shoulder.

“You don’t have to watch if you don’t want to,” the woman said. She looked sympathetic, maybe a little pitying. I ground my teeth together.

“Shouldn’t I have to do it?” I said. “I’m the one who hit it.”

“Maybe if this was *Old Yeller*,” she said. “Do you have some longstanding emotional connection with it?”

We both watched the bird for a couple beats. Some of those bones were definitely broken. It wasn't struggling so much anymore, or trying to even get away from us despite the close proximity. Blood was coming from somewhere, but I couldn't tell where with all the feathers.

"I guess not," I said eventually.

The bird's eyes were kind of sad, helpless, but the panic I felt from before was gone now that someone else had come along to fix the problem. The woman handed me her travel mug so she could use both hands to raise the shovel up high. Her back arched, her grip tightened, the turkey gave a final, furious attempt at righting itself. I held the coffee close and breathed it in, more out of instinct than any desire to be more awake.

The messy crunch-squelch of the turkey and the neat *shink* from the shovel meeting packed dirt brought me back to myself enough to turn away from the scene. All things considered, she got the turkey's head almost clean off and it didn't seem to take too long to die. Long enough, though. As the lump of broken and dead turkey bled onto the ground, the woman walked farther from the road to wipe her shovel off on some grass.

"Thanks," I said, feeling like it was the wrong thing to say. It sounded like I was thanking her for killing the bird—which I was, technically, but not like that. I was grateful for her coming along and dealing with an unpleasant thing I wasn't prepared to deal with, but that didn't mean I was pleased with the killing itself. The turkey was too big for me to feel neutral toward its death. Fish, parakeets—they were the size of rodents. A turkey was the size of a small child.

I inhaled again, holding the coffee under my nose, and told myself it was because I needed to wake the hell up. It couldn't be a sniffle, because I was a grown-ass woman and not about to cry over a turkey. I wanted to pull out my phone to check the notifications again.

“You’re welcome,” she said, and went to throw the slightly-less-gross-looking shovel in the bed of her truck. Realizing I was still holding her coffee in my hands, I trailed behind and stood off to the side.

“I’m Wendy, by the way,” she said. Wendy opened the tailgate and hopped up to sit, patting the space next to her. I passed over the travel mug and followed.

“I’m Parker.”

“Want some coffee, Parker?”

I took the coffee back when she offered it, deciding it couldn’t hurt. There wasn’t much of a view from where we were sitting at the entrance to the canyon, especially in the pre-dawn darkness, but we both gazed out past my car and at the rising walls of limestone.

“So,” I said, “you always stop for people on the side of the road in the middle of the night?”

She smirked, and I pulled my feet up to sit criss-cross, pretending I wasn’t looking at her out of the corner of my eye.

“Depends on the person, I guess,” she said. When I turned to look at her, the smile only grew.

“Oh, really?” I said. Half of me was willing to adopt her amusement—the situation was pretty ridiculous—but the other half was weirded out. She’d just decapitated something, and here we were, sharing a coffee. Wendy hadn’t even washed her hands or anything. Perhaps that was the wrong detail to be focusing on, but it was true and also gross. I handed the coffee back and asked, “What made you stop for me, then?”

“I usually stop for people I could beat in a fight.”

“Uh, excuse me,” I said, trying to sound as offended as possible and using that as an excuse to turn back to her. To be fair, she looked tough and lean, like she could hit fast and hard, and she had at least a good four inches on me, and probably about ten years too, but still. To be even fairer, I didn’t know a single thing about fighting except that people were squishy and vulnerable, some parts of them more than others. “That’s a little presumptuous. Plus, I fight dirty.”

“Okay, fine,” Wendy said, not sounding put-off in the least as she handed the coffee back over. “Maybe you’ve even got a couple guns stowed away in that clown car of yours, ’cause God knows there’s nothing as big as a shovel in your back seat.” I pressed my lips together hard. “And maybe you’re even well rested and ready for a fight at ass o’clock in the morning. But even then, I’m gonna give my hypothetical self a fair shake in our hypothetical fight.”

“Jesus,” I said under my breath. “Fine, sure, I wasn’t an active threat. But, what, you’re just going for a cruise in the middle of the night? Nowhere to be?”

“I work at the airport,” she said.

“Ah. So.” I took in the sharp slant of her wrist where it overshot her sleeve, the way her hair had become significantly more tangled since I first saw her. “Aren’t you gonna be late for work?”

“I was already running late this morning. It’s too early to care.”

I hummed in acknowledgment; she wasn’t wrong. The silence stretched on for a moment then, illustrating her point. I had already left the creek behind me in the canyon, so the only noise was the song of a bird somewhere off on the golf course. It seemed wrong and ridiculous to think about hurrying at this hour. Everything was asleep, the dangerous things and the joyful things.

The only things up were the creek that couldn't stop flowing, the wind that travelled through the canyon, and, for some reason, the birds.

I passed the coffee back and pretended to be engrossed in the scenery when Wendy had to throw her head back to get at whatever coffee was left. Even this woman's neck was long and graceful. When she lowered the travel mug, she was smirking.

"Of course," she said, "when I tell my boss I was late because I was saving a girl and slaying a ferocious beast, I'll probably get a free pass. He's a sucker for heroics."

"Hey," I complained, shooting her an appropriately offended look even as my stomach sank. "I bested the beast before you even showed up."

"Oh, sorry," she said, all mock sincerity. "Of course you did."

Another bird sang, another one I didn't recognize though it sounded familiar. Most likely I'd heard it in my sleep a thousand times. I smiled.

"Well," I said. "I should probably get going. No reason for you to be any later than you already are."

"Yeah," Wendy said, "probably."

I jumped down from the truck and brushed the dirt off the seat of my pants. It was kind of a lost cause, but I gave it a go, more for something to busy myself with than any belief that it was going to help me look like I hadn't just slept under a waterfall and rolled around in the dirt by the road. I held myself straight and tall, put my hands in my pockets, and faced the woman.

"It was nice to meet you, Wendy," I said. "Thanks for your help."

"You're welcome," she said, smiling with half of her mouth and crinkles at the corners of her eyes. "And it was nice to meet you too, Parker."

After a beat, I nodded and started back toward my own car.

“Wait!”

I turned back at the sound of Wendy’s voice, and would’ve been embarrassed about how quickly I moved if she hadn’t looked so alarmed.

“Is your car okay?” she asked.

“Yeah.” I blinked. I didn’t think there was anything wrong with my car, anyway. “It’s fine.”

Wendy nodded, and it was much too dark to tell, but something about the way she averted her gaze made me think she was blushing.

“What were you doing out in the middle of the night, anyway?” she asked.

I drew in a deep breath through my mouth, shrugged.

“Just. Hanging out, really.”

It wasn’t, for once, that I was too embarrassed to admit to Wendy what had happened up the canyon. It probably would’ve even made for an entertaining story, but I couldn’t stand the thought. Spearfish Falls in the moonlight—that was mine. The weird rock-duck and the way I could hear the pine needles, even under all the water? Mine, wholly and entirely. It was too soon to share, with Chelsea or Wendy or Andrew or Trent, who would all have something to say, some opinion, some wrench to throw into the works when it finally felt like a smooth running machine.

I drove back to Chelsea’s on autopilot, a plan trying to grab hold of me already. The door was unlocked when I returned. On the other side of the front door I was faced with an empty couch. A cursory investigation produced even stranger results: Chelsea was asleep in her bed.

Not that she never slept in her own bed, but it was a bit bizarre for a Saturday night, especially without Andrew around somewhere. Suddenly suspicious, I crept to my own room, but he wasn't in my bed either.

Good, I thought. At least the likelihood of me waking up to more screaming seemed pretty slim, and Chelsea couldn't have gone too far off the rails if she was asleep in her own bed.

There wasn't much in our fridge, but someone had stuck a box of olive-pepperoni pizza in there, not even half eaten. Neither Chelsea nor Andrew got the concept of putting pizza slices in ziplock bags, but it luckily hadn't been sitting around long enough to go bad. It was only a little tough, but I didn't dare use the microwave for fear of waking Chelsea. It was closer to 4:30 by then, but still an ungodly hour at which I felt unfit to interact with another human being.

Cold pizza was better than no pizza, so I held the slice in my mouth as I went to my room, wrestling my way out of my water-stiff clothes and flopping onto the bed. It was disgustingly comfortable after sleeping on a fence. Warm, fed, and horizontal, my body finally made its protests known. And there were many. By the time my pizza was gone—sans the crust which was unsalvageable, so that went on the floor where I would have to deal with it later—I had almost relaxed entirely into bed, my muscles unknotted, my spine slowly melted back to its true shape.

Wishing I'd brushed my teeth before lying down, I grabbed my phone, shot off a text to my mom, and was asleep almost before I rolled over.

I woke up at about 11:30 the next—same?—morning. All things considered, I decided that was a perfectly decent time to get up. I swung around so that my feet landed on the ground.

Or, one of my feet landed on the carpet, the other landed in the remains of a slice of pizza. I sighed, stared at my foot. When the marinara sauce on my toes didn't magically disappear, I had to seriously consider going back to bed. Leaving my legs where they were, I lay back the rest of the way on the bed again and pulled my phone off the cord while I made the decision. My mom had texted me back only a couple hours after I'd gone to bed. She was thrilled that I was coming over for dinner, so obviously overjoyed even through text message that I felt a little guilty for brushing her off the way I had the day before.

Eventually I did get up, and I even perfunctorily cleaned the pizza from both my foot and the carpet before I made my way out to the living room. Still no sign of Andrew, which was unsurprising, but Chelsea was there, which was. To be fair, it was close to the time she normally got up, but that day it happened to be my morning too. She was sitting on the couch in a tank top and flannel shorts, looking comfy and sleepy, with a plate of waffles on the coffee table and a mug in her hands. She was a bartender last week, so if that was still a thing she wouldn't have to get to work for a while yet. With her inheritance slowly fizzling out, she'd decided to look into getting a job, but her version of job hunting was more like job test driving. She was a waitress first, but that never lasted long with her, and then it was Arby's, but everyone who worked there was on what Chelsea called the scary drugs, but that wasn't new either—even when we were in high school, Arby's employees had been on hard stuff. I estimated about another two weeks—or until she found a mostly solid job she could settle into—before she asked why I hadn't found employment yet, prior agreements be damned. Maybe I would use my first paycheck to smoke Andrew up. But that was a fight for another day.

Time to test the waters. I took a deep breath, smiled, braced myself.

“Morning!” I said, going around the back of the couch and flipping onto the seat next to Chelsea so I wouldn’t walk in front of the TV, though, looking closer, she seemed to be watching cartoons.

“Barely,” she said, but it was teasing, and she smiled back. Bolstered, I swiped her coffee and took a drink. While she whined about it, I was allowed to live, which moved me from being relieved about her good attitude to slightly suspicious.

By the second episode of *Adventure Time* I was feeling a little surreal. It was so nice. Not that I’d been miserable the entire time I’d been living there, but the nature of the house was disruption. This, though, sitting on the couch in sweats, waffles and coffee and cartoons, easy banter—if someone had interviewed my fourteen-year-old self what her ideal future was, it would’ve been exactly this. Maybe our ideal selves in my kid-brain were secretly superheroes or had ten pets, but the general structure of the thing was the same.

Chelsea didn’t bring up Andrew or the fight the day before, and I knew better than to push.

At about noon we both independently decided it was time to shower. Not in the mood to argue about it, I let her take the bathroom first and stole the remains of her waffles while I waited. The syrup had congealed, though, and my stomach bubbled. I set the plate back down and watched Finn the Human grapple with the at-least-semi-sentient leaf sword residing somehow within him, but my stomach didn’t settle. The rest of me seemed to vibrate around its tremors. I was unnerved, and contemplated the possibility that Chelsea had put something in the coffee, which was ridiculous since the only thing she would’ve put in her coffee was Bailey’s. Whatever I was feeling, it wasn’t Irish cream.

I got up and put the disgusting plate in the sink so I wouldn't have to look at it. Back in my room I laid out clothes on my bed, put them back, got different ones out. I swiped a pair of Chelsea's shoes to borrow right before she emerged from the bathroom, but felt justified in the action for how little hot water she left me.

"Okay," I said, standing in the kitchen. My hair was dry, Chelsea's shoes were on my feet, and my car keys were in hand. The oxygen was vibrating as I sucked it in, and it wasn't effectively making it to my brain.

"Okay," I said, louder, with more finality, and Chelsea looked up from where she was at the couch again, scrolling through a laptop. "I'm gonna head out. Have a good night at work."

"Thanks," she said, looking back down at her computer. "Have fun doing your whatevers."

My parents lived in a small cube of a house two blocks up the hill from the city park and one block down from the cemetery. The house itself was painted dark green and had the sloping roof that made it look like any five-year-old's rendition: a door in the middle and windows on either side, all very symmetrical and clean. Up close, past the ash tree and up the three concrete steps, the paint was peeling back in places, but nothing was in terrible disrepair.

This was, as I'd been reminded so many times, still my home, but it had been a while since I'd been inside that I hesitated on the front steps. It would be weird to just walk in like the time hadn't passed, but I couldn't get on board with knocking either. That was too formal, would admit to too much of the distance between me and my parents. I recalled being sick as a kid, sick enough to miss school but not sick enough for my parents to miss work. On such days I got to go

to my grandparents' house, and I remembered suddenly how my mom conducted herself. I opened the door just wide enough to fit my face though.

“Knock, knock!” I called, opening the door all the way entering.

The dog came tearing into the living room first, my dad hot on his heels.

“Arnie!” I said, and crouched down to get on the dog's level so he was less likely to freak out completely. Arnie was a brown mutt with blonde eyebrows, a something-something-part-border-collie, and he was terribly smart and just plain terrible. And a spoiled brat.

“Parker,” my dad said. His eyes were wide and bright, and he started flopping his wrists and bouncing on his toes like an overgrown, impatient toddler as he waited for Arnie to wind down. “Oh, my God, Arnie barely recognizes you. He says he almost forgot about you entirely. Where have you been!”

I pushed myself up and gave my dad a hug. Phil hugged back, tighter than could be considered casual, and held on for too long. Arnie jumped up to rest his paws on our elbows, either feeling left out by the action or just being weirded out by the humans trapping each other in a way that made him anxious.

“Sorry, Arnie,” I said obligingly.

By the time I was released, my mom had come in from the kitchen, looking surprised. Pushing down the guilt that caused, I hugged her too, a much more tempered one than what I'd gotten from my dad.

“You,” she said, pointing at Phil. “Put that dog outside before it pees on the floor.”

“He's fine,” my dad said, waspishly. My mom sighed.

“Fine,” she echoed, “then put him outside before he knocks the TV over. Again.”

“See how she bullies me?” Phil asked me.

“I’m staying out of this one,” I said.

I bent to take my shoes off and watched my parents banter. It was nice, even though it seemed a little staged, the way old arguments sometimes are when someone new is there to spectate. It made me feel more like a guest, like some kind of outsider. That stung me, though I knew it was my own doing.

Salvage this, I told myself.

Dinner wasn’t ready yet, so we sat in the living room and chatted. The room itself was fairly small, and had a bit of an organized chaos thing going on. There were colorfully symmetrical area rugs thrown over the scratched up wooden floor. Every room in their house had brightly colored walls, part of my mom’s never-ending quest to build a happy home, and the walls in the living room were bright yellow. The TV was more or less the focal point of the room, and just about every piece of furniture was a rescue. There was the couch from one of my dad’s old friends, the recliner that used to be my grandpa’s, end tables from a garage sale put on by one of my mom’s buddies from the women’s leadership program. Everything was worn, but not broken down exactly, just lived in.

There was certainly no shortage of things to catch up on, not with our classically massive midwestern clan of a family. Aunt Linda was having health problems that may or may not have been directly linked to the breast implants she got a good few decades back, though everyone was playing nice so far and pretending it was a spontaneous mishap; cousin Tom’s second kid was just born, which I hadn’t had a clue about since Tom blocked me on Facebook years ago over a dispute about his raging racism; my second cousin Alex had just come out as gay a month

ago (for the life of me I couldn't remember whose kid Alex was but I resolved to look it up online later). In turn, I provided some of the more innocent gossip from mine and Chelsea's place, like the fight between her and Andrew, the money her grandmother had set aside for her, and how low it was now running.

Eventually we relocated to the dining room. It was six o'clock on the dot, the same time we'd done dinner the entire time I was growing up, the same time *The Simpsons* was on. My dad had made his infamous lasagne, a dish that was notorious not for its taste, which was pretty good in all honesty, but I knew that if I rounded the corner into the kitchen, there would be at least two extra pans of the stuff cooling on the counter. There would be no room in the fridge for weeks after, and it would be leftover lasagne every night until Mom was sick enough of the stuff to sneakily throw it out or feed it to Arnie. This was an old song and dance, but the knowledge made the house I grew up in feel more familiar.

"And what have you been up to?" my dad finally asked, and we all knew this is what he'd wanted to talk about since the beginning. He'd held off for admirably long.

"Not sure quite yet. I'm still looking for something that's not McDonald's," I lied.

"I'm sure Jack could use the extra help up at Killian's," he said. "Especially in the summer and with the rally coming up."

"I think I'd rather find something in my field," I said quickly. "Actually, I was thinking of heading up to the bio department at the college, seeing if they had anything for me."

"Oh, that would be great," my mom said. "They would be lucky to have you."

I would have to beg them to take me, I didn't say.

I'd thought, briefly, about bringing a bottle of wine with me, because that was what adults did when they were invited to dinner—they contributed. And it wasn't like Chelsea and I had any food to offer up as a side dish unless my parents had developed a taste for stale pizza since I'd last seen them. Ultimately I'd decided against the wine, recalling vaguely that my dad had stopped drinking, though it didn't appear to have stuck. It also didn't appear to be a problem tonight, just a glass for each of us. Besides, it probably counted as a special occasion and, contrary to popular belief, Phil could behave himself when the situation called for it.

Dinner was incident free, all landmines and tripwires left buried and hidden, and I even felt comfortable after a while. By the time we were clearing our plates away, some corner of my brain was waiting for the reminder to finish my homework before watching any TV.

"Can I help with the dishes?" I asked, knowing full well my dad despised my dishwashing abilities but I had to at least try to contribute after showing up empty handed.

"No," my mom said, taking my plate from my hands. It was the kind of mom-tone that brokered no arguments. I could hear my dad laughing at me from the next room over.

"Everything's going to need to soak anyway."

"Uh-huh."

Back in the living room I sat down, overfull and clumsy, in the big recliner my mom had taken from her parents' old place when they downgraded to the townhouse. Arnie perched stubbornly in my lap, and my dad kitty-corner to me on the couch he had all to himself. Most of the furniture in the house was the same as far as I could tell, but nothing was in its right place. Mom took spring cleaning very seriously, as well as winter rearranging and mid-September rotations where the focal point of the room was redefined and framed accordingly. From where I

sat I had a clear view of the front door, the fake stained glass of the door's small window, the hook that held the old, ratty towel used to wipe Arnie's paws when he was tracking mud. What I didn't see were the key hooks that had always been to the left of the light switch. And that was the one thing I'd been hoping would be there.

It wasn't that I'd been planning on stealing from my parents, not exactly. I simply felt better with more routes open to me. Now if I wanted anything I was going to have to ask.

Eventually Diane came back with wet spots on her shirt and Dawn bubbles on one sleeve, after having obviously done more than start the dishes soaking. She was exceptionally efficient but never neat about it, the kind of woman who tied her hair back in a bandana and wore overalls to clean the house and ended up looking like Pig-Pen. A wave of pure, unsolicited fondness hit me straight in the gut as my mom walked into the room after speed washing the dishes. She was smiling even as she scoffed at the dog and sat at the seat on the couch farthest away from her husband. Thirty seconds later there was still an extra crinkle at the corner of her eyes when she spotted the suds and wiped them off onto the arm of her couch before anyone could note the evidence. I *loved* her, I loved them both. Too much.

I wondered if I had let them down.

In that moment, I would have done anything to make it up to them.

They'd gone from having the mild bragging rights afforded to a South Dakotan couple whose kid had gone off to do science and change the world in New York to the parents of a disgraced fool who'd had a shot to do some good and make a name for herself and blew it spectacularly.

“Do we—or, do you guys still partially own that cabin up at the lake?” I asked, trying not to sound too eager or too sudden in the comfortable atmosphere. Arnie pushed at my hand with his damp nose and I started petting him. The TV was on to one of the horrendous shows my mom watched and my dad was playing a game on his phone, and they were both pretending to not be watching my every move. I pretended to not notice.

“Course we do,” Mom said.

“We do?” my dad said.

“Yeah.”

“We haven’t been there in forever.”

“Yes, well,” my mom said.

“Has anyone been using it?” I asked, talking over whatever smart retort my dad had. “Or do you think I could set up shop there for a little while?”

My parents had both stopped pretending to be engaged in their own activities. I turned the dog’s ear inside-out and weighed my next words carefully.

“I was kind of hoping to take some applications up there to fill out. And just, y’know, generally get away from Chelsea for a while so I can figure out my next move.”

It sounded like a solid, well thought out plan when I put it that way. There was no cell service up that far in the hills, and no wifi, nothing but a payphone at the store where people rented out paddle boats.

My parents looked away from me, and at each other. A housewife on TV got a drink thrown in her face.

“Of course,” my mom said, like the pause had never happened. She got up and rummaged through one of the drawers of the entertainment system, coming up with a set of keys attached to a smiley face keychain. “I’ll text your uncle tomorrow to make sure he’s not using it for anything, but I doubt it.”

“So that’s where you’ve been hiding the keys,” Phil said.

“I have not been hiding the keys.”

“They look kind of hidden,” I said, the slightest bit bitter despite myself at not having known where they were.

“The board with the hooks fell off the wall and broke, so I’ve been keeping them in here till I fix it,” she said.

“It only fell because you had it held up with thumb tacks instead of nails,” my dad said.

I reached toward my mom and opened and closed my fist. She dangled the keys in front of her from across the room.

“Mom,” I whined, long and drawn out. “There’s a dog in my lap.”

“What’s the magic word?” She came closer with measured, slow steps. I pouted until she was close enough and snatched them before she could pull them back.

“Kumquat!” I said, curling both hands around the keys and keeping them close to my chest as I settled back under Arnie, under the sounds of the house and the wind glancing off the living room window. “Thank you.”

I stayed a while longer, drifting on the banter and being weighed down by the pasta. Eventually, though, I left. I was smiling and laughing when I bypassed the concrete steps leading

down from the door, landing in the grass with bent knees, and I was furious by the time I was behind the wheel of my car.

Promises and ideas and explanations poured out of me like water under the non-pressure of my parents. Words I didn't owe them and impulses I hadn't yet set to a structured rhythm of thought. Laying it out made it sound as stupid as it probably was. The real kicker was that none of the things I'd said were my real plans. My forethought had gone about as far as wanting to get out of town, out of Chelsea's hair before we tore each other to shreds again, because that was what we did when we were around each other for too long. It would be nice, I thought, if we could part ways before bloodshed.

It was late enough then; I'd been at my parents' house long enough that Chelsea would be at work. Suddenly I wanted nothing more than to catch up on the sleep I hadn't gotten the night before, maybe a hot bath and some of the backup weed Chelsea kept in the paper lamp.

The thing about lying to my parents was that I couldn't. Or, I didn't. Never for long, anyway. Speaking something other than the truth aloud to them broke some cosmic rule, and the entire universe seemed to warp to fit around whatever mental picture I'd painted for them. I used to tell people I was probably one-sixteenth fae, most likely on my dad's side.

The next morning I was up, caffeinated, and packed before Chelsea was even awake. Not that it was hard; I'd arrived with not even a full carload of stuff with me, and I hadn't accumulated too much in the weeks I'd been living there. While I hadn't been paying rent, I hadn't had a source of income either, and had been living off my savings. Luckily the cabin

would be rent free too; my parents and uncle split the cost, but they didn't go camping as much as they used to, so it mostly sat untouched.

Right before leaving I took out a sheet of printer paper and scribbled a note for Chelsea to find:

*Moving on! feel free to give Andrew my room,
sorry for the late notice. I'll be in touch. -Parker*

I left it on the coffee table with my key on top. I paused in the open doorway, going down a mental list of my possessions, but I didn't think I was forgetting anything. When I pulled the door shut behind me, it was locked.

I blew out a breath and left.

I made it almost to the point where the pavement dissolved into gravel road before I turned back around.

"Goddammit," I whispered to myself, but even so, I aimed myself toward the college.

I couldn't leave yet, or the evening with my parents would turn to dust in my head, would crumple from the honest dinner I'd wanted it to be to just more deception on my end.

When I got to the BHSU campus I wasn't myself but some version of myself as a combination of a soccer mom and CEO, someone who didn't mind wandering through halls and demanding answers to frankly stupid questions. A Professional Parker.

"There's a career planning office at this school, right? Do you know where?"

"Definitely not in the science building."

“Can you take me to someone who knows where it is?”

“I’ve kind of got somewhere to—”

“It’ll only take a minute.”

“...Hey, Carmen?”

“Hi, thanks. Carmen, right? Do you know where there’s a career development office on campus?”

“Uh—hi. In Woodburn, I think.”

All in all, it took me over half an hour to find the office of someone I could talk to, and then an extra hour and a half to get what I wanted out of them. This was achieved by me simply not taking the hint to get out of her office. At first she tried to hand me an email address and a link to the college’s website, and I said I’d prefer her help instead. We then hit a bit of a speed bump when I confessed to not having a BHSU-specific email address; she stared at me for a good thirty seconds before coming to terms with the fact that I wasn’t a student.

After we got the ball rolling it was okay. I left her office with a stack of applications and informational packets. There were grant opportunities and contest rules, jobs ranging from research assistants to internships to fellowships in places like California, Idaho, North Carolina, even as close as Rapid City and Mitchell. Looking down at the papers once I had them all collected and in my hands, I felt sad. When I’d moved to New York I’d been scared, but underneath there’d been a sense of adventure that was all but absent as I tapped my stack of papers against the desk in front of me, making a neat stack of possible futures for myself. None of those were places I wanted to go, and I was tired of the East Coast. I was getting tired of uprooting myself.

“Thanks for your help,” I said, and she smiled back at me, a terse upturn of the lips, no teeth. I hadn’t asked her name and she hadn’t asked mine.

I tossed the pile of papers down on the passenger seat and thought, now? Something still wasn’t quite right though. When I got up to the lake I wanted to stay there for a good while, not turn back right away to take care of unfinished business. I wanted to be sure this time. This time would be better. Just me instead of the whims of everyone else, and I would rest, and I would breathe, and I would maybe even think some things through.

My gas tank was full, all my belongings were strewn about the backseat, the applications were beside me, and a small cooler full of beer, hot dogs, and s’mores ingredients was in the trunk. This was as good as anything had been in a while, and as good as anything was bound to get.

This time when I drove up Tinton Road, I kept going. The gravel ensured I kept both hands firmly on the wheel, and the flying dust and dirt outside kept my windows rolled up despite the gorgeous weather. There were a couple spots I had to stop for cows crossing the path, but for most of the journey I went along solidly and slowly as pickups and minivans alike passed me by. In high school, the thing to do was see who could pull off the coolest drifts on gravel roads. Kids got their licenses freshman year, sometimes even in eighth grade, and the next day they’d be out past Walmart or back by the Wyoming border figuring out the tricks of the trade. For my first couple years driving I’d been too scared, but I did try once when I was sixteen. Then never again. Gravel wasn’t something that needed to be messed around with, and that kind of temptation to fate ultimately never ended well.

Tinton was too narrow for anyone to be pulling stupid stunts on, but that didn't mean anyone was going to slow down for a little gravel and some tight turns. A great point of pride around there was that people could drive in any conditions, and the preferred method of proving this was to show no fear. No fear for ice, rain, hail, gravel, open field, or incline. And no fear means no slowing down.

Despite the weather, the way up the hills was both incline and shifting gravel, and cars in front of me left clouds in their wake, which made me slow down for the upcoming twists and turns, which only made anyone driving behind me irritated enough to pass me. Rinse and repeat. Luckily, even going 35 miles an hour as I was, it wasn't a long drive. Not even thirty minutes after leaving town I turned onto Iron Creek Lake Road, and nearly drove myself off the road looking out the driver's side window to get the first glimpse of the lake.

That first sight, after all the dust and anxiety of the winding road, always made the lake look like an oasis. The small ripples on the surface shone through the gaps in the trees, and it sparkled magnificently where the water caught and reflected the sun in a thousand different places. The road came at Iron Creek from above, the road curving down and around like an exit of the Interstate, so that when it first became visible the view was the kind someone would put on a postcard if the pine trees weren't in the way.

There was a "beach" on the near end of the lake, where people had brought in sand and dumped it in a swath between the parking lot and the water. The parking lot was bracketed on one side by this beach, and on the other by the lake store. I passed both and continued on around the lake, unlocking the kind-of-gate (a strung up cord and padlock) when I got to it, and up to my family's cabin, which wasn't a cabin at all but an RV with a deck built around it, probably sunk

enough into the ground that it never could go anywhere anyway, stationed right across the lake from the beach. There used to be a cabin there, when my mom and her siblings were kids, but by the time my parents had decided to take me camping as a kid, the wood had rotted and the entire place had become hopelessly infested with squirrels. My mom's family had had it torn down, and brought the RV up instead, though there were the beginnings of disrepair evident now, even from the outside. Once again, now that the kids were mostly grown, nobody was using the place regularly, though they kept up the payments to keep the small property that had been my grandparents'.

The dust settled around me when I got out, and I stood on the deck for a few minutes as I breathed in the dry, cool air and listened to kids shrieking and laughing from across the lake. Eventually I took up the broom leaning against the mossy picnic table and started sweeping away the pine needles that were all over the deck. It felt like a weird place to start, considering how much work the place was apparently going to take to be livable, but there were enough needles in a couple spots that I thought I might slip on them like banana peels. When I pushed a branch off the wooden platform it fell the three feet to the ground, and a scritch-scratch scurrying sound came from somewhere underneath my feet.

Please, God, I thought. Not the squirrels. They were downright nasty when someone encroached on their home. They'd been the reason we'd torn the last place down. Anything else, we could have handled. It was probably foolish of us to believe we could fix the problem by putting another structure on top of the same land; what difference did that make to a squirrel? Sure, it might take them a while to get back inside, but I feared no metal structure could withstand the collective will of a forest full of squirrels.

Experimentally, I used the broom to fling an acorn off the deck. Nothing, no audible reaction. Figuring the larger object had scared the whatever-it-was, I decided a truce was in order. I was going to leave the probably squirrel alone as long as it stayed underneath the RV and deck, and until such a time as it invaded my newly claimed space or decided to wage the first battle.

After sweeping the deck I set up the camper, expanding and sliding out portions of the RV, stringing up and beating blankets and bedding with the handle of the broom until they were mostly clean or at least not so dusty, flipping switches on the power hookup out back. The place had electricity, but wouldn't have water unless I wanted to do some actual work. I decided I was okay for now. I had a couple bottles of water with me for drinking, could buy some more from the store on the other side of the lake, and there was a bucket and lake water if I felt like mopping the inside of the RV.

Sitting at the wooden picnic table, I popped open a lunchable and laid one of the applications out in front of me. Some of the dry moss crackled underneath the paper, but I assumed I would have to redo them all on my computer eventually anyway. I didn't think most of the places I was applying took snail mail applications anymore. Or maybe they did, but I didn't have the kind of handwriting that made handwritten applications a feasible option.

It wasn't until that afternoon that the mystery creature made its reappearance. I was around the back of the camper, sifting through the pile of firewood, trying to find logs that weren't damp without getting splinters. The wood on the right side of the pile was okay, the moss on the exposed bark brittle and crumbling. It seemed like the left side was under the slope of branches of the tree that shed all the pine needles on the deck. I thought rain might have been

sliding down and onto half of the wood pile. I resolved to shift the entire thing over the next day to be closer to the RV and farther from the tree, but for now, in the dying light, I wanted a fire, which meant finding dry wood.

I was nearly satisfied with my findings when my search dislodged a beaten up tennis ball and sent it flying into the front tire of my car. I jumped back from the wood pile in surprise. Just as I realized it wasn't a squirrel leaping out from its home in the depths amongst the logs, a rustling erupted from underneath the deck and a black dog shot out from the shadows and snatched the still rolling ball in its teeth. I yelped and jumped back again from the suddenness of the movement, and the dog squared itself to me and froze.

"Jesus," I said, shoulders slumping as I registered what exactly had just emerged like a demon from the dark pit underneath my deck. The dog didn't let his guard down and I reminded myself to be wary, even though my entire being was ready to relax and accept the dog as a friend. That didn't necessarily mean the dog knew I wanted to be friends.

"You're okay, buddy," I said, and held my arms slightly to the side with my palms forward to show I was nonthreatening, though I didn't know if that was a universal sign or just one humans understood to mean *I'm not armed*.

He looked like a boxer maybe, though I thought the snout might be a little too long. Probably a mixed breed, I decided, still waiting for the dog to unpause. It wasn't an all-black dog I realized now that I was looking, but had white on his chest and wrapped down and around his front paws. Hoping to encourage him, I lowered down into a crouch and let one of my hands drift forward, the back of my hand offered for sniffing, thinking that was probably the dog version of nonthreatening. Immediately, the dog jumped to attention, widened his stance with the front

paws and sticking his butt up in the air. From that position I could tell the dog had no tags, no collar.

“Okay,” I said, drawing out the word and stilling my every muscle. “Hey, we’re okay. We can play with that ball if you want. I can just leave you alone, if that’s your thing. Honestly, I just came out here to be alone too, I just wanna know you’re not gonna nip at me if I try to go inside.”

The dog didn’t move when I explained myself, but did cock its head, probably because my voice was a little higher pitched than normal. We stayed there long enough that I had to shift onto my butt on the pine-needle-and-dirt ground. The dog tensed again as I moved.

“Calm down, you’re fine. I’m just settling in, weirdo.”

I was sitting with the camper on my left, my car slightly to the right, the dog in front of me, and, beyond the dog, the lake. It was still glittering from there in the slanted, late evening sun. I knew that if I went closer it would look more brown, more opaque, but from where I was sitting it was still picturesque. I shifted my focus to the water in hopes that the dog would take the hint and chill.

I didn’t know where the name Iron Creek came from, but I’d always imagined it found its origin in the surface of the water. There was a way in which it was unique, the surrounding hills carved out in such a way that the wind skipped over the top layer of the lake and wrinkled it like fabric, making so many tiny waves so close to one another. I imagined standing on a dock there gave the same view someone might get being in a helicopter above an ocean. It was always strange to remember that it was a manmade lake since it fit so neatly where they’d nestled it, and for the first ten years of my life I’d been so sure there was a prehistoric serpent living in some

crevice at the bottom of the lake. Though my fantasies had been crushed when I learned the lake had been constructed in the 1930s, I learned a couple years later that the lake was definitely haunted by the ghosts of at least a couple waterlogged and drunken high schoolers, which was tragic but almost a suitable substitute for a sea monster.

Eventually, the dog dropped the tennis ball from his mouth and slapped at it with his paw a couple of times.

“You can keep it,” I said quietly, keeping my eyes on the water and the dog in my periphery. “I don’t need that for anything.”

I was stiff from both sitting on the ground and from the cold; it was always about ten degrees colder up that far in the hills than it was in Spearfish proper, and it was slowly becoming nighttime around the two of us. The sun was just starting to set for real when the dog picked the tennis ball back up and retreated to his home underneath the shelter of the deck. I sat still for a couple of minutes after that, and then used a stick to stir around the grass and pine needles around the steps, but no teeth came darting out, and no growl came from the darkness. Probably not as slowly as I should have, I stood and gathered up my small pile of dry wood, jogging around the back of the RV to the other side where the fire pit was, to frantically build a fire in the dying light.

It was exceptionally dark by the time I had convinced the fire to keep going on its own, and I sat back in a folding chair, more exhausted than I had any right to be. After a few minutes and a couple mosquito bites I went inside to throw on jeans and a hoodie. On my way back out I snagged a Tupperware bowl and a skewer for the hotdogs and marshmallows. The bowl went right behind my chair, half of my water bottle went into the bowl, and a cold, torn up hotdog

went next to the bowl. My chair was facing away from the camper, partially because of the way the hill slanted, partly so I could see anyone who was coming up the road, and I settled in to cook and wait.

There were a couple other fires I could see burning from where I was sitting, most on the other side of the lake where the cabins were rented out. The screaming had died down as it got too cold out for even the most daring of the kids to be in the water, though the laughter was still audible every now and then, coming from the points of brightness.

I didn't keep track but it must have been close to twenty minutes later when I heard the first telltale signs of the dog behind me, getting closer and then retreating suddenly. Or, that's what I imagined him to be doing; I didn't dare look, especially as he made progress and got slightly closer. By the time I heard the first distinct slap of tongue on water, the fire was really going, sharp and warm against my shins. Feeling smug, I stabbed a marshmallow and moved to hold it over the flame.

We sat there for a long time. I was tired and cozy, and content with listening to the sounds of the dog retreating and coming closer. I shifted my focus to the sky until the stars stood out against the backdrop of space, and after a while of that I shifted back to the fire, watching the flames wage war on one another, vying for territory, eating the logs up. I got up for a beer at one point, and the dog darted back under the deck for the next half hour after.

There was the issue with the hotdogs, but I was sure there was a solution and couldn't call up any serious worry for the matter. There were only so many, and I would blow through them faster than I'd planned if they were going to be feeding the both of us. Maybe they could use some help down at the store; I could clean the paddle boats for them, or do inventory on live

bait. If I had to run back down into town I could. With the electricity in the camper running, I'd be able to store food in the fridge, bring more this time around, maybe some dog food and one of Arnie's toys if Phil could stand to part with it. Then again, maybe I would wait a few days until I had a couple of the applications completed, and I could hook up to wifi long enough to send them out.

I was about to call it quits when the dog came forward enough to be considered sitting beside me instead of behind me. One of the campfires in my sightline had diminished to a smoldering heap, though the other was still going strong, the sounds of conversations and stories carrying. The dog plopped his head down on the canopy arm of my folding chair. Just as happily, I reached over to pet him on his pointy, velvety-looking ear. Immediately, he snapped at me, but didn't bite for real, and I laughed even as I turned obediently back to the fire.

The morning saw another brief standoff between me and my new almost friend as I was trying to get to my neighbor's outhouse.

"Please," I begged, "for the love of God, *let me pass.*"

It took a considerable amount of bargaining and distraction on my part, but eventually I reached the tennis ball, and from there all I had to do was throw it and sprint. Later in the morning, I was telling the story to the cashier at the lake store as I traded a few dollars for a styrofoam cup of coffee and small paper bag of bacon. The cashier was an elderly man. If memory served, it was the same man who'd been there for as long as I could remember, his back maybe a bit more stooped, his white hair thinner, but same in every other way.

"That skinny black dog?" he asked.

“Yeah, that one.”

“Been tryin’ to catch him for a month and a half, was gearin’ up to call animal control if it was still loose by end of summer,” he said, pouring my change into my hand. “If he’s warmin’ up to you, do me a favor and get him under control. No dogs allowed unless they’re on a leash at all times.” He stepped away and into the back room, but came back a second later to hand me an old, chain style leash.

“I’ll work on that,” I lied, “just as soon as he lets me get close enough.”

I ran the leash through my hands. It was short, definitely too short for a dog as big as he was, and especially if there was no collar to work with. There wasn’t anyone else in the store so early, so I wrapped the chain around my hand and leaned my hip against the counter. When I asked him about work he raised his eyebrows, looked me up and down, and told me to come back the next day, he’d see what he could do.