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# Tilt-A-Whirl

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by

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*To my little sister, Eleanor*

The feeling wasn't so bad, the feeling of being lost.

—*Leonard Michaels, Nachman at the Races*

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# Minestrone Girl

There were five stages of decomposition: self-digestion, bloat, active decay, advanced decay, and skeletonization. Online, Nora studied photos of dead bodies after one day, after three days, after a week, after a month. She especially loved the ones where the women were bloodied and beaten, stockings wrapped around their necks. There wasn't a real reason she could point to for the sudden interest; being a teenager was enough of one, Nora guessed. Sometimes at night when she could not sleep, she imagined what her body would look like on the bed, full of fluid, blue and distended.

One Saturday, a house sparrow hit her kitchen window. Right above the sink. It made a small, excusable thump as if it were only a pinecone flung by the wind. Outside, Nora knelt by the small creature. Its wings were splayed open, stuck in mid-flight. The sparrow lay on its back, with its unmoving red chest facing the sky, feet grasping at the air. She looked at its eyes; they were closed and covered by tiny eyelids. Nora cupped her hands around the bird—who was softer than anything she had ever held before—and brought it towards her chest.

The sparrow, she decided, would be an experiment. She would watch it decompose and keep its bones—soak them in soap, put them in bleach to make them bright white—and display them in a jar on her bookshelf. Nora placed the bird in a flimsy aluminum baking dish. The experiment would be conducted in the treehouse rotting away in her backyard. It was a simple, uncomplicated structure. A thick sheet of plywood was bolted into the trees and supported by wooden beams.

Extra wood blocks were screwed into the trunk as a makeshift ladder. Nora left the dead sparrow on the second floor, uncovered, with the intention to check on it every day of the week.

That night, she met Alex at a house show. It was hosted by a mutual friend, a tall, lanky blonde who had nudist parents and an unfinished basement. The house was tall and white-paneled with red brick steps that led up to the front door and around to the backyard. In the basement, drunk boys played with a table saw in the center of the room. Old kitchen tools, broken chairs, and forgotten books lined the walls, and towards the back were racks of dresses from the eighties: shoulder-padded, sequined all over, and pure polyester. As Nora walked through the crowded room, the soles of her sneakers stuck to the concrete floor from spilled beer. She couldn't tell if her heartbeat matched with the tempo of the kick drum, or if the kick drum dictated how her heart decided to beat. Outside, kids stood in small circles in the fenced-in backyard. A fire pit crackled to the far left. I heard, someone said, that the world won't last another fifty years. Bullshit, someone else said, reclining in a metal chair, we've been here this long, why not another billion more? Alex sat alone next to the fire in a foldable camping chair, a cigarette loosely hanging between his fingers. The cigarette's tip was uncomfortably close to the canvas fabric. He wasn't very tall and wasn't very friendly. Nora came up to him looking for her keys. He agreed to help her. But only if she made plans with him outside of the party. Nora's skirt kept rising up her thighs, and she kept trying to pull it back down. She agreed to it. He was cute enough. At the end of the night, they both realized that the keys had been in Nora's right hand the entire time.

When she checked the sparrow the next morning, hundreds of small, black ants had crawled onto its body, their antennae moving this way and that. They seemed to be on a mission to explore as much of the bird as possible. Nora imagined that if the bird were still alive, the ant's limbs would have tickled. She felt them then, as she stared down at the bird, on her skin. They crawled up her arms, under her armpits, up the back of her neck, into her ears. There was no smell to the bird, not

yet. It smelled only of its surroundings: stale wood, pine needles, and packed dirt. The ants fixated on the bird's eye. They fought one another for a spot, their limbs flailing and bodies on top of one another. Three large flies with orange eyes and black and white stripes down their backs sat on the bird, unmoving. Nora hadn't ever seen flies like that before. She wondered if they were the flesh flies she had read about, the ones that were attracted to the scent of decay and laid live larvae that ate animals from the inside out.

Alex texted her, which didn't surprise Nora. She was used to it, the stage of initial infatuation. It never went further than that. Alex told Nora that he'd meet her at the Fremont troll: an eighteen-foot-tall sculpture under the Aurora bridge made of concrete. It was an ugly troll, with a crudely carved face and a silver eye. During the day it was often used as a jungle gym by small kids. She agreed. It wasn't a far drive, and she had nothing else to do to fill her time.

Dusk had fallen over the quiet neighborhood. Nora realized as she stood by the troll, that she and Alex had only ever met at night. Something excited her about that. Night made everything more meaningful, Nora thought. One had to move and talk with purpose. An empty shopping cart sat on its side behind the troll, surrounded by plastic cups, loose papers, and other rotting trash. Nora looked at the troll's carved hand which was twice her size, and the way it clenched around a real, concrete-covered Volkswagen Beetle. She kicked dust with the toe of her shoe and twitched every time the heavy thud of a car passed above her. Nora took a deep breath.

Alex emerged from the gloom. He wore a well-loved, neon-yellow puffer, and walked with his shoulders slouched and head down. When he saw Nora, he grinned. Nora grinned back. She liked his thin lips and flat, blonde hair and dirty jeans and unknowingness. The hug they gave each other was stiff, yet warm. Nora didn't get a chance to smell him. He led her up and around the back of the troll and over its shoulder. Nora held his hand loosely, and it fell out of her grasp. She didn't try to take it back. Alex didn't seem to notice. They both sat down on the top of the troll's hand.

The silence between them wasn't uncomfortable, but it did linger. Nora kicked her feet against the concrete sculpture and looked down the hill, at the illuminated homes below.

I don't have many friends, Alex said.

Me neither, she said back.

Nora was full of jumpy, nervous energy. She looked down at the Volkswagen below the two of them. The ground seemed so far away. Alex didn't talk much that night. He mostly listened. Nora liked that. Alex had a good face for listening. The corners of his mouth naturally turned downward, and his eyes had an inexplicable sadness that Nora had only seen in animals before.

She checked on the bird again, late that night. The flashlight in her hand shook as she made her way up the unstable ladder. The ants were still there. It appeared they were engaged in a kind of dance around the sparrow's body, circling its head in the aluminum baking dish. There were more flesh flies. They kept jumping around different parts of the body, plotting the best place to birth their larvae, Nora supposed. She wished that she had grabbed a paper towel, or a washcloth from the bathroom, to drape over the bird's body. Even though she knew the sparrow couldn't feel a thing, it was cold out and Nora wanted it to be as comfortable as possible, even in death. The temperature dipped below thirty-five degrees. Nora's teeth chattered as the cold bit at her face. Nora said goodnight to the bird. She wanted to touch it, to stroke the spot between its wings. She didn't let herself.

Soon enough, Alex was all Nora thought of. This was her favorite part, the moment she became so preoccupied with the idea of someone else that she forgot entirely about herself. She didn't shower for five days. Her mouth tasted thick and sour. She held her bladder until pain shot in bursts up her back. The only food she ate was tootsie pops from a large bag meant for parties. She had eleven a day, and no water. Nora gnawed at the lollipops with her molars and found joy in the sound when the sugar cracked between her teeth. Her bedroom was dark and damp and safe. Alex

texted, periodically, asking how she was, and how badly he wanted to see her again. Nora texted back things like: Yes! Let's do it! I'm always thinking of you! She let herself fall into fantastic daydreams of the two of them, where they were much older than they actually were, and the endings strange and violent in their ways. At last, once it became Saturday again, Alex sent her an address. Nora showered and brushed her teeth. She paused on her way out the front door, overcome with the feeling that she was forgetting something. But it was probably nothing. People felt that way all the time.

Nora parked her car next to a large gray building on the edge of a boat dock, across the water from Fremont. It was five P.M. and dark. That night, light rain drizzled, slowly filling up cracks and bumps in the pavement with dirty water. The dock was full of small and medium-sized boats: two-seaters and family motor yachts. Their bows gently knocked on the wooden dock and waves slapped hard on their sides. The night was calm. She watched the cars on the 405, their headlights carving paths in the dark as they crossed noiselessly toward north Seattle. Alex was in his same neon-yellow puffer, looking out toward the water with his back to her. There was a hole in the lower left side of his jacket that she hadn't noticed before, where the thin material had frayed and discolored feathers poked through. He turned and grinned.

Sorry for making you meet me here, he said. Alex stepped towards her, his arms spread, asking for a hug. Below his right eye was slightly bruised: yellow and green. She hung back next to her car, hesitant. But then Nora gave in.

She said, don't worry, I'm just glad you wanted to see me. He smelled like old smoke, coals of a fire left out in the rain.

Everyone on the freeway had their brights on. Nora hunched over the steering wheel with her eyes almost closed in concentration, heading north to his dad's house. Rain began to fall harder. It spattered on the windshield, reflecting light. Alex played with the volume dial of her radio and

asked why her car was snot green. She shrugged her shoulders. It's my dad's, she said. I'm just borrowing it for the night. Alex said that the boat dock where she picked him up was where his mother lived with her pedophile boyfriend.

Water sprayed out from under the car. Alex kept turning her volume dial, side to side. She didn't say anything and pressed harder on the gas.

Alex's dad's house was small, blue, and across the street from an honest-looking church in Northgate. A dog barked in the neighbor's yard, white with a smushed-in face. It rattled the chain-linked fence with its wet nose; thick saliva dripped around its chin.

My dad is home, but he won't bother us, Alex said. He opened the gate for her, and with caution made sure it didn't clang back shut. She nodded. It was odd, Nora thought, though people have many reasons to keep quiet. Inside was a living room that led to a squished galley kitchen, which led to a dark hallway. The wood floor was covered in deep scratches. Dust was gathered in corners. A poorly upholstered couch sat in the middle of the room and a potted plant in the corner kept company to the box TV. To the right of the living room was a carpeted staircase and a tall, stained-glass window of a tree. Everything was quiet. Nora found herself holding her breath.

She followed him towards the stairs and then stopped, abruptly. A taxidermy deer head hung above the carpeted stairs, its eyes glassy and distant, staring ahead to a blank, yellow wall. The seams that kept its skin together were coming undone. Both antlers were broken off into sharp nubs. Nora watched Alex descend into the unknown below. I have the whole basement to myself, he called out, his voice muffled. She swayed at the top of the stairs, eyeing the dead animal. She tried to meet the deer's eyes, but it looked past her.

I'm sorry, she said, to the head. The head made no sign that it had heard her. Its nose looked like a dried plum. She walked down the stairs, following the same steps Alex had, and disappeared.

They had sex and it wasn't very good.

That was good, Alex said. Like, really good. His face was red, and he closed his eyes. Nora looked at him for a moment before looking up at the ceiling. She let her eyes unfocus—the room blurred—and then she refocused them on Alex's face.

She said, yeah, that was really good. Really, really good.

Want to take me to Safeway? I'm out of groceries.

The ask slipped out of his mouth casually, as if he had just come across the thought in the moment. She could tell that he hadn't. Nora sat upright on the bed and rubbed her face, up and down. She didn't know the time, but it didn't matter. She didn't want to go home.

Sure, okay, if you want.

I've got to ask my dad for money. Alex looked at her. Come with me.

Upstairs was still silent and dark. Nora kept bumping into corners she didn't recognize. A sliver of light came from the room down the hall and Nora knew it was his dad's.

Stay here, okay? Alex whispered. They stood a few paces from the door. It was hard to read his eyes in the dim light. He looked like a little boy, she thought. She waited. He went behind the door and for a second the hallway flooded with bright, warm light. She saw her arms, her feet, her legs. They felt far away, and not her own. There were low voices, his and his dad's. The bed squeaked; someone heavy shifted their weight. Alex reemerged, his face cast in the same light for a moment. Nora's gaze lingered on his right eye, the one that was bruised. Someone on the other side locked the door with a click. The two of them were silent as their eyes tried to readjust, standing opposite one another in the cramped hallway. Vulnerability was an odd sort of thing, Nora thought. When their eyes did adjust, Alex held out his hand, palm up, a sly smile on his face. She looked down. A fifty-dollar bill, origami-wrapped into a ring. It was folded with great care. He stuck it on his middle finger.

Safeway was crowded. Everyone walked with purpose, chins stuck out and carts moving in a blur. She and Alex stood in the entryway; the automatic sliding doors stuck open, cool air blowing into the store. She stuck her hands deep into her pockets.

Grab a cart, Alex said.

She followed him down the aisles, head foggy from the noise, and tripping over herself every so often from a wonky wheel on the shopping cart. Alex stopped at the bakery clearance rack, eyeing a pack of expired blueberry muffins. He threw them in the cart, and they bounced against the back of it.

He's not a good dad.

He paused at the soup aisle and crouched down to a bottom shelf.

What are you doing? She asked.

The cans on the bottom shelf are only a dollar, he said. Alex scooped his arms around a whole bunch and dropped them into the cart with a loud clang. She flinched, slightly, and stared down at what he blindly picked. Seven beef pot roasts, two corn chowders, and one vegetable.

My favorite soup is minestrone, she said. It's kind of an odd favorite, I guess.

No, he said, not that odd. You just didn't strike me as a minestrone girl. She went quiet. She wondered what minestrone girls were supposed to look like, and if minestrone girls were usually prettier than she was, or smarter, or dumber. Alex paid for the soups and muffins at the register. The check-out girl had long black hair that covered most of her face and a silver charm bracelet that jingled as she moved her wrist. Did minestrone girls have sex with boys when they didn't want to?

The ride home was silent, and Alex went on his phone. Nora listened to the left turn signal as she waited at a red light. She chewed the inside of her cheek until she tasted blood. When she asked Alex what he was going to do with the leftover money, he said he would buy weed with it.

Twenty-five dollars can get you a good quality eighth. Not the best, but good enough. She let him out in front of his dad's house and Alex came around to the driver's side. He motioned for her to roll the window down. She did.

Tonight was fun, Alex said. He shifted the plastic grocery bag to his other shoulder. The cans of soup clanked one another.

Let's do it again, yeah? She nodded and smiled. He kissed her on the lips, to say goodnight, which she found romantic. No other boy had done that before. He didn't need to go out of his way to do it, but he chose to anyway. Nora drove off towards home with no intention of ever seeing him again.

The next morning, she woke up panicked at the thought of the dead sparrow in the treehouse. She had forgotten. It had rained for many days, and now the bird was probably gone. She imagined that the storms had swept the little bird away, and it had fallen somewhere on the earthy, pine-needle-covered floor around the treehouse, never to be seen again. She shoved her feet into some slippers and wrapped a coat around her shoulders. The bird could still be there. The bird could still be where she had left it. The back door squeaked as Nora opened it. She stepped into the backyard. A fine mist had gathered in the thick evergreens, obscuring the distance. She climbed up the slippery pieces of wood to the second floor of the treehouse, carefully so as not to fall.

It looked like soup. The cake tin was still there, filled to the brim with dirty rainwater. She couldn't see the bird. A layer of maggots floated on the surface, their bodies pressed together, swollen, and dead. She grabbed a twig next to the tin and poked through the maggot sheet. At the bottom was what was left of the sparrow. Decayed, feathers thin and colorless, bones translucent, and eyes missing, with its sockets covered with a white, spider-web-like film. None of it was salvageable.

# In Maine

It was July. Everything smelled like heat and wet bark. The family had a week left of their yearly vacation in the cabin. Sylvie sat crisscrossed at the kitchen table, her chin resting on her folded arms, deep in thought. The bowl of candy in front of her was almost empty. A lone Strawberry Bon Bon sat at the bottom, its wrapper open and pink sugar paste seeping out. She wondered if the candy had come from their neighborhood Fourth of July parade, two weeks earlier. Then again, the house used to have bowls of them all around, back when Grandma was alive. That was what her brother Noah had told her, anyhow. It could very well be a Grandma candy. She furrowed her brow. Or maybe not. She could have sworn the old man dressed as Uncle Sam was handing them out. Noah walked into the room, hands in his pockets, looking for something to do.

"Do you think Grandpa misses her?" Sylvie said. Noah stopped. He looked at the strawberry candy, and then thoughtfully up at the ceiling.

"Of course."

Sylvie rocked forward and backward in her chair. Noah reached out instinctively when it began to fall too far back, catching it with his hand and pushing his sister along with the chair upright once more.

"She smelled like softness," he said. Sylvie grabbed the last candy and stuck it in her mouth. It left her fingers sticky. She sucked on it, thinking about the way Grandma may have been. Floorboards creaked above them, the sound of someone's feet moving.

Since Grandma had passed away, Grandpa had become increasingly difficult to talk to. Yeses and no's became humph and hms, and the only complete sentences he put together were riddles, at least Sylvie thought they were. A lot of the time, he didn't make much sense at all. Grandpa was Mom's father, a weathered Jewish man with thick, silver hair who had made his living selling fur coats to luxury stores around New York City. He was five-foot-three and had large, flat feet. Sylvie liked him because he quietly sat while she styled his hair with plastic bands and rainbow mini-claw clips, a cigar in his mouth. They were staying with him at his cabin on the lake, as they always did as a family every summer: Sylvie, Noah, Mom, and Dad.

The lake was quiet and shaped like a kidney. The far left of the water was obscured by a small peninsula of thick balsam firs. The water was deep, so deep that Sylvie was only allowed to go out to her knees, with an adult standing at the shore to watch. Noah, however, could go out by himself. He was thirteen, a responsible teen. The family had two boats: a blue sailboat with a red stripe on the sail and a worn canoe that was decades old. Noah knew how to sail; Dad had taught him on his tenth birthday. Sometimes, Noah would go out all day and only arrive once dinner was hot and on the table, his nose and cheeks tinged red from the sun. Sylvie always complained. She didn't understand why he could go out by himself, and she couldn't. Sure, she was only seven, but she knew her way around the lake. Sylvie understood her limits, the depth in which she could go so her chin grazed the surface of the water and her toes were still firmly planted on the lake's muddy floor. Mom wouldn't have it. She'd stand there, in the kitchen, hands on her hips. Sylvie hated the word no, especially when Mom said it. And Sylvie didn't even need to wait for Mom to say it. She

already knew the answer, every time a question was asked. Sylvie had quickly learned that in her family, being young was generally synonymous with being left out.

She watched a group of boys play in the water. They were throwing a football back and forth to one another, diving under the lake's surface when it slipped through one of their hands. They were much older than Noah, probably sixteen, and were very loud. Grandpa sat a ways up the shore, listening to his portable radio—men speaking in static voices about sports and such—and smoking a cigar. Sylvie lay on the wet sand at the edge of the lake. There were baby fish in the water, each the size of her fingernail and bright silver. She dug holes in the sand, letting the water pool into them along with the fish. She liked to watch the way the fish's fins flapped this way and that in her open palms. Their bodies sparkled in the sun.

"Put those down," said Noah. He magically appeared from the water, dragging a neon pool floaty behind him. It left a shallow trail in the sand. He pushed his hair up from his forehead. It looked like seaweed. Sylvie decided not to listen. She kept playing with the fish, letting them swim out of her grasp and then blocking their escape and grabbing them with her hands, over and over again.

Noah splashed Sylvie on the back of her head. Lake water dribbled down her forehead into her eyes. She screamed, which was so loud that birds took flight from the trees next to the cabin, and dropped the baby fish. They shot through the shallow water like silver bullets and disappeared into the depths of the lake. Sylvie's eyes welled with tears. She looked over at Grandpa. He was looking past her, at the lake.

"Noah is being *mean*," she said, and Grandpa's eyes traveled to her. Noah tried to walk away, so Sylvie grabbed one of his ankles. He shook her off, tripping over himself slightly, and gave her a quick kick in the side. Grandpa frowned and took a puff of his cigar. Sylvie made a noise of indignation.

Inside, she found Noah in the cool and dim unfinished basement, building Legos. He was still in his bathing suit. She stood in the doorway, by the stairs. He was stomach down on an old beach towel, a large bin of vintage bricks and half-built sets next to him. They had been Mom's when she was their age. Noah was moving his lips, but Sylvie couldn't hear what he was saying. He was focused on the red car in his hands, his fingers running over the shiny bricks. Sylvie sat down next to him and started to shuffle through the bin.

"Can you take me on the boat tomorrow? It gets lonely on the shore."

"You've got sand on your feet," Noah said, "Mom'll hate that." Sylvie looked down. Dried sand clung to her ankles, the tops of her feet, in between her toes. Behind her, she noticed, there was a light trail of it that she had accidentally brought in. She forgot to wipe her feet before following Noah inside.

Sylvie picked up a cowboy Minifigure and walked it over to where Noah was building.

"No," he said, pulling the Lego car away from Sylvie's Minifigure. "I don't want to play like that right now."

That night, Sylvie woke in her twin bed, sheets stuck to her skin with sweat. She could see only the faint outline of the edge of her bed, Noah's side, and the dark black hole that was the closet. A clock ticked beside her. Sylvie lifted her chin and tried to push herself up. She wiped sleep from her eyes. A blue light was shining through the window, a single beam that made a large circle on the wall above her brother's bed.

Sylvie called out Noah's name. Nothing from the other side of the room. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she could make out more of her brother, lying in the other twin bed beside hers, flat on his stomach and his face in a pillow. The blue light pulsed on. She said his name again. He stirred.

"Noah!" This time, Sylvie was louder than she expected, but it woke him up, so she didn't care all that much. Noah lifted his head, and she could see his eyes, two shiny gray blobs in the darkness.

"There's a light out there," Sylvie said, "It's *blue*." She tried to emphasize the word so her brother could understand what she was trying to say without her having to say it. She worried that if she did say it, alone with only her brother in the dark room, her deep-seated fear would come true. Sylvie asked what time it was. Noah lifted his left arm, where he was still wearing his glow-in-the-dark Velcro watch.

"Three thirty-two A.M."

Sylvie wailed. Noah shushed her.

"It's probably a neighbor. Everything's okay." Noah got out of bed and walked over to the window. Sylvie wiped her tears with the back of her hand, lowering herself into the bed as far as she could go. Her brother's face was cast in the blue light. He opened the window and cool night air blew into the hot room. Noah stuck his head out. Sylvie watched him, hesitant, as he scanned outside.

"There's nothing. No saucers," he said. Noah walked over to where Sylvie lay and tucked her back into bed. She let him pull the blanket up to her chin, and smooth down the duvet. The sheets were wet against her chest with snot. Noah made his way back to his bed, then the room fell silent once more. Sylvie listened for anything, a footstep, a tap in the wall, the rustling of a bush. Nothing. She fell back asleep, somewhere between four and five.

The sailboat could only seat two people comfortably, but because Sylvie was so small, she sat on Dad's lap as Noah steered the tiller. The sky was remarkably blue and the fir and oak trees along the edge of the lake shimmered with light. Sylvie bounced on Dad's knee, periodically brushing hair off her face from the wind. Most of the time, the three of them just sat in the middle of the lake, hot

air collecting around their skin. They watched families of dragonflies skim the top of the water and listened to the loud hum of cicadas on the lakeside. Sylvie watched her brother's face scrunched in thought as he stared out at the beyond. She leaned over the edge of the boat, placing her hand softly under the water's surface. The water was dark, but sometimes when the sun hit it right, it turned emerald. A dragonfly bobbed around her arm; its wings blurred. Sylvie asked what was at the bottom of the lake. Noah shrugged his shoulders and watched her hand in the water.

"Sludge," Dad said, "Seaweed, fish, dead plants."

"Dead plants?" Sylvie said, "Dead things?"

"Treasure," Noah said. Sylvie didn't listen to him. She was too preoccupied with the thought of all the dead things below her. She stared down at her hand in the water. She stopped moving it, and let it float alongside the boat. Under the water, it looked puffy, off, like Sylvie viewed it through a thick piece of colored glass. She removed her hand from the water at once.

Sylvie met Noah's eyes. They were a bright brown in the sun.

"Dead people?" said Sylvie. She began to give tiny breaths, her chest moving up and down like an injured bird. Noah opened his mouth, but Dad stopped him.

"It's time to go back in," said Dad. The boat wobbled.

Noah mumbled something to himself that Sylvie couldn't hear, but Dad heard the comment and raised his voice. His tone hurt Sylvie's ears. Dad grabbed her from the edge of the boat and placed her back on his knee. Noah sat, unmoving for a moment, before turning the boat around and heading back to shore.

It was Wednesday. Grandpa offered to take Noah and Sylvie to the birdwatcher's store on Main Street. Grandpa drove his SUV which smelled like stale smoke. The floor of the car was sprinkled with sand, accidentally brought in from the shore. The hot leather seats burned because they had been baking in full sun all morning. Grandpa rolled down the windows. The breeze cooled

off their hot faces. It was like taking a sip of ice water. The birdwatcher's store was owned by an old man named Todd who had a limp. He and Grandpa were friends. They talked about old man things as Noah and Sylvie went around the store, touching everything they could.

The store was crowded with everything related to birds. There was the kids' section that Noah and Sylvie quickly looked over: parrot hand puppets, bird-related bedtime stories, and a child's guide to birdwatching manual. There were the expensive tchotchkes for gift-giving: silver robin earrings, glass bookmarks, heavy gold pens with crows engraved on their side. Then there was apparel towards the left corner of the store: bird t-shirts, bird underwear, bird hats.

At the back, next to the anti-squirrel birdfeeders that violently spun when weight was applied to them, were large barrels of feed. Sylvie loved sifting her hands through all the different kinds. There were the safflower seeds, little white kernels that almost looked like dried corn. There was a mix of little black seeds and round red seeds. There were also dried mealworms. Sylvie loved the dried mealworms. After touching them, her hands were covered in a fine powder that smelled like peanuts.

She called Noah over. He looked down at the dried worms in her hands and made a face.

"There's live ones over there," he said, pointing to a plastic tub on a stool. Sylvie ran over to the tub. It was about three inches full of wriggling mealworms. They were slightly lighter in color than the dried mealworms and juicer. When Sylvie scooped her hand into the tub, they didn't react at all. They continued to twist and turn over one another.

Though unable to go out on the water by herself, Sylvie was allowed to explore the land surrounding the cabin if Noah accompanied her. Sylvie loved these outings. She often pretended that she and her brother were lost somewhere in the wilderness, their parents had left them—they had died—and now they had to fend for themselves. Sylvie collected small red berries in her pockets and made mud pies for dinner. Smashed, the berries made a thick, pink paste. She called it frosting.

Noah sharpened twigs with a dull army knife to protect them from the beasts that wandered. The ground was covered in a thick layer of fallen leaves and pine needles. Sylvie smiled as she watched him work, his legs crisscrossed on the forest floor, a pile of sharpened sticks beside him. Leaves stuck in Sylvie's hair. Birds twittered above them, talking to one another. She looked up and watched them as they flew from one branch to the next. It was effortless, the way their wings moved through the air.

"Do you think it's possible?"

Noah looked up at the birds, thinking, and then back down at the stick in his hands.

"I suppose so, if you really believed."

Sylvie began to run in circles. She spread her arms out on either side of her and gained speed. She closed her eyes and let the feeling of gravity take hold. Noah laughed but stayed in his spot on the forest floor.

She pulled at his arm. Noah dropped his knife and stick after his little sister's adamance. He shook his head but stood up next to her anyway. He ran around his little sister, replicating her speed and imagination. The two of them jumped over broken logs and rocks. The wind blew past Sylvie's face with such force that when she closed her eyes, Sylvie could fool herself into believing they were truly in the air, far above the trees.

Thursday night, they had baked mac and cheese for dinner, a favorite of both Sylvie and Noah. The family only ate it at Grandpa's cabin; it tasted better that way. Something was always missing when Mom replicated the recipe back at home. The sand in the hair and burnt shoulders, maybe. Large slices of tomato were cooked on top of the dish. Sylvie picked at the breadcrumb topping and stuck a finger in her mouth. The kitchen was nautical themed; the tablecloth was checkered white and navy as well as the curtains and floormat. Shells were inlaid in the backsplash behind the stove and kitschy signs hung on the walls—lobsters sitting at the dinner table with

napkins tucked into the front of their shells and a starfish with a large smile saying, "Let's Eat!" Mom reminded Sylvie to put her napkin on her lap as she served large portions onto everyone's plate. Sylvie unfolded her napkin and peered over to Noah's lap, where his napkin sat. She copied his placement.

The mac and cheese stuck to the roof of Sylvie's mouth as she tried to chew it. Grandpa and Dad talked about fishing, a topic Sylvie always tuned out because she didn't understand most of the words they used when referring to tools and actions.

"Bring Noah next time," said Mom.

"Me too," Sylvie said, chewing loudly. She stuck a cheesy finger in her mouth. Noah told her there wasn't any room for her to join. Sylvie scrunched her eyebrows and frowned. The conversation went on. Sylvie couldn't bear to listen anymore about the fun Noah would have without her on the boat. She hated that she was so young. When Noah began to act particularly excited about the idea of fishing, Sylvie shoved him, hard. A large red splotch appeared on his arm.

She felt her cheeks getting hot. She looked at Mom, then Dad, then Grandpa.

"Sylvie…" Mom said. Sylvie made a loud, upset noise, and got up from the table. She purposely dragged her chair out with a long screech and left it, feet away from where it had been tucked in. Everyone stayed seated. Sylvie went to the basement. She sat on the cool floor with her back against the wall, trying to breathe. She would wait for someone to come down and check if she was okay. No one did. Minutes passed. Sylvie thought of the large scoop of mac and cheese she left on her plate and of Noah, who probably didn't deserve the punch in the arm. Eventually, she heard someone's footsteps coming down to the basement. It was Noah.

"I don't want you to be mad at me," Sylvie said.

"I'm not," said Noah. Sylvie looked away. She felt awful about ruining dinner, but even more awful about hurting her brother. She played with the fraying edge of the rug. He showed her his arm. It wasn't red anymore. "Look," he said, "Like nothing ever happened."

It was Friday. Noah and Sylvie sat by the lake. They were on their cabin's private dock and let their feet hang off the edge into the water below. Noah had a book on his lap, its spine cracked, and its pages worn. Sylvie was already a fast reader but she much preferred it when her brother read to her. He always put on the right voices—the perfect pitch for all the characters—and the cadence in which he read was slow enough to let Sylvie develop the imaginary world in front of her eyes. She lay on a beach towel, her eyes closed and face hot from the sun overhead. Noah's voice cut through the lake's sound of the slow-moving water. Birds rustled in the trees nearby.

Periodically, he stopped to catch a breath after reading a long-winding paragraph. Noah took a sip of water. Sylvie took a deep breath. Her brother was in front of the sun, and the light framed his head in a perfect halo.

It was the end of the last day before the family left the cabin for the long drive home. It had been a successful day, in Sylvie's opinion. She had lounged on the shore of the lake for hours, playing with fish and finding rocks that looked like gems. Sylvie and Noah had played in the water, Dad watching from a lawn chair on the shore. Then Noah decided to take the boat out by himself, so she followed Dad back into the house to take a bath and rest.

After the bath, she walked towards the stairs that led to the living room, the bottoms of her feet still damp and sticking slightly to the floor. From her position, she was able to see the entire downstairs, though no one was able to see her. There was a man at the bottom of the stairs, one who she hadn't ever seen before.

At first, Sylvie thought it was Noah, but this man was taller, and older too. He wore an ironed navy collared shirt and matching pants. Something hung from the side of his hip, though

Sylvie wasn't sure what. He had a deep voice that stung. The man was talking about something. The lake. Yes, he mentioned the lake. He said they had searched the lake. Sylvie wondered why the lake needed to be searched. It seemed like too much water to go through. She thought of when Noah said treasure was at the bottom of the lake. Gleaming, gold coins flashed in Sylvie's mind. Maybe that was what this mysterious man had been searching for. Then the man said he was sorry. Did he not find the treasure? That must be why he looked so sad. Sylvie searched for Noah. He wasn't on the couch with Mom and Dad, or by the door where Grandpa stood. Mom had been crying. Sylvie could always tell when adults had been crying. She stepped down the final steps and into view. Sylvie stared at the odd man in front of her. He had squinty eyes and made a sound of surprise at the appearance of her.

"You must be Sylvie," said the man. Sylvie couldn't read his tone. He knelt in front of her and held out his hand for her to shake. On his chest was a silver, glinting badge. Mom put her hands on Sylvie's shoulders.

Sylvie did not take his hand. She looked up at Mom, whose lip trembled. Suddenly, something felt out of place. Shoes crunched against the gravel outside, and then more men were in the house, all dressed in the same outfit as the one who still knelt in front of her. Sylvie was then steered out the door by Mom, towards Grandpa who stood with a hand outstretched for Sylvie to take. She wouldn't take it. Mom said they needed to figure some things out with the men. Sylvie would have to sit outside with Grandpa. Sylvie began to protest.

"Where's Noah?!" she said.

Outside, Sylvie faced the wall. She wouldn't look at Grandpa. She wanted to go back in, to hear what the men and her parents were talking about. She wanted to talk to her brother. Sylvie asked Grandpa if Noah was still out on the lake.

"He's gone on a trip," Grandpa said.

"Without us?" said Sylvie, "without me?"

Grandpa sighed. His eyes were shiny.

Sylvie pushed past him and ran toward the door. She needed answers. Through the glass, she saw her parents talking to the men in navy, their arms crossed and heads bowed. The door banged against the side of the house when she opened it.

"I want to go too," said Sylvie. She got onto her hands and knees and grabbed her shoes in the entryway. They were her favorite light-up sneakers. She swept them to her chest. She grabbed her pink flip-flops too, and her rain jacket from the hall tree hook. Sylvie didn't pay any attention to the adults that began to surround her. She would need a jacket if she were to join her brother, in case of a late summer thunderstorm. Noah's rain jacket still hung on the hook next to hers, which Sylvie found strange. She grabbed it too. He must've not thought through the possibilities of the trip as much as she had.

A pair of arms grabbed her and lifted her into the air. She was against Mom's chest. Sylvie clutched the jackets up to her chin as if they were a blanket on her bed. Her shoes clattered to the floor. Mom put a hand on her back. Sylvie tried to focus on her mom's heart, which was as erratic as her own.

Once alone in the bedroom that night, Sylvie became more aware of Noah's side than ever. The room seemed larger, the closet seemed darker, and everything was much quieter without the soft sound of his breathing. She tossed around, trying to find a comfortable position. Sylvie opened her eyes. The blue light was shining through the window. She felt something in her stomach. She needed to go to it. She quietly got out of bed and pulled the blankets over her pillow as if she were still tucked in—just in case. The old house creaked as she moved through its rooms and hallways, gliding without ever bumping into a corner or wall. She got to the bottom of the stairs, and then to the sliding glass door that led out to the shore. There was the blue light! The spotlight shined over

the whole lake now, lighting it up with brilliant, neon light. Sylvie's hands went to the lock. He was somewhere out there. She would just need to borrow the old canoe, the one she and Noah weren't allowed to touch. But it couldn't be that hard to do. She had watched Dad go out on it many times before.

Sylvie slid through the open door, her nightdress blowing. Sand stuck on the soles of her feet and in between her toes. She couldn't take her eyes off the light. It seemed to be getting brighter and brighter as she moved over to the old canoe that sat flipped upside down in the sand. She wasn't even scared of the light anymore. Sylvie would find her brother. Maybe he had taken the sailboat out and had gotten caught in the thick algae and old logs by the opposite shore. Sylvie would go to him and bring him home. The first thing Sylvie would say to him, she thought to herself as she crouched down next to the canoe, was that she loved him, so very much.

But the canoe did not budge. She tried with all her strength to flip it over, digging her feet deep into the sand and pushing her fingers underneath the wooden sides of the boat until they ached. Deep and angry grooves were pressed into the fine skin of her palms. Sylvie began to cry. She could not lift it. She looked up at the lake and the blue light. It was beautiful. Sylvie climbed on top of the canoe and sat, overwhelmed. Fine, she would wait. She was okay with waiting. A family of loons passed over the lake, their bodies silhouetted against the beam of light. Their calls reverberated around the lake. Sylvie would wait for her brother to return.

# Birdy

Mom found him under a bush in our backyard. I wish we had left him there. He was wet; it had rained the night before, and like the grass, his shiny black body was damp and covered in beads of water. He had awkward, twig-like legs. His beak was black and razor-sharp. Mom thought his wing was broken, so that's why she brought him in. It turned out his feathers were just stuck up in an odd position.

It had always just been me and Mom so when she brought him in, I was angry. She said: Here's your new brother! And lifted him over her head. He pecked at her hands. Mom turned on ABBA and danced around the kitchen with him under her arm. The floorboards creaked. He cooed. I stood in the doorway, hands on my hips and my mouth in a downward U. I felt the tears beginning to well in the corners of my eyes. But it was not the time to cry. We were supposed to be celebrating our new family member. I squeezed my eyes shut and let the tears seep back into wherever they came from. Mom smoothed a feather down on the top of my new brother's head and made a *shhhhhhh* sound of love. He closed his eyes and snuggled into her arm. I hung back, unsure where I fit in. Usually, it's only Mom and me dancing to ABBA. But not anymore. Mom said: Sweetie, pull out your trundle and make it up for Birdy. Sweetie, light a candle in your room so it smells like vanilla and lavender. Sweetie, turn on the heating pad and put it under his sheet so he's nice and

toasty when I tuck him in. But not too hot, please. Sweetie, you and Birdy will be best friends forever.

I did as I was told. I made the trundle and even used my favorite sheets for him: the ones with little blue stars that felt soft on my cheeks. I lit the candle by my window. I turned on the heated blanket and put it on the low setting so Birdy wouldn't get burned. My sunflower-yellow room filled with heavy, perfumed smoke. Mom and I had picked the color out on my ninth birthday, a month before the arrival of Birdy. A plastic chandelier hung from the ceiling—an estate sale find of Mom's. Birdy! Mom! I called for them, up the stairs. Mom appeared at the top of them, with Birdy in her arms bundled in an old, raggedy towel. Only his little round head poked out of the burrito. He cocked his head to the right. Mom said: did you do everything I told you to do? Yes, I said. The room is ready for Birdy. I even dimmed the lights.

Once Birdy had his well-deserved nap, it was time to get to know my new brother. I decided to play with him because normal kids do that with their siblings. I pulled out my bin of plastic dolls from the closet. They were off-brand Barbies with large, round foreheads, black eyes, and narrow hips. I had two girls and a boy. There were many outfits to go along with them: business casual tweed suits for the office, slinky silver night-out clothes with an added-on fedora for the boy, and stretchy floral-patterned swimwear. Birdy pecked at the fake-ken doll's face and poked a hole in one of its eyes.

Birdy, you're supposed to hold up the doll by its waist and walk it around like this, I said. I moved around my own doll on the carpet floor, to show him. She teetered this way and that, her plastic legs stiff without joints.

Brrrreeep, said Birdy. He shuffled his wings.

Oh, I said, I see. You don't have arms or hands. I forgot.

The next day we went to three different doctors. Mom said this was an important thing to do since Birdy was performing well below the average social, cognitive, and physical levels of a young child. First was the pediatric doctor, Doctor Dupont, who was a very short, wrinkly old woman with cold hands and a face fixed in an expression of surprise. She told us Birdy was probably a month old, but she wasn't a bird specialist so she couldn't be sure. Doctor Dupont said we'd better go to someone who knows things about birds because all her patients are human. Her eyes were very wide when she said this, and I think I saw a bug fly into one. Mom did not like this comment but kept her mouth shut. Birdy got six shots and they took his blood, but the princess band-aids wouldn't stick to his feathers and kept falling on to the office floor. Dr. Dupont grumbled, loudly. After reapplying them for the tenth time, she finally gave up and threw the pile of used Band-Aids into the receptacle. Silly people, she said, thinking a bird is a child. Mom threatened to ruin Doctor Dupont's career. She said: how dare you? Birdy is no different than any other child you treat! I sat on the chair in the corner of the room, kicking my feet. I was already bored.

Next, we went to Birdy's new speech therapist. She was tall and sort of ill-looking and wore a silk headscarf with a lion on it. Her name was Ms. Clark. I asked if she liked lions, but she ignored me. Instead, she tried to forcibly open Birdy's mouth. She pinched two fingers on the top of his beak and two on the bottom. I wanted to tell her how exceptionally sharp his beak was, but Ms. Clark seemed like the type of lady who didn't take no for an answer. A popsicle stick lay on the table. We will have your son speaking in no time, she said to Mom. Mom smiled politely.

I use a reward system, said Ms. Clark, Children respond to it well. She grabbed a large container of gummy bears from under the table and pulled out a handful of them. Birdy flapped his wings.

I'll hold up a card with a letter on it. For Birdy to receive a gummy bear, he needs to make the sound of the letter.

That sounds easy enough, said Mom.

Ms. Clark held up a small white card with the letter R on it in front of Birdy's face. She smiled expectantly. He blinked his eyes.

Birdy, can you say Rrrr? Ms. Clark said. He cocked his head.

Rrrrr, she said, again. Mom looked at Birdy, waiting. Ms. Clark frowned. I sighed. Birdy stayed absolutely silent. I thought about how wonderful and sweet a gummy bear would be. I could almost taste it in my mouth.

Well, there is definitely room for improvement, Ms. Clark finally said. Ms. Clark was getting on my nerves at this point. Mostly because she and Mom were completely ignoring me, but also because I was craving a gummy bear.

I can make the sound! I said, standing up. Both Mom and Ms. Clark turned to me.

Well of course you can make that sound, Mom said. You're in the third grade.

I want a gummy bear. Ms. Clark shook her head.

No, she said. This appointment is not for you.

Mom said: Sweetie, we have some chocolate at home, I'll give you a piece later.

After the failed appointment with Ms. Clark, we went to see Birdy's new physical therapist. I had told Mom about the attempted play time Birdy and I had together, and how his wings stopped him from being a normal boy. Soon after, she booked an appointment with Brad, a physical therapist who was very large and muscular. His head was shaved and looked like a thumb. Brad gave Birdy some exercises to strengthen his wings. Birdy did not like the exercises. He screamed very loudly when Brad lifted his wings above his head. He also screamed when Brad tried to bend his wing in half. I covered my ears. Mom felt so awful about the ordeal that she bought vanilla soft serve for us after the appointment. I licked mine hungrily. Birdy didn't touch his, so I ate it too.

On Monday, school started back up. I was in Ms. Woods' third-grade class, and Birdy started as a new student, in Mrs. Heinowitz's kindergarten class. I had Mrs. Heinowitz for kindergarten too, so in the back of the minivan on our way to school, I told Birdy all the fun facts I knew about her and not to worry. He didn't say anything because he was nervous. I could tell. Mom was humming ABBA to herself.

In the classroom during recess, Ms. Woods left the room. A group of girls came up to my desk and peered down at me. I smiled. They smiled back. One with two long braids spoke.

Aren't you that girl with the weird brother?

I don't know what you mean, I said.

Yeah, another one of the girls said. She had blonde hair and bangs and a large nose. He's strange. A bird.

He's a crow, I said.

He's slow, the girl with the braids said. He's stupid.

No, he's not! I said. I don't know why I stood up for Birdy. I wasn't really. I just wanted these girls to think I was cool. I didn't want them to think I was stupid like him. The girls laughed at me, and I hung my head so low that my nose rested on the desk. I didn't want them to see me cry. Ms. Woods walked back in. The girls dispersed as if nothing had happened at all. Ms. Woods didn't come over to check that I was okay, and once I lifted my head back up there was a large pool of snot in front of me.

One night, I found Mom sitting alone in the kitchen. Birdy had gone to bed. She looked tired, with heavy bags under her eyes. I sat down next to her. Mom and I hadn't had a lot of time alone since the adoption of Birdy. She stared ahead. I knew that taking on a new child was hard on her. Mom gave herself up endlessly. This was always something I looked up to her for, but now, as

we sat at the table across from one another, I felt something different. A bad taste in my mouth. I wanted to reach for her hand. I wanted to hug her and have her tell me that she loved me.

How are you? I said.

Tired, Sweetie, she said.

I can watch Birdy tomorrow if you want to do something for yourself. She stared at me for a long time. Then she sighed.

Oh, Sweetie, she said. I know you mean well.

January turned into February which turned into March. The girls at school still taunted me because Birdy had not improved very much with his social, cognitive, and physical skills. He could, however, say something that sounded like my name. Shweeeeee! He yelled, high-pitched, as he flew around the living room. Schweeeee! Mom told him to get down. Normal boys don't fly, they walk, she said. He landed on her shoulder and kissed her on the cheek. Meep, he said. Mom said: oh my god, he just said my name. Her eyes filled with tears. I rolled my eyes and sunk into the couch. Mom? I said. She told me to be quiet and smoothed down the feathers on Birdy's head. My throat closed up, and I didn't say anything else after that.

I spent most of my free time searching things up on Mom's laptop while she was out with Birdy at his many appointments. She left me alone by myself, which I didn't mind most of the time. Sometimes though, the sudden passing of a car on the street made my heart stop. Or just the silence itself was enough to give me goosebumps. Mom left me her pepper spray—just in case. I sat at the kitchen counter, eating raspberries, and typing away. The pepper spray sat next to my hand. I searched: *can birds become your siblings?* And: *lifespan of a crow*. Birdy was supposed to live up to eight years. That's not so bad, I thought to myself. But then I took the thought back. I was an awful sister. My mouth tasted bad again. I should love my brother. But I missed how things were when it was

just me and Mom, and when the girls at school were nice to me. Since Birdy joined the family, I felt a lot heavier than usual. When I walked, it felt like I was carrying ten backpacks, forty pounds each.

After spending an hour on the computer, I got bored. There was only so much one could learn about crows. I wandered into Mom's room, the only bedroom upstairs. The walls were off-white. Large, delicate flowers and vines were painted along them in a happy blue. She had painted them herself. I traced my fingers along them, remembering a time when mom still felt like mine. I was her real daughter. I had her red cheeks and pointed nose and detached earlobes. We both shared a love for rice pudding and metal slides.

By her bedside table were stacks of books, balls of tissues, uncapped pens, loose change, and a card I made her in kindergarten with a crude smiley face that read: I LOVE YOU, MY MOMMY! All the books were on birds. I grabbed one from the top of the stack and opened it to a random page with a photograph of a group of crows sitting on a telephone wire. The pages were thick and glossy, and the photograph itself was sullen. Underneath was a line that read: A group of crows is called a murder. I felt like I was doing something I shouldn't be doing. I carefully closed the book shut and put it back on her bedside table. I made sure to place it off kilter, exactly how I had found it.

When Mom and Birdy got home, she asked me to run the bath for him. I didn't say anything about the snooping. The water had to be not too cold and not too hot. I stuck a finger under the stream to check. I poured in bubble bath soap and Birdy's essential oils that were supposed to remove toxins from his skin. I lit a few candles. Bath times were stressful for Birdy because of the noise and water, so we tried to make the surroundings as peaceful as possible. Mom always was the one who held Birdy in the water, even though I had asked many times if I could try.

I straightened the bathmat on the floor and waited on the closed toilet seat until they both came in. Only Birdy appeared in the doorway, cocking his head to one side.

Shweeee? He said.

Hi Birdy.

Schweee? He said, again. We stared at one another. I tried to figure out what he was trying to convey. He ruffled his feathers. At last, I made the responsible decision that because Birdy attempted to say my name twice in a row, he wanted me to bathe him instead of Mom. I picked him up and he flapped his wings a few times, to signal he was happy with the turn of events. I smiled and walked him over to the tub. His wings began to move frantically as I lowered him in; the water sloshed up the sides and spilled onto the ground. It's okay, I said, trying to calm him down. I became strangely aware of my power as I held him in the water, his wings batting against my hands. Birdy was much more delicate than I had realized. Without feathers, his body was no bigger than the torso of one of my plastic dolls, and compared to plastic, his body was malleable and soft. I could feel his bones, like toothpicks, that sat right under the skin.

I'm not sure what overcame me. Maybe it was the girls at school. Or maybe it was the image I had of Mom and I, before Birdy, holding hands and being so in love. I plunged Birdy completely under the water. His wings beat against my hands so hard that I knew they would be scratched and bloody. I didn't care. I wished him dead. Gone. Away from here, back to the outdoors. I closed my eyes tight. Water splashed up my arms and onto my front and down the sides of the tub. Shut up! I yelled. His wings beat harder. Mom burst into the bathroom and said: STOP! so loudly that I let go of Birdy, who was still alive, somehow. He shot into the air and bounced off the ceiling. Water and foam sprayed down onto both Mom and me. I began to sob. Mom didn't say anything. If she did, I couldn't hear her over the noises I was making. She grabbed Birdy and wrapped a towel tightly around his body. They left the room. I closed the door with my foot and continued to cry.

I sat on the bathroom floor for a long time. My back was against the base of the tub, my knees tucked under my chin. The white tile floor was hard and slippery underneath me. The sun set,

and then the room was dark. I let my mind slip between every bad thing I had ever done. The time I wet the bed, the time I broke Mom's favorite necklace, and everything and anything to do with Birdy. The water on the front of my shirt dried in a dark oval shape. Mom was moving in the kitchen; pans clanged together. I assumed she was making dinner for her and Birdy. And then there was a knock at the door once some more time passed. I ignored it. My eyes got heavy. I thought about the water and Birdy's little body. I could run away. Then things would be better for everyone. Mom didn't want me here anymore. Birdy was a much better child than me—needy, quiet, and special. There was another knock, a peck. I ignored it. I felt tears and then they dried and then I felt some more. There was another knock, and the door creaked open.

It was Birdy. I couldn't read the emotion in his little black eyes. His feathers were dry and shiny. I sniffled. I told him to go. He didn't need to see me like this. Birdy hopped onto my shoulder and pecked at my hair. It hurt a bit, but it seemed to bring him joy, so I let him. After a while, I started to like it as well. There was comfort in the repetition. Then he stopped and began to coo. His call sounded as if something were stuck in the back of his throat. Almost as if he were crying. But I wouldn't know. He wouldn't be able to tell me if he was. I closed my eyes and focused on the feeling of his claws digging slightly into my shoulder and the way his wings sometimes brushed the side of my cheek when they fluttered.

# Sisters

They are twenty-two and nineteen years old and still sleep in the same bed when they visit home. Home is a small house, on a hill, with a grassy backyard. The trees are thick and reach far up into the sky. There are frogs in the pond—at the front of the house—because it is late spring and that is where they gather to mate. Algae and dead leaves hide them, so they only look like slippery rocks. Sometimes, the coyotes around the property play a game: who can steal the most frogs from the pond without ever getting caught? The sisters' mom and dad are older now. They are content, the sisters think. The second step to the bottom of the stairs still creaks. Home is feeling further away, whatever that means.

"I can smell something," the older sister, Grace, says.

"Go back to bed," says her little sister, Ella. It is summer break. A few days before, Grace and Ella flew in from their colleges that are so far away. The bedroom is dark. Grace spots a pillow on the ground, kicked off the bed from an uneasy sleep. Used cups clutter Ella's desk. Paintbrushes lie next to broken watercolors. Grace can hear frogs croaking outside the window. The analog clock on the bedside table reads a time early in the morning, between three and four. She realizes it is officially their brother's birthday. She wants to say something out loud but does not know what. Instead, she takes a moment to imagine what he may be doing. Sleeping, she hopes. Then Grace remembers that there is a smell. Something is wrong.

"There's a fire," Grace says, and then again, "I smell something burning." The sheets are damp from her sweat. Her words are urgent. Grace knows Ella cannot stand it when she does this. It happens like clockwork: the waking up, the smell, the hushed voice, the fear. This time though, Grace is sincere. This time, it is real. She swears it. The two dark closets in the bedroom hold strange shapes that were folded clothes in the daytime, but now are the faces of people Grace does not know. When she lies in one position for too long, her body forgets its place in space, forgets about the bed, the floor, the room, the house…

Ella is unmoving. Sometimes, Grace wishes her sister was a little louder, a little more open, and a little more understanding. No, maybe not, because then she wouldn't be Ella.

Ella mumbles in annoyance but sits up. Her posture is stiff, eyes still closed.

"Fine," she says, "I believe you."

Outside, the grass is damp. Wet dirt sticks to the soles of their feet in large clumps, like shit. Frogs croak on. Grace walks to the edge of the property line where the itchy grass meets the trees and looks back at the top of the house. There is no smoke. There is no breaking of glass. No siren to indicate an emergency. The chimney quietly sits at the top of the house. Grace feels her chest falling into itself.

"I told you," Ella says. She touches Grace's shoulder. Grace moves away. Wind blows without care. Grace knows it takes Ella a long time to fall asleep. If they go in now, then Ella may only be able to steal a few hours of peace before the sun begins to rise. Grace does not care about her sister's sleep. All she can think about is what she believes in and how now, she does not know what that is. She continues to stare at the roof and then raises her gaze to the sky, which is navy and complex. A satellite blinks at them from above.

"I smelled something burning," Grace says, again. Her mouth is dry. She doesn't like to be wrong. She's embarrassed herself, even though it is only the two of them standing there in the

privacy of night. Still, she feels bad, as if she has done something unforgivable. She wonders if her sister knows it is now their brother's birthday.

Ella says, "I know you did, but now we've checked."

The first time this happened was when Grace was twelve and Ella, ten. The absence of their brother sat like a crater in the middle of the house. All four of the family members, Grace, Ella, and their parents, skirted around it in their own ways: the idea of him, the memories, the simple sadness of it all.

Five nights had passed since their brother was taken. Grace grew accustomed to sleeping with the lamp by her bed on, covered by an old towel. She wanted to find the right balance of light in her room, not too bright to not fall asleep, and not too dark to be unable to make out every object in the room. The room next to hers, which belonged to her older brother, was silent for the first time since she could remember. It felt wrong, the silence, since for so long she listened to him move around his room through the thin walls, late into the night when no one else was awake but the two of them. It was a shared intimacy she never told anyone about. She would listen to him move furniture and exercise, and things would make loud noises—only loud enough for the two of them to hear—and he would swear which felt like taking a bite out of flesh. Most nights Grace cried as she tried to sleep because she missed the way things used to be, or the way she believed they might have been.

But he was gone now, for five nights, which meant five nights of silence and five nights where Grace was unable to sleep. She sat upright in bed, listening. Waiting. She noticed the way her chest moved up and down and the strange way in which movement and time stood still in silence. Her room was full of odds and ends. A bin of yarn, new and old books, calligraphy pens, plastic bags kept inside of plastic bags, sticks of graphite next to thick, dimpled drawing paper, rusted over

jewelry, a plastic handheld mirror, and at least ten old and still wrapped lollipops. Ella slept down the hallway, disconnected from the wing of the house that Grace and their brother shared. Grace wondered if Ella was still awake. No, most likely not. Ella's childhood was still intact, unlike hers, which sat fragmented in all the objects around her room. Pipes creaked in the wall beside her. A car rushed down the street, its engine a low grumble. Grace was about to give up on her senses and try to sleep once more, but then she smelled it.

At first, it was distant, as if the window of her bedroom had been accidentally left open and the neighbors had lit a fire in their backyard. It could have been the portable heater, which burned in the corner, dry heat circulating in her basement bedroom. Or a phantom scent, something the brain makes up that dissolves as soon as it is detected. But this scent lingered. It strengthened, found power in Grace's lack of sleep, and warped the structures of the room. Smoke grew from the crack under the door. Grace believed there was a fire, and so there was one. She grabbed her robe and walked down the hall and through the living room. She knocked hard on Ella's door. Without waiting for a reply, Grace opened it. Light poured from the living room into the bedroom. Ella was an innocent lump in the covers.

"Get up," Grace said. Ella stirred. Grace told her they had to move. Her tone was harsh. Ella listened because her older sister always knew what was right and what was real. Ella sat up. She began to cry when she realized what was happening. Grace shushed her. There was no use for tears. Fear only slowed things down. Smoke circled their heads. She grabbed Ella's hand and held it tight. They had to wake their parents. Once their mom and dad were aware, everything would be okay. Everyone would be safe. Grace said this to Ella as they ran up the stairs. The smoke followed their steps, trying to wrap itself around the sisters' ankles and bring them back down.

Upstairs was another world. Water bubbled in the pond that sat right outside the front door. The dark metal railing of the stairs was cold. The only light came from the living room, a single lamp

left on all night long. Their parents' room was past the kitchen, down the hallway, and to the right. Grace's knuckles rapped against the door. Their disheveled mom answered, her robe loosely tied around her waist, hair a large halo around her head, and eyes half-opened.

"Are you okay?" she said. Her voice was full of love but also uneven, like something sanded down, eroded by water, chipped off from carelessness. When her son was first taken, she took the bin of dirty clothes from his room and did three loads of laundry, one after another. She separated the clothes into darks, lights, and delicates, taking great care in their spots and stains. She did not leave the laundry room all day. By evening, all the clothes were washed, dried, folded, and organized. They balanced on the top of the washer and dryer in piles with no reason to be put away. When Grace went into the laundry room the next day, she stared at the neat piles and crisp edges of clothing that would never be worn again.

"There's a fire," the sisters said. Their mom's eyes widened. At first, it seemed, their mom stood in shock. She slowly removed her hand from the door handle. Grace held on tighter to Ella's small hand. Their mom turned away, a look of uncertainty and sleep still on her face as she searched for her husband in the dark. She called out to him, her voice small. There was the sound of scrambling, their dad's hard voice dampened by exhaustion, and the two appeared in the doorway together. Thick scruff grew from their dad's usually clean-shaven face. He had not shaved since their brother, his son, was taken. On the wooden floor of the hallway, their dad's feet were the loudest as all four of them padded toward the stairs. They went past the front door where the pond was audible, and their dad stopped. Grace tugged on his robe. He rubbed his eyes. Grace tugged once more. He remembered where he was and kept on. The sisters whined at their parents to go faster. Did they not understand that this was life or death? Downstairs, the four of them peered around the corner into the living room. It was hazy and discolored, like a dream. Smoke pushed at the windows

and ceiling. The girls' eyes watered. Grace coughed. Ella covered her nose. Their mom held onto the daughters' shoulders, her fingers digging into their skin. Their dad turned on the light.

"It's nothing," he said, after a moment. The morning after his son was taken, the dad worked from home. There was a desk in the back room of miscellaneous items that had no other place to go, the litter boxes, the art supplies, the trinkets, and memorabilia. His hands rested on the keyboard of his computer, fingers hovering and stuck. The clock by the window ticked. A photograph on the desk was propped up next to an old employee of the month award. It was of his three kids, his son, Grace, and Ella. They had their arms wrapped around one another and their smiles were full. It was a trip to a cabin, in the winter, years before. Their cheeks were red. When Grace came to visit her dad, she glanced at the photograph. Her brother had a firm look on his face, one that looked an awfully lot like her dad's…

At the base of the stairs, the family stood huddled together. Their dad's voice was higher than usual, as if he too was surprised there wasn't a fire. Grace wondered if he had seen it, or sensed it at least. The living room was normal. There was no smoke, no flame. It was just a living room. There was the red couch where their dad sat to watch the game, the stone fireplace, and the painting of the three kids hanging above. There was the coffee table with the large water stain because Ella forgot to use a coaster that one time. It was all there, nothing unchanged. Their dad put his arm around their mom's shoulders. He sighed. Grace let go of Ella's hand and looked down at her feet. How had it felt so real?

Grace cannot see beyond the tree line. She turns her head and stares at the place between the evergreens that could go on forever. She feels Ella's hand around her arm, though Grace's arm feels like it belongs to someone else entirely. Then, there it is. A brush against a bush and the padding of soft paws on dirt. A coyote appears. He is thin, fur matted, and eyes egg yolk yellow.

Long, black whiskers reach out from his snout. His nose quivers. Grace counts three ribs on either side of his torso. Even in the dark, they protrude. She cannot feel where Ella's hand was only moments ago. Never mind her, she thinks. There are more important things than false fires and younger sisters. She asks the coyote if he is lost. He says nothing back.

Before the brother was taken, he was so sick that the sisters didn't have a word for it. They were afraid to ask their parents for a word because then the sickness would become too concrete. Their brother looks just like Grace though the family never speaks of it. She wonders if others see her and think of him.

"Do you have a way home?" Grace says. She makes sure to keep her voice steady. She tries to hold in her fear, so it doesn't get passed on to him. They stand face to face with one another, the coyote's bushy tail between his legs and head bowed toward the ground. His muzzle presses into the grass. When he raises his head back up, bits of dirt are stuck to the tip of his nose. She wants to touch the soft spot between his eyes. The urge appears out of nowhere much like the coyote. She imagines his ears between her finger and thumb, the hair coarse and shiny. The coyote's eyes soften. Grace wonders how long they will stand like this, waiting.

"Please," Ella says, "come back in." Grace realizes that her sister has been there, just behind her. The coyote's mouth is open. A pink tongue lolls out through his long, doggish teeth. He paws the ground. His tail swishes, moving back and forth, waiting for something to happen. Both he and Grace shake. She thinks of her brother's birthday. He is twenty-five now. Frogs still croak. Wind rushes through branches. The coyote bows its head once more before turning around. She watches his tail as he disappears into the trees.

Grace lets Ella lead her back to bed. She grasps her sister's hand as they meander through the dark. It is hard to tell who needs who more. Through the glass back door, they go. Through the family room where the red couch sits with the portrait of the three kids, into the younger sister's

bedroom which glows from a lamp left on. Grace is silent and obedient as she follows. She feels young again and not in a good way. Thoughts of their brother float around in wisps. Something is said between the two of them, though neither speaks. The two sisters climb back into bed. The sheets are warm and soft. A howl from somewhere outside quiets the frogs. Night turns to morning, like every night and day before.

# Heather

Three days after her twenty-third birthday, Heather dropped a full glass of water on the kitchen floor because she had grabbed her stomach. It felt as if it was ripping itself in half. Shattered glass flung across the room. Some pieces were as small as sand, some as large as a finger. Mango, Heather's small, white dog who liked to scream instead of bark, ran to lap up the spilled water and Heather had to step on shards to stop him. She didn't feel the glass cutting into the bottom of her feet or see the blood that seeped out from where she stood. The dog sat on her hip, panting and happy. While her mother picked glass out of the bottom of Heather's foot with tweezers, Heather thought of her stomach and how unknown her organs were to her. Inside of her was a whole ecosystem of complex parts she had no control over. She lay on the couch, her feet propped up on her mother's lap. Bandages and disinfectant sat on the coffee table. Heather rubbed her stomach, counterclockwise. Mango licked her face. Heather told her mother that something was very wrong.

Life was not going the way Heather wanted. She had a bad ankle, no appendix, and a degree in Early Modern History. She lived at home with her mother and Mango. Heather had no job. She had no prospects. All of her past college friends lived in a city very far away. Often, Heather's days involved waking at one in the afternoon, not showering until four, and sitting behind her computer

asking the internet questions about her believed ailments. *Signs of blood clots in legs. How to know if my brain is hemorrhaging*? *Normal circumference of ankle. Trapped Gas vs. Liver Cancer.* All Heather had was the internet, and she was okay with that. Her mother was not. Heather's mother was a no-nonsense kind of lady with a tight bun and a lopsided smile. She knocked at Heather's door throughout the day. When Heather didn't answer, her mother slipped her notes on multi-colored Post-its under the door. Sometimes they were a simple hello and reminder that Heather was loved. Other times it was the number of therapists and the addresses of programs. Heather ignored the notes when they contained the latter. She crumpled them and threw them in the bin.

Heather's mother had always taken great pride in her daughter's achievements. As a kid, Heather was gifted. She excelled in reading and writing and mathematics. Heather was put in a separate classroom with other intelligent kids, while the non-gifted kids were far away doing whatever non-gifted kids did. In middle and high school, Heather won awards for her academic achievements, was the lead soloist in choir, and volunteered every Saturday and Sunday at her local foodbank. Her mother couldn't have been prouder. College was no different. Heather graduated with honors. She knew everything there was to know about European women during the early modern period. She read Christine de Pizan, Madame de Lafayette, Olympe de Gouges. Heather had a bright future.

When Heather told her mother something was wrong, her mother listened because that was what good mothers do. There was a doctor's appointment booked for the next day. Heather's mother was tactical like that. She didn't wait when it came to her daughter.

There wasn't anything wrong with Heather. Not physically. The blood tests were negative. The doctor said the stomach pain was most likely period cramps, or anxiety. She should take two Advil if it were to happen again. Heather's mother was satisfied with this answer. She knew her daughter to be a healthy girl. Heather was not satisfied.

Months passed of pain and doubt. Nearing nine-thirty P.M. on an early February night, Heather lay in bed rubbing her right side. The lights were on, and her legs were tangled in the duvet. She was caught up in a detailed daydream of her funeral. Friends and family hovered over her open casket. She was such a great girl, they said. Heather wondered why the mortician had given her coral lipstick in her daydream. It was a hideous shade. There were brown spots on Heather's bedroom ceiling. She tried to focus on them as she accepted death. Her stomach pain felt as though someone's fingers were poking her from the inside out, pressing their thumb on the lining of her stomach, spreading the curtains of her large intestine. When she hobbled to the kitchen to get a cup of water, Heather noticed her mother's bedroom light on, the door halfway open. Mango screamed from his doggy bed in the entryway. Heather grabbed the car keys and went out the door into the cold night.

The drive to the hospital was peaceful. The streetlamps flooded the road with yellow light. In the emergency room, the doctor with a German-sounding last name told her she was a perfectly healthy twenty-three-year-old. No, he wouldn't do a CAT scan just for the hell of it. And no, he wouldn't cut her open just to make sure everything looked all right, either. He had kind eyes. When Heather returned home, her mother was waiting in the kitchen, a look of great concern on her face. Heather asked why her mother looked like that.

Sometimes the mind makes up emergencies when people are going through something emotionally, said her mother.

Emotionally? said Heather. Yes, dying is pretty damn emotional.

Throughout the night and the next day, Mango scratched on Heather's door, his unclipped nails making tan grooves in the dark wood. Her mom brought her food: a cup of yogurt, a turkey sandwich, and later, cooked broccoli and pasta. Heather didn't touch it. Her eyes burned from staring at her computer for too long. Words blurred into one another. Her shoulders were stuck in a

hunched-over position and her fingers typed without registration from her brain. *Signs of heart attack. Toes feel strange. What illness is tiredness a side effect of?* There was a knock at her door, and then it opened. Her mother stood there with Mango hidden behind her legs. She told Heather that she found a good partial-hospitalization program for her. One that would make her feel better. Heather would only have to go during the day, and she'd get to sleep in her own bed at night. Some things take trust, her mother said, and this was one of those things. Heather didn't feel like fighting. Also, she thought it would be nice to spend time doing things she liked, like reading heavy books and knitting sweaters for Mango, instead of sitting behind her computer screen worrying about death. She agreed to her mother's request and went back to thinking about the veins in her legs and where they led.

The program was called Spring into Balance: Center for Mood and Anxiety Disorders. It was on the fourteenth floor of a snazzy skyscraper, the kind whose windows were mirrored and looked like it was about to shoot into the sky. Heather's mother had offered her to drive and stay at a coffee shop in the city for the six and a half hours. Heather had said no. When Heather walked into the program, two sad people sat in cheap-looking upholstered chairs covered in abstract, colorful prints. Heather sat down in one. She looked at her knees. Wind pushed at the windows.

If Heather had to define the first three days of her expedition into the world of mental health with one word, she would say unsuccessful. She learned about the other two patients: Patrick, a boy with hair that went down to his waist, and Rebecca, a woman in her late fifties who wore upturned mauve glasses. Rebecca was newly divorced. She spoke of a recent spa trip where she sat naked atop a taxidermized bear in a private sauna. She said it was healing, the heat, the fur, the thrill of it all. Heather wasn't so sure she believed the story to be true. Patrick was shy. He talked mostly of dissociation and his ex-girlfriend. Patrick said when he dissociates, which is almost always, it feels

like he's walking through a windstorm. Heather didn't speak at all. Speaking in group therapy was optional. She decided against it.

Heather's assigned therapist was named Clara. Clara was five-foot-eleven and wore leather sandals with socks. Her office was small, with one window looking out to a cramped parking lot. Clara had a tic where after every sentence Heather spoke, she gave a knowing hmm. Heather asked Clara to stop. Clara said no, she couldn't, it was just something she naturally did.

For her first therapy assignment, Clara said Heather should find time to take a walk every evening. Heather asked if Clara thought she was fat.

No, Clara said, and I don't find jokes of that nature funny.

Heather would have to be in constant conversation with her body during the walk. When a thought arose, Heather would have to ask herself what facts the thought possessed, if any. This, Clara said, would allow Heather to slowly see that she wasn't in immediate danger. Heather's thoughts were just that: thoughts. Heather said she didn't believe this assignment would be useful. Her stomach pain, as well as all the other sensations her body created throughout the day, were her top concerns.

Hmmm, said Clara. Heather sighed and shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Clara tapped a pen on her knee.

Back at home, Heather still spent at least three hours a day on the internet, searching about her possible illnesses. Her back ached from bad posture. Her neck was stiff. Periodically, Mango whined outside her bedroom door. Heather's mother stopped knocking, which Heather assumed was due to her mother believing the program was doing something. *How much Advil is too much? Food poisoning symptoms. What does gangrene look like?* When Heather fell asleep at her computer, which

happened more often than not, she'd wake with drool on the mouse pad, the outline of computer keys pressed into the side of her face.

Two weeks went by before Heather summoned the courage to walk around her neighborhood. It was now late into February, so even though the ground was no longer covered in frost or a thin layer of snow, it was cold. A warm jacket was needed to go outside. Heather put on one of her mother's out of convenience. It hung right by the front door. Her mother's coat was older than Heather was and had a black and white checkered print and shiny, red buttons down the front. It smelled like her mother. Burnt sage and rosemary oil. Mango screamed. Heather shook her head at him. It would have to be just her this time. Maybe on another walk, she'd take the dog.

Outside, it lightly rained. The pavement smelled stale. Heather only realized the rain once she was three houses past her own. She worried that if she went home, she wouldn't come back out. She felt the small drops of water hit her uncovered hands, the high points of her face, and her head. Her hair turned frizzy. She thought about many things. She thought about when in college, and any time before her twenty-third birthday, she felt different. There was a time when overwhelm wasn't the main feeling she experienced. Now she held herself like a sodden lump of laundry.

Heather thought also about her heart. She wondered how many times the heart beats in a person's lifetime. There were only so many. Heather was incredibly in tune with her own heart. When she focused hard enough, she could control it. On the walk, her heart pounded. She wondered if the pounding was normal. Was she about to die? It should be normal for the heart to pound. But hers was pounding quite hard. Heather held up two fingers to the side of her neck, right beneath her jaw. Her artery pushed against her fingers with a firm, steady beat.

Heather didn't pay attention to where she walked. She didn't see the slew of worms on the pavement, rushed in by the newly fallen rain. She didn't see the droopy tree two blocks away from her house that looked like a disparaged old man.

During program lunch breaks, Heather and Patrick walked together. The landscape of downtown was very different from her neighborhood, which was tucked away in the suburbs. Heather hated the groaning cars, the honks, and the large buses that thought they could fit down those skinny streets. There was no control in the city. Patrick was a year younger than Heather and wore thick, yellow glasses. She liked his long hair. It was tangled and sort of greasy. Patrick was the son of two preachers. He took acid on the weekends and smoked weed throughout the day. Sometimes he dabbled in pills too, but he told Heather to keep that quiet. No one needed to know. He explained his condition as if he were sitting between two separate worlds, a leg in each. Some days, he saw things only in greyscale.

A Catholic church was a few blocks from the program. The architecture was grand and made of creamy stone. Manicured apple trees grew from their assigned spots. In the church's courtyard, a single bench faced a water statue of Mary holding Jesus. Mary's head was bowed, eyes closed. Heather wondered if it was complicated growing up with both parents in the clergy. It must be. Cars rushed outside the tall gates. Patrick and Heather sat on the bench. They were safe, for a moment, listening to the water pour out from under Mary's feet. Heather had never been religious. But she saw the appeal in being held by hope.

The next time Heather took a walk in her neighborhood, it rained again. Heather was ready. She brought an umbrella. It was old and clanky, with the metal support that ran under the fabric rusted over. She found it in the back of the closet where no one ever seemed to go, next to forgotten pairs of hiking and snow boots. The outer canopy of the umbrella was designed to look like a ladybug. Red, with big black spots. Heather remembered it from when she was a kid.

The umbrella was hard to open because of its rusted gears, and Heather spent eight minutes standing in the street trying to get it to work. Rain kept pouring. Eventually, she gave up. She walked on without it. Rain soaked through her sweater, and it became itchy, wet, and cold against her skin. She didn't care. Heather saw trees, houses, and stop signs. She came to an intersection. Her pants were wet and her hair stuck to her head like a helmet. Heather looked to the left. She looked to the right. She decided to go straight.

When she came upon a covered bus stop, Heather sat down on the blue bench, her clothes and hair dripping. The earth smelled new. Heather wondered if she would catch a cold. Her body was a weak, susceptible machine. A raindrop trickled off her nose and landed in a perfect circle on her leg. She was surprised when she realized she wasn't upset by the rain or the broken umbrella. There was a lit sign hanging above the stop, which read: BUS CANCELED. She stared at a crack in the sidewalk, where the concrete had been smashed. A green shoot grew from the exposed dirt. It wavered this way and that as raindrops landed on its single, delicate leaf.

That night, her mother cooked potato-leek soup, Heather's favorite. The sweet steam felt nice on her face. The mother and daughter sat opposite one another, not speaking, and Mango lay beneath the table, tapping his tail on the floor. The spoons clanged against the side of the bowl as they ate. Heather's mother asked how the walks were going. Heather shrugged.

Wet, she said.

And the program? Heather's mother asked.

The soup is excellent, said Heather, thank you.

One day during the fourth week, Heather found herself alone with Rebecca. It was the first sunny day of the season and the warm light cast strong shadows on the walls of the group therapy room. Tacked up were inspirational quotes like: You Can Do This! And: Your Story Isn't Over!

Heather liked to stare at these posters and make fun of them in her head. She thought to herself, who do these save? Rebecca was in downward dog on a yoga mat in the middle of the room. Heather didn't have anything against Rebecca. But Heather didn't appreciate that Rebecca only spoke of things with no basis in reality: dream interpretation, astrology, spells, palm reading. Heather kicked her feet at the legs of her chair. Rebecca unfolded herself from her yoga position. Heather wrung her hands and waited for Rebecca to say something out of pocket and unexplainable. But she said nothing. Instead, Rebecca breathed deeply into her chest, her eyelids fluttering in relaxation.

Heather went on walk that night. It was now nearing the middle of March. This time, she took Mango, who waited patiently next to the door as Heather attached his leash. There was a slight breeze. Above, hints of stars poked through the black sky. She was wearing another one of her mother's coats, this time a teal track jacket. There were holes in the sleeves for her thumbs to go, and the tag in the back was cut off. Heather wondered when her mother decided to cut it off and what thought had gone through her mind when she did. She walked down her street with Mango beside her. Every so often he stopped to stick his nose into a smelly spot on a neighbor's lawn.

Heather passed a house she hadn't ever seen before. It was a deep blue with Victorian architecture and a round, tall tower. Its trim was white. Even through the darkness, Heather could make out the cobbled steppingstones leading up to its front door, the stained birdbath next to three statues of foolish-looking gnomes, and vines reaching over the front windows. Heather stopped and stared. Mango wagged his tail and gave a short bark. Heather thought that she'd like to live in a house like that, someday in the future.

It was six weeks into the program. Heather sat in a chair in Clara's cramped office. There was a cup of tea on the table next to her, tea that Clara had offered. When Heather said no thank

you, Clara poured it anyway. Clara sat across from Heather, staring with intent, but did not speak. Heather knew that Clara was waiting for her to be the one to start. Fine, Heather thought. She took the bait. Heather told Clara that she worried that if she stopped thinking about illness, her inattention would cause disease. Heather focused on the pattern in the rug as she said this. For some reason, she thought of her mother, sitting at the kitchen table at home, working.

Bad things may happen, said Clara, but it's important to remember that they might not.

The next morning, Heather's mom asked once more to drive her to the program. She hadn't asked since the first day, and now it was the very last. The sun was out, birds twittered outside. Heather thought about it. It would be nice to sit and watch the buildings and cars pass. The keys in Heather's hand jangled as she passed them to her mother. Heather's mother said that Heather could pick the music they listened to, whatever she wanted.

The last day of the program was boring and unsentimental. They went in a circle and said how they had grown. Rachel had found peace with being alone. Patrick had gone on new medication. Heather wondered if she had changed at all. She rubbed her stomach, which hadn't ached in exactly two weeks. Clara hugged Heather on the way out. It was awkward, a side hug. Clara said she knew Heather had it in her. Heather wondered what that was.

During the car ride home with her mother, Heather thought about where she'd walk that evening. The park, she decided, where the trees were in bloom. Bright pink and white cherry blossoms that smelled like almonds. Maybe she'd ask her mother to join. Spring was starting and she wanted to take part in it. While she was out on the walk, she'd look at the old trees that lined the

street, their bark twisted and worn. She'd look at the trees and how their branches had broken off and regrown, broken off and regrown, broken off and then regrown.

# Portland Story

I was not a bad person. Instead, I was seventeen with a badly aspected moon and a four-planet Scorpio stellium in my first house. I had no understanding of boundaries. I was a liar. My ego was the size of the entire solar system. I also found talking about my emotions so revolting that I often kept them inside. Sometimes for years. Eventually, however, they'd always find a way out, usually through my mouth or eyes, with such force it took days to fix the wounds they had caused on myself and onto others. I often lived in my head. That was thanks to Venus in my twelfth house. I loved to believe in things that weren't true, like centaurs, reiki, and fate. And I relied too heavily on astrology as a guide and maybe sometimes as a shield—though I'd never admit it to anyone—for and against others.

Winter was heavy for the Pacific Northwest that year. I lived in a large, black coat I found at the Goodwill bins. It smelled like a safe, old man. It came with a folded tissue and three dollar-coins in its pocket. The snow was unrelenting. The streets were frozen, then unfrozen, and then frozen once more. I mostly stayed over at my friend Ivy's. She had a queen-sized bed and a young mom. We decided, one evening, that it was time for an adventure. Life was turning stale even though we hadn't become adults yet. Also, I had been miserable. The misery came on like a cold which then

developed into a long-lasting flu. I walked through the world unbalanced and untreated. I liked to believe nothing had caused this feeling. Something had of course, though only Ivy and I knew this. I hoped it would pass by, the pain more like a pinch than a burn. A drive down to Portland for the weekend would solve everything, we thought. The city was new even though it felt the same as Seattle, but all jumbled up—like someone had thrown all the streets and buildings into a large bowl and shook them violently, spilling them onto the table in a different way. We pooled together our saved money from odd jobs to rent a small house in the south end of Portland, where the suburbs and city melded.

We left in the morning. Friday, at nine A.M. I drove a two-thousand-and-four neon-green Saturn nicknamed The Green Machine, which drove terribly and made a deep rumbling sound when turned on. The engine wanted to die but I wouldn't let it. The backseat was covered in grime and the dashboard had a thin layer of dust over it. When the light caught it right, you could watch the particles floating around by the windshield like tiny stars caught in a galaxy. I cut my hair right before the trip, short and close to my ears. It stuck out in all directions as if my finger was always in a power socket. I liked it. It gave me an edge I felt I hadn't ever had before. I had read an article online about how hair holds onto memories. I also had read an article on how men's DNA lasts up to seven years inside of you. I wasn't entirely sure that either were true and hoped neither were. The hair was an easy fix, the DNA not so much.

Ivy sat next to me on map duty, her hair in a bright red bob and her eyebrows arched so that she had a mean sort of look to her. I loved Ivy more than myself. Her scent was addicting and so was her strong sense of direction in life. She had five earth placements. Her knees were bony, she practiced an hour of yoga every morning, and read books exclusively on mycology and forest restoration. She was giving, stubborn, and hated boys. I drifted around her at all times, untethered and unruly, a torn kite. Sometimes she appeared to me only as a single dot, far below on the ground,

her red hair her only distinguishing trait. She was someone I rerouted toward when I fell off course. On the way to Portland however, I didn't need her help finding my way. All I had to do was follow the green metal signs that showed up every so often with the words INTERSTATE FIVE SOUTH TO PORTLAND on them. I liked watching the number of miles shrink as we drove on. Flurries began to fall an hour in. I turned the windshield wipers on as snow began to collect. Ivy turned the music up. I slowed down to fifty on the freeway and let cars pass.

The house we rented was a nineteen-fifties single-story home with a painted green front door. I sat in a chair by the front window, watching nothing in particular outside. It was noon. The snowfall had lessened. Snow clung to the branches of trees, over the roofs of houses, and blanketed the front lawns and road. The sun was high in the sky and the neighborhood was empty other than some cars parked on the street. I held an open journal in my lap, silently sketching a chart. I liked to make up strange astrological combinations. What kind of person would have their Sun, Venus, and Mercury in Leo and then all their other planets in water signs? I wasn't sure. I didn't think I would want to meet them. Ivy was in the bedroom. I heard her unpacking, the dresser drawers slamming open and closed. Outside, the front door of the house across from ours opened. I sat up. A boy who looked about my age walked out, holding a magic eight ball. He was cute. Odd-looking too, with a big nose and shoulder-length hair. He wore a sherpa-lined coat over a faded tie-dye t-shirt and brown hiking pants. I flattened my hair and tried to smile. He waved. I waved back. I sank into the chair as he passed by my line of sight and thought about what would happen if I followed him.

Ivy was still in the bedroom. I grabbed my coat from the kitchen table. I was aware that I was being a bad friend. But at that moment I didn't care. The front door closed with a click behind me. I took a breath of new snow scent. I followed the footprints he had left behind, down the block and to the right. When I saw him ahead, I slowed down. I didn't want to scare him. I knew I wouldn't though, since I was attractive and only five-foot-two.

"Where are you going?" I asked. He stopped and turned around. I could tell he was trying to figure me out. He wouldn't. He shook the magic eight ball and then smiled. He held it up for me to see.

"Cannot predict now," he said and went quiet for a second before shrugging. He asked for my name. He was seventeen too, had lived in the house across from us his entire life, and was named Eli. Birds flew overhead. My sneakers were soaked through from the snow. I asked if he wanted to hang out. He said yes.

Eli let me inside his house. His dad was sitting at a desk near the entryway when we walked in. He was short, bald, and an anesthesiologist. He glanced at me through his reading glasses, asked me how I was, and if he could get me anything. He seemed surprised to see me, a girl his son's age, standing in his home. I said that I was well, and no thank you. A record spun on the desk where he sat, a low saxophone ringing out into the room. I shook his dad's hand, which was firm, and smiled.

Eli's living and dining room was L-shaped. In the back was the table, round and wooden, surrounded by six chairs. Large shelves stretched around the back of the room, stacked with cans of beans and soups, baking goods, cereals, and snacks. There wasn't a real kitchen cabinet to keep the food in, he told me. On the walls were abstract paintings of musicians, jazz, I assumed. I couldn't tell whether I was looking at the body of the instrument or of the man. The living room had a hemp rug and a soft leather sofa that took the shape of whoever sat on it. I liked the feeling it gave, the feeling of being swallowed.

I brought up Eli's birth chart on my phone. He was a Taurus sun—strong-willed with a thick neck—a cancer moon who felt things a bit too much but had a healthy relationship with his mother, and a libra rising—a peace-seeker, a people-pleaser, with large eyes and soft hair. As I told him this, he just smiled, crisscrossed on the carpet and his back against the side of the couch. I couldn't tell if he was enjoying what I said or simply enjoying that I spoke.

"We're compatible," I said. Four of his planets sat in my seventh house of long-term relationships. It felt odd holding this much power, being able to peer inside of him and understand who he was more than he understood himself. He was attracted to me. His Venus sat at zero degrees on my DC line. He loved me. He had the potential to, at least. At that moment I saw our life together spread out in front of me. I saw us having sex for the first time, getting married, buying a house. Oh, God. Eli wiggled his eyebrows. I laughed. He grabbed my hand, which I found surprising, and held on for a second before letting go.

We played cards. He had four different packs. I looked at them spread out on the living room floor and sighed. I called him lame. He had two sets of plain playing cards. One of the boxes was yellowed and kept together with silver duct tape. The other was pristine, the edges of the box sharp, the cards inside unbent. Eli told me not to touch that one. The other two sets were limited edition, themed packs. One was covered with art from the original Star Wars. The other was Lord of the Rings. Eli was excited to show them to me. I patiently listened. We played with the cards that were falling apart.

"Don't show me what you have," he said. Eli was so serious. I had been fanning my cards at my face, uncaring to whether or not he saw what I held. He tried to push my hand of cards away. I threw them face up on the floor and grinned.

Later, we lay on his bed staring at the ceiling lamp. It was ten P.M., and the windows were so dark we could see our reflections. It seemed hard to imagine that we had met that afternoon. My face in the reflection looked happy. It made me nauseous. I turned to face Eli.

"Do you know what you want to do in life?"

"Own a dog," he said.

"Let's move to California, together."

"With a dog," he said and kicked my leg softly with his foot. He thought I was joking. I tried to bite back the emotion that pushed against my teeth. My limbs buzzed.

I walked back to Ivy and I's rental feeling something new that could've been described as hope. The lights were off except for a dim glow coming from the bedroom. Inside, Ivy sat at the edge of the bed we shared, in her pajamas. Her hair was wet and slicked back on her head. She rubbed her eyes and raised her head when I closed the door.

"He's a boy," she said. I let my bag fall. It crumpled next to my feet, my wallet falling out with a muted thump. She thought I was stupid. I was throwing away our trip to spend time with a boy who didn't matter.

"He's kind," I said.

Ivy looked at me and then got into bed. She turned off her bedside lamp and then the room was only lit by the lousy lamp on my side. The house was silent other than Ivy's small breaths. I stared at the flickering bulb and let whatever the feeling was that wasn't misery wash over me.

Ivy didn't say anything in the morning. I kept my eyes closed as she walked around the room getting ready for the day. Once she left, I opened my eyes. The clock on the wall read eight-fifty-four A.M. She would cool off, I decided. It was her Aries moon most likely, which blazed brightly but extinguished fast. I dressed and texted Eli. He answered, right away. I wondered if that meant anything. We'd go on a walk, he said.

I met him in the middle of the street, between our two houses. Eli wore a baseball hat and his same sherpa-lined coat. He hugged me. I hugged back. We trudged together through the snow. I followed close behind him as he led me out of his neighborhood and onto one of the main roads. The air was sharp and cold. He asked me about Ivy, and I said she was fine. He asked me where she was, and I told him I didn't know. Eli dropped it after that. Instead, we talked about memories. I told him about my biggest fear as a kid—taxidermy moose heads and how my favorite food growing

up was frozen fish sticks. He told me that his Bar Mitzvah theme was Harry Potter and that he was once in a professional yo-yoing competition. We stopped at a small coffee shop. A bell dinged as we walked in. He bought us two coffees. I added four fake sugar packets to mine, and it tasted like burnt syrup. We sat in a booth next to the window and watched people pass.

"Have you kissed anyone?" I asked. He frowned. I wasn't sure what had prompted me to ask such an intimate, romantic-fueled question, but it fell out of me so fast that I felt off-balanced in the rickety coffee shop chair.

"No," he said, "have you?"

"Loads," I said. I took two big gulps of coffee. I coughed slightly from the plastic taste. Eli looked away from me, deep in thought, or maybe just out of politeness. It's rude to stare at the vulnerable. People walked into the coffee shop. A woman and man in their thirties, holding hands. The bell dinged again.

"Have you had sex?" He asked. I smiled. The coffee burned my tongue. It felt strange and large in my mouth as if it were a foreign object.

"I think I'd want to wait," he said, "for someone I loved." He looked at his hands that wrapped around his coffee cup. My thoughts on sex were complicated, to say the least. I had thought of sex solely as an exchange, as easy and simple as a conversation between two people. One had control and one didn't. One listened while the other talked. I closed my eyes and tried to think about something else.

"I hadn't ever thought of that," I said to him. I wished I had met Eli long ago. He could've prevented my misery. The couple sat down at the table next to us. Eli was looking at me with a face I couldn't read. He seemed to know something I didn't. Suddenly, everything was too intense, and I regretted ever asking a question at all. I slouched deeper into my chair and stared out the window at the melting snow.

After the coffee shop, we found ourselves back on the couch in his living room. It was getting late, but Eli didn't say anything about it.

"What do you want to do?" He asked. I didn't know. All I truly wanted was to be next to him, but I couldn't say that. It was hard for me to act as a collected and complete person, especially at this time in my life, because of my underdeveloped moon in the eighth house of other people's resources, sex, and death. I had to play it cool. Eli watched me, his eyes sleepy and mouth turned down, relaxed. I blinked.

He played with a worn friendship bracelet on his wrist. I watched as he looped his finger around the loose strings, over and over again, and twisted the bracelet around his wrist until the knot reappeared and then disappeared once more. I began to think about who had given him the bracelet and wanted to ask but then decided I had no business to.

He said, "Do you know the constellations?"

"All of them?" I said, "No, I don't." Eli stood up from the couch. I sunk deeper into it. He stuck his hand out for me to grab onto. I took it. His hand was warm and soft and everything.

Outside was silent. There wasn't even the faraway sound of cars on the road or buses groaning to a stop every few blocks because the ice inhibited the movement of all vehicles, small or large. The wind whipped back and forth across my face. I tightened the scarf around my neck and shoved my hands deeper into the pockets of my coat. Eli pointed up at the sky with a gloved hand.

Above was slate-gray, flat, and empty. The clouds were knitted so tightly together that it was impossible to see past them. Even the satellites that usually were scattered above the city were invisible to us. Eli made a sound of exasperation.

"Sirius," he said, "is usually right there."

The brightest star. I had read about it before, years ago in a schoolbook. I didn't care for constellations. I know that it seems counterintuitive since I couldn't stop thinking about astrology.

The stars themselves, the physical state of them above me, couldn't interest me more than any other mundane thing. I liked the idea of them, sure, and the way in which they dictated who I was. But other than that, I hated to think about their existence. Their grandness terrified me.

Outside quickly became too cold. Eli said instead he'd show me the stars inside his house, on his phone. He had a special app, one that showed the sky without clouds. He promised me it would be better this way, as I was a beginner to constellations, and practicing inside would help me find my bearings. We lay on the rug in the living room. It scratched the back of my neck and arms. Eli was happy. He giggled as he held the phone above our faces.

"If you squint," he said, "it's just like the real thing." I squinted. It wasn't. I was looking at a phone on the floor of a living room. But I didn't care. I was with Eli. I nodded and let him show me.

I saw Ivy the next morning. She sat at the empty bus stop across the street from Eli's house and next to ours. I had texted her the night before that I would stay over at Eli's. I had slept on his bed while he slept on the floor. Only small areas of ice were left on the road, collected in the dings in the pavement. Ivy scooted over on the bench to make room for me. The sky was pale blue. I watched as a group of crows took flight from nearby powerlines and crossed the sky.

"I'm in love," I said. The word sat suspended in the air in front of us for a moment before falling into the slushy puddle on the sidewalk.

"My mom called," Ivy said, "She's wondering how everything's going." I knew she would never say that she wanted to go home. Not to me, anyway. But this was her way of hinting that Seattle still existed. Ivy's mouth was a thin line. I didn't want to go. I wrapped my jacket tighter. I told her to give me an hour.

Inside his room, Eli handed me a rock. It was the size of a small pebble, no bigger than the crater that forms in my palm when I cup my hand. The edges were smooth. A thin line of silver ran

through the center of it. My shoulders slumped forward. I was let down. I didn't need a rock. It would fall somewhere between the seats of my car or find its way into the bin in my room of things that don't have a place. Eli stood there with a grin on his face.

Eli said, "Portland is only a three-hour drive away." His Libra rising and Cancer moon made him an optimist. He was so lovely. I kissed him. His long hair brushed my cheek. I clenched the rock in my fist.

"I don't think," he said. I stopped kissing him. I had misread the situation. I just couldn't get anything right. I thought only of myself and the contents of my mind which were jumbled, at best. Eli's dad was in the kitchen, and I listened to him put away plates from the dishwasher. I shoved the rock into my back pocket and grabbed my bag. The straps fell through my fingertips. It hit the wooden floor hard. I picked it up again. I swore to myself and didn't look at Eli. I assumed he didn't want to look at me either. I told him Ivy was waiting for me at the rented house, and her mom was wondering where we were. I had been a bad friend, I said, keeping my eyes on the ground. A really bad friend. Then I looked at him. His mouth was slightly open and his hands were stuck, plastered by his sides, where they had been before and during the kiss. I took a look around his room and tried to figure out what I wanted to remember. Eli stood up, blocking my way out of the door.

"Let's not leave it like this," he said. I shook my head. I wish I had said something meaningful, like how he's the first to ever care for me, or how I really would move to California with him if he wanted to. I'd drop everything for him. I walked past him and out of the room.

In the car, I turned up the heat. The roads back to Seattle were clean and snowless. Traffic was non-existent. I pushed the gas pedal and felt the tension underneath my foot. The car surged forward. Ivy was next to me, smiling. The I-5 was bleak. I felt the rock in my back pocket. It was a reminder of something, though I hadn't decided what yet. As we passed into downtown Seattle, I apologized, with full sincerity. Ivy shook her head and said she wasn't going anywhere.

# Tilt-A-Whirl

When Julia first arrived at the Academy of Saint Francis, she signed up for choir. Music, she found, was the closest she ever felt to God. Or a God-like presence, at least. She sang everywhere: on the dirt path home from the bus stop, under the maple tree in the front yard, and in bed during the middle of the night, when all that could be heard was her soft voice against the silence of sleep. Singing for her was what praying was for others around her. All the students at the Academy of Saint Francis, Julia felt, were hierarchy-obsessed, egocentric, surface-level-loving kids, whose restricted Catholic upbringing made them anything but good and forgiving. Julia learned fast to keep out of everyone's way. Most days she spent lunch in the empty humanities classroom, eating a peanut butter and jam sandwich from home and watching the eighth-grade humanities teacher, Ms. Morgan, grade papers at her desk.

It was late into May and a year since Julia transferred to the Academy of Saint Francis. The school's annual choir trip was set to take place at Silverwood Theme Park, the largest amusement park in the Northwest. A rented charter bus would drive the thirty-six middle and high schoolers three hundred and fourteen miles from outside of Seattle to a few towns over the border of Idaho. The students were in a buzz. They waited in line to board, clutching their overnight bags to their

chests, talking to one another. Julia leaned against the side of the bus and let the hot metal turn her skin red. She wasn't looking forward to the trip. She spoke to no one and closed her eyes. It was unseasonably hot that May. Summer had come early, and the sun burned a white-hot hole in the sky.

Julia boarded the bus. It smelled like pee and sweat. She sat in an empty window seat towards the back and watched the others board. Her crush, Carter Reilly, was a ninth grader with red hair and a long, freckled nose. He stood in line, outside the window. His black, cut-off tee with the Rolling Stones logo showed off his muscled arms. She loved his shoulders and gold aviator sunglasses. Julia pressed her nose to the hot glass. He was so sexy. Carter looked like the boys in the bands Julia liked, minus the black-lined eyes and long, swoopy hair. He was close enough. And Carter sang, with a high tenor voice and slight vibrato. Julia sighed. One day, she hoped, he would be hers.

The bus started. The engine shook the seats. Julia squirmed. Two rows ahead was Claire, writing in a planner. Julia watched. Claire wrote with a purple pen and her handwriting was loopy and careful, very unlike Julia's which was rarely legible. Julia wondered where her own planner was. It was most likely pushed to the bottom of her backpack along with loose, wrinkled paper, forgotten half-eaten bars, and uncapped pens. Claire's long blonde hair was fastened into a neat ponytail at the nape of her neck and pushed back by a blue headband. Her khaki skirt hit right above her knees and her navy polo was ironed: perfect. Julia thought that if she could look like any other girl, she would choose to look like Claire.

They had been friends once. Last year. When Julia was new to the school, and they were both in seventh grade. When neither understood the complexities of middle school. Claire was better at blending in. She was thin and boys liked her. Her mom let her wax her mustache and tweeze her eyebrows. Claire was what girls were supposed to look like. Pretty, sweet, with large eyes and a flat stomach. Julia was not. The boys never looked at her. Girls never looked at her either

because there was nothing to envy. Julia was just there. She was just Julia. And so, the two girls grew apart. Claire was welcomed by the other thin blondes in the grade and Julia sunk deeper into the background until she wasn't even sure herself where she had gone. Julia hated Claire for it. For leaving her. For letting her go. For holding to higher regard kissing boys and popularity, than friendship with Julia.

Julia sweated through her polo, first under her armpits and then under the metal wire of her bra. She tried to flatten her wrinkled skirt against her thighs. The AC must not have been working. She clicked open the window and pushed it up; hot air from the freeway hit her face and blew her bangs up from her forehead. She felt a bug hit near the corner of her mouth. Julia shut the window. It wasn't worth it.

They stayed at a white motel, stained yellow, with red doors. The town was flat and concrete-covered. The choir kids were split into rooms by gender and four people were assigned to each room. Julia's name was called, along with two tenth-grade girls—Melody and Lillian—and Claire. Melody and Lillian were both tan with bleached hair and high soprano voices. They wore thick mascara and lip gloss. Melody and Lillian were not afraid to show their skin. Seeing all of them together, Julia thought, maybe Claire hadn't changed that much after all. She was nothing like these girls, who seemed so confident in their lewdness.

At the park, Julia stuck with Melody and Lillian. Julia could tell the two were best friends because they were always holding hands and touching each other's hair. They wore handmade matching white t-shirts that said ASF CHOIR TAKES SILVERWOOD in bright pink felt marker on the backs. The shirts were cut right above their belly buttons with kitchen scissors, the hem jagged and curling slightly against the skin of their stomachs. Julia walked behind them, watching their tan legs and the way their silver charm bracelets jingled against their skinny wrists. They didn't seem to mind that she followed. They almost liked it, Julia noticed. As if she were their lost little

puppy, and they were so kind to take her in. Julia didn't mind being treated like a pet because she was not entirely kind in the way she thought of Melody and Lillian either. They were something she would carefully study, like organisms under a microscope, to find out more about the way of the teenage girl. In line for the Tilt-A-Whirl, Melody grabbed Julia's hair without asking and told her she'd look good with golden highlights.

What else? Julia asked the older girls. Melody and Lillian smiled at one another, their lip-glossed-covered lips sparkling in the sunlight.

I love a project! said Lillian. Melody took out three sticks of cinnamon gum from her bag and put one in her mouth, one in Lillian's mouth, and dangled the last piece in front of Julia's face. Julia opened her mouth. Melody dropped it in. It tasted like cinnamon and hope.

After riding the Tilt-A-Whirl three times and walking around the park judging older women's outfits and weights, Julia, Lillian, and Melody sat at a picnic table under a large, shady tree, eating raspberry sorbet. They felt sleepy from the sun. Julia watched Lillian twirl her tongue around the plastic spoon, licking up the rest of the sweet, sugary dessert. Tall grass grew around the base of the table and it tickled Julia's ankles. A bee flew around the girls' heads. Julia tried to bat it away. Melody and Lillian pointed toward an old lady with pure white hair, a saggy face, and a sun hat. She was accompanied by a boy, probably her grandchild.

I'll kill myself before I look like that, said Melody.

There's no point to life if you're fat, ugly, and old, said Lillian. Julia agreed to fit in, though didn't think those statements were all that true. She wondered what Melody and Lillian thought of her body, with her big thighs and skinny ankles and soft tummy. She knew they wouldn't tell her the truth. Julia could play it out in her head though. Instead of the old lady in front of them, Julia imagined it was her, walking alone.

Cow, said Melody from the picnic table.

No one will ever fuck you, said Lillian.

Julia finished her sorbet. She crumpled the paper cup into a ball. Melody told them about a new diet her mom went on: cayenne pepper water in the morning, a boiled chicken breast at lunch, and a boiled chicken breast at dinner. Julia thought it sounded disgusting. Melody said her mom had lost fourteen pounds already. Lillian said it didn't matter what you ate, as long as you threw it back up later. She grabbed another one of Melody's cinnamon gum sticks and began to chew. The smacking of her lips and the click of her jaw rattled around in Julia's head.

Back in the motel room, Julia stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. A day at the park without sunscreen resulted in a bright pink burn across the top of her cheeks and along the bridge of her nose. She ran the water in the sink. Bits of black dirt spurted out. Julia tried to flatten her frizzy hair. She squinted her eyes. She pouted her lips. She put her hands on her waist and rocked her hips from side to side. Her uniform did nothing for her figure. Julia hated the fact that middle schoolers were forced to wear uniforms and the high schoolers weren't. It was an instant label of being 'not cool'. Julia zhuzhed her hair. The bathroom light flickered. She wondered if she'd run into Carter Reilly later and whether he'd look at her. Most likely not. Julia decided that she'd ask to borrow something of Melody and Lillian's. They'd let her, and say it was like Project Runway.

When Julia walked out of the bathroom, Claire was sitting on the edge of the bed. Her hair was still perfectly smoothed back against her head as if she hadn't gone out to the park at all. Her khaki skirt ballooned around her in a perfect crescent. Julia could smell her perfume; it was sweet and orangey. Julia pretended Claire wasn't there and walked over to her side of the bed. She began to go through her bag.

They aren't good people, Claire said.

Like you are, said Julia. Claire's face turned maroon. Julia found what she was looking for, a cola-flavored lip balm. She applied it to her lips and smelled the sick scent of fake cola. Julia didn't say goodbye to Claire on her way out.

The sun was setting purple and orange over the grassy lot behind the motel. Boys whooped loudly by the parking lot. A car sputtered on the road. Large insects with cellophane wings zizzed in the grass. Melody and Lillian lounged on beach towels, their shirts off and bedazzled neon bralettes catching in the evening light. Julia pulled on the hem of her uniform shirt and sat down in front of where they lay. Both of the older girls looked at her with interest.

What's the plan? She said. Melody and Lillian exchanged a look that Julia couldn't quite understand. They began to giggle, high-pitched laughter that rose above the three girls and popped in the sky like bubbles. Julia just smiled and rocked back and forth on her knees. From under herself, Melody pulled out a plastic container with a red cap. Gold juice sloshed around inside. Julia watched as Melody put her lips around the rim of the bottle and let the liquid slowly pour into her mouth. She handed it to Lillian. Lillian drank deeply. Then the bottle was shoved in front of Julia's face. She took it, hesitant.

The only alcohol she had seen was the three bottles that sat on the silver cart in the corner of her parent's living room. A clear bottle of vodka with blue flower detailing over the frosted glass, a dark brown bottle of whisky she every so often saw her dad pouring into a cup over ice after dinner, and a skinny, tall green bottle with the word 'vermouth' printed on it in cursive font. That was it. Sometimes as she sat on the couch in the living room, she'd peer over at them with interest. Her parents weren't drinkers, other than her father's occasional nightly sip of the brown liquor. It was something she understood to be strictly adult. But the gold liquid in the plastic bottle that sat in her lap was different. This wasn't off-limits. This wasn't adult. The plastic, the sticker logo—it screamed that it was something that should be hers. Julia unscrewed the lid and took a large gulp.

Melody and Lillian shrieked with delight. It tasted like spicy syrup and burned the back of her throat as it went down. She coughed. Some of the golden liquid dribbled down her chin. She swiped it away with the back of her hand.

All at once, or maybe after thirty minutes of drinking the strange alcohol, the world became brighter and sharper, even though the sun had finally set and dusk was upon the grounds. It was as if Julia had been transported to a different place and body, one where the grass was soft beneath her hands, everything smelled sweet and heavy, and she didn't feel the need to hide anything, her stomach or her thighs or the way that she sometimes had a crooked smile…

Melody and Lillian were laughing about something and clutched each other, rolling around on the towels. Bits of grass stuck to the back of their arms. The lights from the motel windows illuminated the back of their heads, and their stomachs, which Julia stared at, her vision blurred. Julia crawled between the two girls, feeling younger and older all at the same time, and listened to her heart beating in her ears. Melody and Lillian smelled like roses. Julia decided Melody was a pink rose, and Lillian a white. They leaned over her and whispered to one another. Julia looked past them, up at the sky. The stars were bright. She imagined God sitting atop one of them, staring down at her. He had a long white beard and a grandfather-like quality to him. Julia's heart swelled with so much love and happiness and thought this was what people must mean when they said they felt connected to God.

The three girls talked about boys. Julia wasn't going to say anything about Carter Reilly to Melody and Lillian, but they asked if she had a crush on anyone and the golden juice wouldn't let her lie. She talked about his muscles and his smooth voice. Melody asked if he knew she liked him, and Julia shook her head. It felt heavy on her shoulders. Lillian said Carter liked younger girls.

He's kind of odd, but so are you, Melody said. Julia took it as a compliment. Melody and Lillian said they'd help her get Carter, but she'd have to change a few things. She'd have to get a tan, lose ten pounds, wear a push-up bra, and straighten her hair. Then, maybe, she'd have a chance.

He likes girls who smell like vanilla, Lillian said. Julia asked how she knew that. She shrugged and took another sip of alcohol.

Do you know how to kiss? Melody said. Julia shook her head, no. She had thought a lot about kissing people, especially Carter Reilly, and what it would feel like to be that close to someone else. But she hadn't done it. No one had ever been interested in doing it with her. Julia thought back to last year when Claire told her she'd kissed Lucas Padilla, the most popular boy in seventh grade, behind the stairwell leading to the art classrooms. She said he tasted like the turkey sandwich he'd eaten at lunch. Julia was both jealous and completely revolted. That had been the true beginning of the end between Julia and Claire's friendship. The kiss with Lucas Padilla. After that, it was hard for Julia to look at Claire. Hate bubbled in her chest. She took a week off from school for being 'sick' with a 'terrible flu' and ate Girl Scout cookies in bed. Julia couldn't stop thinking about Claire and Lucas kissing, how gross it must have been to kiss him, and Claire's closed eyes trying to enjoy it.

Melody's eyelashes looked like spider legs. She put a hand on Julia's thigh and said to pretend she was Carter Reilly. Julia did exactly that. Lillian whistled. It was an odd feeling, kissing. Julia wasn't sure if kissing girls and kissing boys were any different than one another. This felt pretty good. Julia touched Melody's hair, which was soft and fell through her fingers like Christmas tinsel. Carter Reilly's hair probably didn't feel like that. Carter Reilly probably didn't smell like rose or taste like lip-gloss either, but Julia didn't mind. She tried not to think about God. Wherever he was, sitting atop of one of those stars, Julia hoped he was trying not to think about her too.

Back inside, the motel room was pitch black. The three girls stumbled around, throwing their clothes to the ground. Melody and Lillian went to the bathroom to take off their makeup. Julia

watched the lump on the right side of the queen bed that was Claire. Nausea stirred in Julia's stomach. She got under the covers and closed her eyes.

The next morning, Julia woke up with the taste of bile in her mouth and the hot sun on her face. The sheet was pushed down by her feet. The curtains were pulled open to reveal the concrete parking lot. Melody and Lillian were already gone; the blankets on their bed were tangled and their pillows were on the floor. Claire was in the bathroom. She came out with a towel wrapped around her head and the tip of her nose pink. Julia blinked a few times. Claire told her to hurry up and get ready, or they'd miss their last chance to go to the park.

At first, they aimlessly walked. Julia wasn't sure what to say. She wasn't sure if she had anything to say. They ordered salt-covered pretzels at a food stand. They sat at the picnic table under the large shady tree where Julia, Melody, and Lillian had sat the day before. Julia wanted to ask Claire where the two girls had gone. Why had they left her? Claire was quiet. Her mouth was slightly downturned, her eyes glassy. The sun was still unrelenting and bright. Julia's mouth was dry. Her head pounded and she felt that no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get her eyes to focus.

They decided to go on the Tilt-A-Whirl. It was the only ride where the line was short. The metal seats burned the backsides of their thighs. Julia clung to the metal bar. She felt feverish and the movement of the ride was not helping. Julia looked at Claire. She was perfect. Julia hated Claire's silky blonde hair, the small freckle right below her left eye, and especially her beauty which seemed to come to her so naturally. Julia closed her eyes. Maybe if she focused on her breathing, the ill feeling would go away. They went round and round, faster and faster. Julia realized she was going to be sick as it was happening; she puked up yellow-green, chunky vomit onto her lap. Vomit seeped between her thighs and ran down her legs. The ride screeched to a halt, and Julia began to cry. First, her cry came out as a whisper, dry, as if she were only clearing her throat. Then it grew until Julia choked on her vomit-ridden spit. She felt Claire, beside her, and the tight grasp Claire had on her

hand. She could also feel the crowds of people staring and how they parted for her, the thirteen-year-old girl with vomit on her front and a face full of tears. Claire's hand on hers was sturdy and unmoving. They came to the park bathroom. Julia couldn't bear to look at herself in the mirror. Claire grabbed a wad of paper towels from the counter. She wet them in the sink and began to dab Julia's face.

I'm disgusting, said Julia.

You're still you, said Claire. She gathered Julia's hair into a ponytail and motioned for her to wash off. Julia did. She scrubbed the dried vomit from her mouth until the skin around her lips was rough and red, but the cold water soothed her hot face. Soon the trash was full of crumpled, vomit-stained paper towels. All Julia wanted was to lie down. Claire handed her another paper towel and Julia wondered whether it was easier or harder to forgive someone you loved. As Julia patted the rest of the water from her face, she backed up from the mirror, and Claire kept a hand on her shoulder.

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