Plus One

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Plus One

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by
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Swarm

Matt Stern sits in the far-right corner pew with his wife and two daughters, none of whom are listening to the sermon. Johanna is swinging her legs, her Sunday sandals dangling from her toes. Some of her nails are still painted pink. Harriet sits beside her in silent protest. She has not sung a hymn in weeks much to her mother’s dismay, but earlier Matt saw her lips move during a familiar chorus. They are thinly drawn now. *Do not cross me*, they read, like a sign left in front of an empty store for all the passersby to note. Cassie takes no notice. She stares ahead at the lectern, setting an example for her daughters which neither of them seems to be learning anything from. She nods at the appropriate times, draws in a breath at every other mention of *Temptation*, looks at her feet when the pastor brings up *Sin*.

Matt knows all of this because he has not for one moment looked towards the front of the church since the sermon started. He grew up in this congregation. The pew in front of them bears his initials, though not officially. He carved them into the seat with a pocket knife years ago during a particularly boring Gospel. That was before he had a wife whose endearingly bad acting he could study, before he had daughters who didn’t mind that he painted their toenails poorly, before they had begun to demonstrate that they -- like their graffiti-fiend of a father -- were unafraid of making their small, silent mark on the world.

Before the cough, the Stern family is not any more or less significant than the rest of the parishioners sitting in the old white church. There are other girls close to Johanna’s age whom Matt vaguely recognizes, other teenagers like Harriet whose postures seem to express similar though varying states of annoyance. Matt does a quick scan of the other couples, trying to assess
their comfort levels with one another. The younger ones lean on each other’s shoulders, seemingly comforted by Father Andrew’s assurance that no one in the room is going to Hell for swearing at the television during Sunday night football. It’s a nice thought, and the Father is doing a good job of selling his point. The elderly couples laugh politely, impressed by the young man behind the lectern. Matt cannot read the couples his own age. Their eyes, like his, wander. They bounce from the ceiling fan, the small circular mosaic of stained glass above the crucifix at the front of the room, their own children’s swinging feet. In the back row, Matt Stern feels like just another man who cannot decide whether or not that feeling in the pit of his stomach is some good old Christian guilt or the results of an overzealous appetite at breakfast earlier that morning.

Before he can determine which it is, he expels a cough so loud that the queasy-stomach feeling itself turns into guilt. White-haired heads spin around to see who has interrupted their daydreams, and Father Andrew issues an oddly solemn “May God bless you,” before returning to his justification of the way in which praising God could be likened to scoring a touchdown.

“Do you need a tissue?” Cassie asks, already reaching for her purse.

“No, I’m fine,” Matt says.

“I have cough drops if you need them,” Harriet whispers. She unzips her windbreaker to reveal a sizeable stash of hard candies.

“Harriet,” Cassie hisses. “That’s medicine. We talked about this. Give me those.”

“Sorry dad,” she says, and hands them to her mother. Cassie does an unconvincing job of hiding her poutiness. Her daughter’s mistake is not having stolen the cough drops to satisfy what has always been an insatiable sweet tooth. Her mistake is possessing legitimate medicine, rather than trusting in the mysterious and as-yet unproven healing benefits of one of her mother’s teas.
The strength and unpredictability of Matt’s cough have almost guaranteed that there will be a mug of hot, bitter brew in his immediate future.

Over the last few years, no one has been spared from the role of “guinea pig” for Cassie’s self-developed “recipes.” Most of them involve some combination of common herbs and roots with the occasional flower or syrup added for what Matt believes is just a touch of flair. The drinks have evolved from glorified basil water to something relatively palatable, at times almost soothing (if Matt is feeling generous). This, however, is just a cough. One cough. It warrants neither the amount of preparation Cassie’s medicine requires nor the statement of legitimacy that accompanies each drink. Matt chalks up her insistence to a kind of self-consciousness, a hesitance to fully accept her own homeopathic interests. His own willingness to participate, however, is less an attempt at reassurance and more the result of a life spent hearing and later accepting the reality that good medicine is reserved for those whose problems cannot be fixed with time and an extra prayer before bed; less forgivingly, for those who were born into a life that can support a dependency on others. Even with a family, a not-insignificant part of Matt has always believed that at the end of the day, he can only truly depend on himself.

“I put some peppermint extract in this one,” Cassie says later that afternoon. She hands Matt a mug that never made back into the box of Christmas decorations. It is covered in candy canes. With Cassie, kitsch is never a coincidence. She stands at the kitchen sink, replacing small glass vials of smelling salts and oils into a small wooden box that sits on the windowsill. Loose strands from her hastily-braided hair fall into her eyes. She pushes them back mindlessly, a ritual both comfortable and necessary.
There are other rituals that pick up after Matt’s first cough. There is the half-teaspoon of ginger Cassie sets out for him before bed, the three times she taps her right thumb and forefinger together whenever one of their daughters sneezes, the four-note arpeggio Matt whistles before making that treacherous left turn on his way home from work. In a different family, actions like these might be footnotes to the greater narrative of Growth Over Time. No one would think twice about taking some spice for one’s health, about substituting a private, nervous tick for a “Bless you.” For Cassie, these are not footnotes, they are chapters. Scenes. Small, related events whose relationship and significance are worth acknowledging. At least, this is how Matt has come to understand them.

Little is known about Matt Stern in Beringer Mines, Pennsylvania, despite the fact that he was born here nearly forty years earlier and has chosen to raise a family in his childhood home. He knows (perhaps too well) the big yarns that small minds have long been spinning: Matt Stern, grandson of the oak tree next to the old white church; Matt Stern, repairer of roofs who can see the future on the horizon if the sun is right; Matt Stern, the broad-shouldered man with the flaxen beard who was born of the barley fields and is awaiting the day when he can finally return.

Cassie is well-practiced at the art of laughing these away. Twelve years of PTA meetings, fundraisers and church dinners have turned her into the kind of woman who will let you down so gently you don’t even know she isn’t holding you up anymore until she’s halfway across the room. In addition to being the Stern family’s ambassador, she has successfully convinced their daughters, Harriet and Johanna, that she and Matt are in possession of the magic that keeps their lives running smoothly. Her magic, Matt is convinced, is much more evident -- dinner every night, an uncanny sense of direction, healing powers that can fix anything from an achy limb to a
gash in the foot from climbing trees in summer. Matt is cautious not to use the “M” word in reference to his own role in his daughter’s lives. Instead, he has become the most ardent whisperer of puns and advice and private incantations against the strangenesses and maladies of which only he is aware.

The second cough is one of these strangenesses.

For the last ten years, Matt Stern has not once had an affliction. He does not count the undercooked chicken he ate three years ago at a roadside shack on his way to a job up in New Jersey, nor does he count the numerous butterflies and dizzy spells that have appeared in moments of self-doubt or heat exhaustion. While the rest of the world trips from one season into the next with hunched shoulders and drippy noses, Matt has greeted each of them with open arms and open nostrils. Harriet and Johanna have so far seemed to inherit their mother’s mortality. They catch the fevers and stomach aches that get passed around at school. Spring, for Harriet, is just one long excuse to eat cough drops like candy. They drink their mother’s teas to cure their frequent hiccups, their seasonal sore throats, their occasional mysterious headaches. Matt is not affected by any of this. The counter-power to Cassie’s motherly witchcraft is Matt’s unwavering conviction that they will grow into their health as he has. The frenzy is just a necessary but temporary phase, the first of several in which a solid foundation is laid down for the rest of life. It is not that he does not care. He simply does not worry. Worry is for those who do not already know the outcome. Each night, Cassie confides in him her anxieties and concerns. Matt shares them, carries them with her, but never shoulders them himself. He lies in bed taking deep clear breaths, hoping Cassie will one day learn by his example. He pulls her closer to make sure she is
real, and that this is not some lucid dream that a younger version of himself is having. She shifts in his arms. The evidence is in his favor.

Despite feeling very sure of his health, Matt does not hear Harriet trying to get his attention the first three times the next morning at breakfast.

“DAD,” she says loudly.

“I heard you,” Matt says, lacing his work boots.

“Not the first million times,” says Johanna from the other end of the small kitchen table. Matt says nothing when she misses her mouth with her fork and a piece of pancake falls behind her shoulder. He looks at the mug of green tea, then at Cassie. She stands with her back to him, scanning the bowels of the over-crowded refrigerator.

“Jo: tone,” she says without turning around.

“Just finish up,” Matt whispers to Johanna, trying to soften the blow dealt from Cassie and her third eye. He looks at the tea again. He says, “It’s not a cold,” loudly for everyone to hear, hoping that Cassie will agree.

“How do you know if it’s a cold?” Johanna asked. “Why do they call it that? And why can’t we call fevers ‘a warm?’ This is kind of upsetting.”

“What’s upsetting?” Cassie turns around and shuts the fridge. “Hon, your tea’s getting cold.”

“Like you,” says Johanna.

“He’s getting a cold, not actually cold,” Harriet chimes in.

“I’m not getting anything,” says Matt. He finishes the final loop on his boot with a defiant tug. “I coughed once.”
“Loud enough that God heard you,” Harriet mumbles.

“God doesn’t listen.” Matt bends down and pretends to tie his other shoe in order to avoid the looks he imagines his family is giving him. He didn’t mean to say this.

“He does if you get a cold and sneeze in his house,” Johanna says. Harriet mouths “If you cough.”

Matt feels something just below the base of his neck that flutters, like moths trapped inside his chest. He clears his throat to stave off the third cough. He has not even touched this first mug of tea, and is not ready for the second one that another cough will guarantee later in the evening. Since childhood, sheer force of will has always worked, although in those days it was out of necessity.

Despite the moths in his chest, he manages to force down a couple of mouthfuls of pancake. He remembers growing up eating pancakes, sitting at this same kitchen table, although in those days there were no drawings taped to the refrigerator, no small toys left to collect dust in every corner and crevice of the house, certainly no mugs of medicinal tea. The refrigerator was where the bookcase is now. The yellow floral wallpaper still remains, although Matt has plans to remove that. He would stare at it emptily as he ate breakfast, thinking up excuses not to go to school and confront the boys who stood by the dumpster everyday with their slingshots and their fists, waiting for him to arrive.

*You’re not sick,* his mother would say from the kitchen sink. She never bothered to look up from the soap suds and piles of dirty dishes.

*My throat’s been hurting all morning,* he’d say, wondering if it was too late to start talking with a bit more gravel in his voice for effect.
What if I go to school and get sicker and you can’t pick me up because Daddy has the truck?

Then you’ll be sick at school. But you won’t, cause you’re not.

“But I am,” Matt says out loud. Harriet raises an eyebrow, its speed and precision the result of years of practice. Again, the moths in his chest flutter and the third cough threatens to rise to the surface. Harriet, unnoticing, pushes her plate toward her father and motions at the mound of potatoes and peppers. He sneaks a forkful off of her plate. She offers another, but he declines. One day, he intones with his own raised eyebrow, you will have to finish all of these yourself. It is not until after he has already forced down the bolus that he wonders if polishing off Harriet’s Untouchables are what have caused the first two coughs.

“You know,” Johanna begins through a mouthful of potato, “you could always chabbah heddaw.”

“Jo, stop talking with your mouth full,” Cassie says. She rejoins them with a small bowl of oranges and ginger, mug of tea in hand.

“She meant ‘chop your head off,’” Harriet translates.

The third, fourth, and fifth coughs arrive at once, and Matt rushes to the bathroom down the hall looking for a towel to cover his mouth, for water to wash out his throat, for a corner of the house in which to hide. He sits on the edge of the bathtub holding a small paper cup full of water. It is covered in ladybugs, which he realizes is supposed to comfort him, but in this moment, he wonders if the cough will persist through the work day. Cups of tea be damned. A moth flutters around the ceiling light, its incessant humming frequently interrupted by one final, sharp fizzle and then a brief moment of silence while it collects itself. Even as Matt hears
footsteps coming down the hall from the kitchen, he does not look away or attempt to make it seem as though he has not spent the past five minutes watching this futile display of ambition. Even as the door creaks open, Matt simply turns his head to acknowledge the intrusion.

“Hi, Daddy,” Johanna says as she enters. “I’m gonna wash my hands.” With practiced speed, she drags the small plastic step stool from the toilet over to the sink and climbs on. She looks at Matt in the mirror.

“Daddy, we’re going to the park for class today!” She laughs as she turns on the faucet.

“What are you going to do?”

“Pick flowers and all. I’ll bring you one back if you like. You don’t have to put it in your hair but I will put one in mine and you can just leave one in your truck maybe.”

“But I would want to see it!” Matt takes a final swig from the paper cup and launches it into the trash.

“The flower will make you stop getting cold, maybe.” Matt says nothing but hands her a towel to dry her hands. She jumps down and walks out. Matt is not sure where she learned to walk away without looking back, but it is a glimpse into a future he has not considered in some time. He wonders that perhaps in his exhaustion he is reading too much into the gesture. It could be that she is just as eager to get rid of this cough as he is, and he should have made more of an effort to be excited about his daughter’s newfound form of alternative medicine. She has done similar things: at a Halloween street parade when Matt declined to walk with her because of his distaste for crowds, she asked Cassie and refused outright to oblige Matt in sharing a piece of chocolate when he asked for one later that evening. He waited for them at the end, only to be greeted by his wife, flush with pride at the number of unfamiliar faces who cheered for their
daughter, and Johanna who could not be bothered to answer how it had felt to be the center of attention. At a bowling alley party, when Matt had to return to work instead of taking a turn with Johanna, she declined any request from Matt to do her chores for a solid week. Harriet, unlike her sister, had always been easy to guilt into forgiveness. There would be tears, big ones, whenever Matt could not participate. After a good cry and some earnest but hasty words of apology, all was forgotten. Matt is not sure where Johanna learned to remember so stubbornly, to collect each small infraction as if they were stones in a jar. It bothers him that this “jar” is private, not for him to see but for her to review.

Finally, Matt gets up from the bathroom and helps Johanna into her jacket, helps Harriet find stray papers left in odd corners of her bedroom, keeps her from drinking milk out of the carton on her way out the door. Cassie gives him a kiss on the cheek and wishes him a good day at work before disappearing out the door with the girls, leaving Matt alone in the kitchen. He stands by the door for a minute, listening to Cassie’s van drive down the lane towards the main road. For a moment, he confuses it with the sound of his father’s truck making the same journey, and he wonders where in the house his mother could be.

Later that afternoon, on a rooftop overlooking a new development project, Matt carves his daughter’s initials into one of the newly-replaced shingles. Every house he has worked on bears the letters “HS/JS” somewhere only he will see. He still uses the same pocket knife that scarred the far corner pew of the New Hope Baptist Church, but now there are other names more important than his that deserve memorializing. Through his face mask, he can smell the sawdust being kicked up by the bandsaw downstairs. On the other side of the roof, near the chimney, his
friend Aaron waves to him. He stands confidently on the sloped surface, his lean arms tinged with sunburn.

“You finally decided to put on a mask, I see!” Aaron calls.

“Just didn’t want to get a bunch of dust in my mouth.”

“What makes today different?”

Matt replaces the pocket knife in his pants and stands up. He squints to see Aaron through the afternoon sun, but the young man becomes little more than a silhouette.

“I’ve had a couple of coughs lately. Just a fluke, mostly.”

“You?” Aaron asks, walking over. “Your girl make you drink that batshit witch doctor stuff?” The profanity surprises Matt, but what surprises him more is how offended he is by it.

“It’s not batshit. It’s worked so far,” he says perhaps too firmly. The faint but distinct aftertaste of bitter herbs still lingers on his tongue. He second-guesses his defense of Cassie’s homeopathy, but Aaron’s flippancy warrants more than nonchalance.

“I’m telling you, though!” Aaron continues. “They say you have to wear this shit all the time in China because of all the smog or whatever!”

“Aaron, there’s no way.”

“Look it up, man! It’s like a whole nother planet.”

“You go to the public library and print me out a picture of that and maybe I’ll believe it.”

Matt turns back to his loose shingle.

“You know,” Aaron starts, visibly excited by the opportunity to air one of his conspiracy theories, of which he has many. Usually, Matt is better at keeping him on a relatively coherent train of thought, but he’s too busy trying not to kick up too much dust, and has let Aaron spiral.
Even if Matt knows that the state of Delaware is not actually just a government experiment to test weather manipulation (though he will admit he has never been there on a sunny day), Aaron has the uncanny power of contagious persuasion that only someone truly convinced by their own accuracy can muster.

“What if your chest cold is really just a long-term side effect of China’s smog reaching America?”

“God dammit, Aaron,” Matt says. “This isn’t a chest cold and it is not from China.”

“You been inhuman too long, Matt. I don’t think I’ve ever heard one bodily function come out of you.”

“No?”

“Matt tell me the last time you sneezed. Or burped. Or caught some sniffle when one of the girls came home spewing snot and spit and --”

“I get it,” he says, then adds, “If I’m being honest, I’m just trying to keep from having to drink some tree bark later.”

“I feel you!” Aaron laughs as he walks back behind the chimney. “My mom always had me drinking vinegar and shit. Not about to double back on that. I don’t care if it’s money. I’ll take two Tylenol over fish oil.”

Matt takes one last look at the initials on the shingle before walking over to help Aaron with his stapling. He readjusts the mask and tells himself it’s nothing, it’s not a cold, not “a warm” as Johanna insists. The moths flutter in his chest, but are quieted by a quick clearing of the throat.
Matt stumbles through the next several days, clearing his throat more often but grateful for two possibilities: either that Aaron has the decency to say nothing or that he has the attention-span of a goldfish and does not notice. He spaces out at meals when Harriet tries to get his attention. *Pardon my French*, she says one night, *but you’ve been really fricken out of it.* Cassie gives Harriet a spoonful of horseradish for her freshness and Matt a tablespoon of ginger, though Matt is not sure why he is being punished. At times, things are clear, but he finds himself hazier than normal. Instructions require repeating. Questions require rewording. The usual Friday night *The-Kids-Are-In-Bed-So-Let’s-Watch-A-Horror-Movie* event becomes an exercise in multitasking when Matt realizes he has to both sit up and stay awake while following the plot of the movie. Finally, he succumbs. *I’m going to bed,* he thinks he hears himself say, but the screams of the couples at the drive-in on the TV are too loud for him to hear his own voice. The moths in his chest are fluttering too furiously for him to feel the vibrations of the words as he speaks them. He must have said something, because Cassie smiles at him and turns down the volume as he makes his way out of the living room.

Matt does not entirely remember waking up at 5am and calling in sick the next morning, but he thanks his intuition when he finally emerges from his bed at 10:16. The moths in his chest are frenzied, badgering him to be released. Everyone has left for the day but the house feels loud. His breathing echoes in his ears. The master bedroom is spinning, the various pictures and pieces of furniture no more than smears of color against a white wall. He lies back down and stares at the ceiling fan. It reminds him of a dervish he saw once in an old issue of National Geographic, spinning frantically to some kind of sacred rhythm he cannot identify. He briefly watches its blades become a blur until that too proves to be difficult.
Instead of counting sheep, as his mother often flippantly suggested he do whenever he complained of “acute insomnia”, Matt tries to count the number of roof tiles bearing Harriet and Johanna’s initials. He plays each job back like a film of his life, one house leading to another until he has crossed every street in the greater Beringer Mines area, relived each carving, flicked the pocket knife more than a hundred times. He thinks about how there will now be one less roof for his daughters to claim as their little memorial, another way in which they can someday say their father was *totally fricken out of it* or however Harriet phrases things. The rest of the day passes with thoughts like these: of days spent standing on houses, of sacred places made secular with alphabetical scars, of ordinary surfaces made holy using the same, subtle strokes.

At dinner, Matt sits at the table, eyes staring blankly into the mug of black tea Cassie has placed before him. The moths in his chest seem to throw themselves against the cage of his ribs. Someone is speaking, perhaps to him, but it sounds as if he has slipped under water. The sounds are deeper, drawn out, muddled. There is a yellow flower on his napkin where he could have sworn there were two Alka Seltzer tablets before. He is equally grateful and confused.

“I told you I’d bring you one to make you feel better,” says Johanna.

“Dad, you don’t look too well,” Harriet says. She puts down her fork to examine her father’s face more closely.

“There’s some real Tylenol upstairs, Matt,” Cassie says.

*I’ll just drink the tea*, Matt hears himself say. He picks up the mug, but misjudges its weight and it drops to the floor. Shards of peppermint-colored ceramic lie helplessly among a pool of lukewarm tea.

No, no, I'll -- he grabs the napkin off the table and bends over to start wiping, but this time misjudges his own weight and hits the floor.

The warmth of the tea slowly soaking through the back of his shirt is comforting at first. It is all he feels. The coldness of the linoleum is the next thing he identifies against the back of his hand, the side of his bare feet, just above his cheek where the tea has not yet spread. Then come the sounds. Cassie yelling, a firm shake of his shoulders. He’s too tired to respond. He looks at the light above the kitchen table, momentarily fooling himself into believing he is once again lying in bed. But then he remembers when he was lying there, thinking of the initials, and suddenly there’s guilt. It hits him at the same moment one of Johanna’s tears does, at the same moment Harriet runs towards the phone mounted on the wall, at the same moment he feels Cassie’s hand gently hit his cheek. He opens his mouth to apologize, to tell Johanna that there’s nothing wrong, but a moth escapes and the rest follow suit. Doubled over in the tea, unable to stop himself from coughing, Matt wishes he could show his daughters all the roofs with a view of the stars that belong, in some part, to them, so they would know that their father is a man who makes sure he takes them with him wherever he goes. He does not want them to see him as a man unable to lift himself out of a sea of bitter, black tea. Johanna picks up her flower out of the spill and places it on her father’s shivering shoulder. They’ll be here soon, he thinks he hears Cassie say, but the only they who are coming he knows of are the moths, and the more he tries to apologize, the faster they escape.
The shuffling of people and suitcases ceased, and only the whine of a tea kettle was left, mixed with the occasional high-pitched voice of a muppet on Sesame Street. It was still early, even though the Stern family had driven the forty-five minutes to Philadelphia to Cassie’s sister Millie’s apartment. Normally, on a Saturday, Johanna would have woken up and accompanied Cassie to the store, Matt would have gone to work, Harriet would have slept in until her own shame at waking up past noon forced her out of bed, and Millie would have woken up alone. Instead, Harriet and Johanna sat on the couch, completely mesmerized by the novelty of Saturday morning television. Their parents had left quickly, as evidenced by the suitcases on their side that had yet to be moved from the entrance hall. Millie, still busy manning the tea kettle and skillet full of scrambled eggs, made a mental note to have the girls move them later. Yes, that’s how you hold kids responsible, right? Make them do things.

Millie was pretty sure this was correct, although she had no children of her own. For the last fifteen years, she had lived in this two-story apartment in Philadelphia, spending her career filming commercials and short promotional videos for local businesses. She ran her own freelance operation out of the small guest bedroom on the first floor, which had been turned into a home office. It was still too early in the day for Harriet and Johanna to muster the energy to explore the house, for which Millie was grateful. It would give her enough time to hide the expensive camera equipment she normally left lying around on the floor. Not that she didn’t trust them. Fourteen year olds knew better than to mess with other people’s stuff right? Did seven year olds? She couldn’t remember much about either age. She focused on not burning the eggs.
In theory, this would be a simple weekend. Cassie and Matt would drive to Delaware to bring Cassie and Millie’s mother, Beatrice, to live with the Sterns while Matt took time off for his illness. Millie had always thought of her brother-in-law as a kind of Paul Bunyan, just a big man walking silently through the woods of their little hometown up north, big smile, firm step. She almost hadn’t recognized him when she’d answered the door that morning. His beard looked tangled, his limbs wiry, his posture slackened. He’d always dwarfed Cassie, but at 7 in the morning on this rainy Saturday, she seemed to be the only thing keeping him upright. It half reminded Millie of the stories Beatrice had told her about her grandfather’s illness. Millie was too young to remember, but the phrase “slow decay” played over and over in her mind. She had never spent much time with her nieces and was reluctant at first to let them stay, but the thought of having to live in their time capsule of a house with Beatrice and their sick father made Millie’s stomach churn. Immediately after confirming with her sister, she’d run to the grocery store and picked up two boxes of Poptarts, as well as a two-liter bottle of orange soda and some silly string. None of it really made any sense together, but Millie hoped that it would be a small reprieve from whatever had been going on before they arrived. She remembered liking silly string, though not at what age. It was either somewhere close to seven or right around fourteen. One of them would care.

“Still tired?” Millie asked as she joined them on the couch.

“A bit,” said Johanna. Her eyes remained glued to the screen.

“Mom said we had to go to bed early, but I stayed up writing.”

“Writing?” Millie asked. Harriet turned toward her quickly and looked surprised. Millie felt bad. She hadn’t meant to pry.
“You know….dumb stuff. Like notes. About the day. Or things.”

“I see,” Millie said into her mug of tea. She left again and checked the scrambled eggs.

From the stove, she could see her nieces half asleep, their drooping faces awash in bright fluorescent color. Her biggest interactions with them had been when they were much younger, running around the house at the infrequent family gathering, when Millie was one of maybe two or three other guests. Their weekend had barely begun and already Millie felt as though she’d made a misstep. Asking follow-up questions didn’t seem invasive, but maybe it was just early.

She plated the eggs and set them on the table, along with two glasses of orange juice and a vase of flowers she’d cut from a small flower bed in the park the other day.

“Do you guys want some breakfast?” she asked. Without answering, Harriet and Johanna rose from the couch and took seats at the kitchen table as Big Bird explained what it meant to be “considerate.” He talked as Millie took a seat at the head of the table. A wave of exhaustion washed over her the moment she rested her chin on her palm.

“I didn’t know if y’all liked eggs or what. I usually skip breakfast,” Millie explained.

“Mom says that’s the most important one,” Johanna said.

“I just sleep in forever and miss it by accident,” Harriet said.

“Does your mama drive you to school?”

“Yep. And Daddy sleeps,” said Johanna. Harriet pushed her eggs around on her plate.

Millie shifted in her seat. “If you want some Poptarts instead, I bought like three boxes.”

Johanna looked up. “Mom doesn’t let us have those unless it’s for snack.”

“Mom’s not here, Jo.”
Millie got up and went to the cabinet. She put three packs of Poptarts in the middle of the table and sat back down. Harriet immediately reached for one and tore it open. Johanna cautiously slid the nearest pack toward her dish after a moment of watching her sister.

“You guys don’t eat sugar?”

“Harriet steals the cough drops,” said Johanna.

“That’s not true, Aunt Millie. Dad lets me have it.”

“Only because you two are in a secret society against mom.”

Millie laughed. “I don’t think that’s true.”

“We’re in a secret society against you, Jo,” Harriet said. A particularly thorough bite of Poptart punctuated the statement.

“Okay, okay,” Millie said, putting her tea in the sink. “If you’re done, you can come bring your dishes and take your Poptarts in the living room.” The girls did as they were told and found their spots on the couch. The vaguely cheerful Muppet chorus was abruptly switched to the valley girl accent and laugh track of what Millie assumed was a show Harriet had picked. She washed the dishes, occasionally turning around to see Johanna nibbling cautiously at her Poptart. Harriet had fallen asleep with her mouth open.

For the first time in her life, Millie had a sense of what it had been like for their mother growing up, just the three of them: Millie, Cassie, and Beatrice. She, of course, had been the Johanna figure, but she did not remember Cassie being on the defensive nearly as much as Harriet seemed to be. Cassie had been much more of a This Is Who I Am, I Won’t Apologize type, whereas Harriet struck her as more of a I’m Sorry I Happen To Be Like This type. She realized the only evidence for this was the different speeds at which her nieces had reached for the
Poptarts, but all the small things might add up over time. Millie finished the dishes, grabbed her laptop from the office and sat next to a now drooling Harriet on the couch.

“She does that a lot,” said Johanna, eyes unblinking.

“Does what?” asked Millie in between short bursts of typing.

“Sleeps like that. It’s pretty gross.”

“You don’t drool? Never?”

“No, I’m clean. My suitcase is packed nicely because I remembered how to fold clothes from last year when Mom showed me but I think Harriet forgot that lesson because you should see how her stuff is. Do you have an ironing board?”

“I do,” Millie said.

“Good,” said Johanna. She took a bite of her Poptart. “She’ll need it.”

Millie laughed. She did not have this sense of her niece the last time they spoke over the phone.

“You don’t visit much,” Johanna said finally.

“I work a lot,” Millie said.

“Are you working now?”

“I am, actually.”

“My dad works on weekends, too. He doesn’t get to sit inside though.”

“I know he does. He fixes people’s houses, right, Jo?”

“Something like that, I think.” She took a massive bite of Poptart, her eyes fixed on the television. “Can I change the channel?”
“Sure.” Millie didn’t bother pointing out where it was. Johanna could find it. Indeed, she did, tucked underneath Harriet’s thigh. She almost woke her sister up, but the tug was calculated just enough that nothing happened except Harriet’s drool slipped a little farther down her chin.

“Disgusting.” Johanna muttered as she switched the channel to one Millie didn’t even realize was still on air. She was disappointed to see that the quality of the storytelling had suffered in the thirty-odd years it had been since the last time she sat down to watch it.

She closed her laptop and sat with her nieces, trying to be totally present and witness to the cartoon bloodshed Johanna seemed to be reveling in. Millie had barely recovered from the slight she had dealt Harriet earlier. Now, it seemed as though Johanna were Millie’s match. The vocabulary coming out of the girl seemed to be slightly more elevated than she remembered a seven year old having, but then she paused and asked herself when the last time she interacted with a seven year old was. Was it Harriet? What had Harriet been like? For the most part, Harriet had picked up the phone on birthdays and Christmas and uttered one-word responses. A polite “Thank you.” The occasional “Yes I did get your package. Mom says to say Good Luck” and things of that nature. Millie had done little more than that herself, offering things like “Were you good this year? How are your classes?” Lately, even those had dropped off the script to make room for heavier, more open ended ones. “How’s your dad doing? How’s your mom? How are you?” Her nieces responses had been reduced to Okay, Good, and Good. Millie decided to test her niece.

“Johanna.”

“Hm?”

“Do you know what ‘videography’ is?”
“What?”

“Videography.” She put the laptop down in her chair and started walking down the hall. Johanna followed her. The office, though carefully labeled, was still not quite put together. Cases of camera equipment lay open in front of the desk, their lens caps strewn about. The room itself fit the large wooden desk and several black floor-to-ceiling bookshelves comfortably. Millie watched as Johanna scanned the lower shelves carefully.

“You read all these?” she asked.

“Most of them.”

“Why do you have cameras?”

“For videography.”

“Pictures?”

“Videos.”

“Do you make movies?”

“I make commercials.”

“Did you make the one for the massage parlor in Beringer?”

“No.”

“Oh. It had a dancing bottle of nailpolish in it.”

“Yeah, that wasn’t me.” Millie shuffled around some of the camera bags, but Johanna’s interest remained on trying to decipher the large books of photography that threatened to jump off of the shelf. She thumbed several of the spines. Millie took the opportunity to close some of the bags. Johanna shrugged as she walked back down the hall towards the living room.
It was barely 8 in the morning, and already Millie was tired. She couldn’t tell if having Johanna in the room with her made the apartment feel more lived-in, or if her inability to get Johanna interested in the cameras made it feel just as singular and empty as it had before. It wasn’t bad that her niece wasn’t super into it. Of course. She was seven. Seven year olds weren’t into art books and things they can take apart, clearly.

Millie sat down at the desk and surveyed the room, now acutely aware of just how many books lined the small room. Every few seconds, the tinny sound of a crash or a slap pierced the open doorway, the hallmark of any slapstick cartoon. She felt heavy in the chair as if each interaction with Johanna and Harriet had added a pound to her shoulders. Her mother had had a nickname for that feeling. *Bowling ball, maybe? Fuzeball? Handball?* She couldn’t remember it.

In addition to this rare pang of nostalgia, Millie imagined that this is how her mother might have felt on similar Saturday mornings when she and Cassie had gone outside to explore the woods near their house. Maybe her mother would sit in the living room and listen to the sounds of her daughters hitting each other with sticks and screaming at the discovery of every new bug. Maybe she would sit there and feel like *her* mother, each woman’s experience like one of an infinite number of reflections in a mirrored mirror. Millie had never considered the quiet moments of parenting, which she understood were few and far between. This was never something Cassie had shared with her, let alone Matt. So far, in their lives, Millie had just made cameos. There was no narrative in an isolated phone call made every other holiday. She barely had a speaking part. She just walked on, delivered her line, and exited the same way she had entered.
Despite this, Millie was not ready to deviate from the past, and spent the rest of the morning on the couch with her nieces who slipped in and out of consciousness. She sent emails to people she’d been avoiding, inspired by the presence of two children to make her feel more like a Person with Responsibilities. She looked up places around the city they might be interested in seeing, but as noon approached, her hunger took over her need to act as tour guide. Millie felt herself slowly melt into the couch, aware that the amount of time they all spent sitting there was directly proportionate to the amount of energy required to pull themselves up and leave. When the brightness of the afternoon light coming in from the windows behind them was too strong to ignore, Millie thrust herself forward and off of the couch. She checked the cabinets again for something to make for lunch.

“We’re going on a field trip,” she announced from the kitchen. Harriet stirred.

“Please, dear Zeus, not the Liberty Bell,” she moaned, her eyes still closed.

“Good Lord no. I was thinking more along the lines of lunch.”

Johanna rolled her eyes. “Great. A field trip to the kitchen.”

“No, we’re going out,” and with that, Millie walked into the hallway, choosing to lead by example rather than try and rouse them both. The girls put on their windbreakers. Millie checked her purse.

For the first three blocks, Harriet and Johanna did not ask where they were being taken. Johanna held Millie’s hand and occasionally stopped to admire some particularly large wad of bubble gum stuck to the pavement, or a metal cellar-door that she could walk across and stomp on. Harriet seemed to be more interested in the skyline, which Millie had never found all that fascinating. She walked straight ahead, taking mental notes of the number of blocks before each
turn, suddenly aware that her Philadelphia was not the same one Harriet saw, nor the same one that Johanna so curiously examined.

Millie wasn’t sure if this was a shortcoming, this imperceptibility. Maybe the fact that she had never identified this imperceptibility was itself an imperceptibility, and there was no chance that she would be able to connect with her nieces for the rest of the weekend. She hadn’t wanted to be the boring relative that lectured her nieces about history and things like that, because she was sure they wouldn’t be interested. But seeing them discover things for themselves, things she could never have pointed out to them, she almost wished she’d taken that on. Even if they had been bored. She might have shown them something.

“There’s a cool piece of graffiti up here,” she said.

“Our dad used to do that,” Johanna said, suddenly interested in something other than bubble gum. “I sat on his name once.”

They stopped to admire the illegible script, an electric neon tangle of lines and waves that struck Millie as resembling the wires of some gigantic machine rather than an idea someone had articulated. The three of them stood there staring at it for a few minutes before the novelty wore off, and the destination became more important than the walk to it.

It had been years since Millie had stepped into the Reading Terminal Market, despite the fact that she lived a brisk walk away from it. Its endless row of stalls and fluorescent signs blurred with the scents of butchered pigs and salted fish until her senses were confused and she wasn’t sure if she was smelling a sign or touching cinnamon. It was disorienting. Her nieces loved it.
“Stay close,” she said, beelining for a small pizzeria she remembered passing years before. There were too many people to keep track of. Choice would confuse and upset the girls. They came to a support pillar and Millie let go of Johanna’s hand to walk around. Harriet stayed several feet in front, continuously looking backward to make sure Millie was still there.

“Keep going, we’ll get some pizza,” Millie said.

“Johanna doesn’t like pizza,” Harriet said.

“Johanna, don’t you like--”

There was no Johanna.

“Harriet, stop!” she called.

This was it. A huge mistake. She never should have told Cassie she’d take the girls. Just last week she’d spent three hours in the office looking for a lens cap she thought she’d misplaced only to find it in her car the next day. Three hours looking for a lens cap. In her own goddamn home. And now she had to find a whole child in this nightmare funhouse made of meat and neon. Didn’t people stop looking for missing children after 24 hours? Was that the window? How long had they been walking? The support pillar was ten feet away. Johanna couldn’t have walked more than that in the time it took them to cover the distance. Millie looked to her right, but found only a pastry case of small, chocolate truffles. A young boy stood next to her, lips pressed against the case. Not Johanna.

“Harriet, where’s your sister?” Harriet shrugged defensively.

“Johanna!” The masses kept rushing by, Millie’s calls obscured by a wall of white noise created by plastic bags and shoes and conversations kept to a dull hum.
She was gone. Millie knew she shouldn’t have felt guilty about letting them watch TV all day in the living room. At least there they were safe. Explaining to Cassie that they only thing they’d eaten for two days was Poptarts and eggs now seemed more favorable than explaining that Johanna had gone missing in a supermarket. She had tried to ignore the whispers she heard at those infrequent family gatherings, the slight shift in Cassie’s tone when she asked how “things outside of work” were going. The detour around the relationship question. Around the child question. Thirty five years and Millie had never really asked herself these things. She walked through the streets of her own personal Philadelphia, never once considering the possibility that the people around her did the same thing, that there were an infinite number of Philadelphias being created and experienced around her. She never asked herself what it would be like to partake in other people’s Philadelphias, nor what it would mean for her to share her own. For a moment when she had stood in the kitchen observing her sleeping nieces, she had entertained the idea of what it might be like to play that role, but maybe she wasn’t cut out for it and the most she could be trusted with was a camera and a shoulder bag, but at even that had proved to be too much. Every little girl rushing past looked like Johanna. Every adult holding their hand was doing a better job than Millie. Every teenager lagging behind was more helpful than Harriet and now she had to find her.

“Aunt Millie!” Harriet called.

Millie turned in the opposite direction, certain that Johanna had just lagged behind. She took a few steps and scanned the hallway. She craned her neck to see around the figures standing in front of the various cases.

She tried again. “Johanna!”
“Aunt Millie!” Harriet called.

A dark thought took hold of Millie, and she briefly began to scan the faces of any middle-aged man in a ten foot radius, trying to judge in the two or three seconds that passed before they were out of sight whether or not they seemed to be capable of kidnapping a girl who wasn’t even old enough to match her socks properly.

“Aunt Millie!” Harriet yelled.

“Goddamit, Harriet, I’m trying to find your sister!”

“She’s right here!” Harriet snapped, pointing several yards in front of her. Millie ran over and just as Harriet had said, there stood Johanna, eyes glued to the bouquet displays hanging behind the counter of a florist’s stall.

“What the hell?” Millie said. She bent down and grabbed Johanna’s shoulders, spinning her around abruptly.

“Aunt Millie, I have money in my pocket for flowers.”

“Johanna, what the fuck? What were you doing?” Her eyes widened, and Millie regretted the profanity. “What happened?”

“I just wanted to buy a flower for Gramma Bea and for Daddy when they come home. Mom put some money in my pocket.” Millie sighed.

“She was right here the whole time,” Harriet pointed out.

“I see that,” Millie said.

“Can we get flowers?” Johanna asked. “You don’t have to spend any money. Mom put at least enough for two flowers. I can even buy you some because you only had those yellow ones in your kitchen but I think you’d like these little purple ones behind the counter, see?”
“We’re leaving.” Millie hadn’t known that was the plan until she said it, but now that it was out there, she was relieved.

“What about pizza?” Harriet asked. “Isn’t that it right over there?”

“You know what we’ll do instead?” Millie asked, choosing to ignore Harriet and address Johanna directly. “We’ll go to the movies.”

“Can we get pizza at the movies?” Harriet asked.

“Why do you want pizza so much?”

Harriet looked away, her eyes fixed on some distant point among the crowd.

“What do you say, Johanna?” Millie said. “They have a ton of candy.”

Johanna nodded, giving the purple flowers in the glass case one more look before taking Millie’s outstretched hand.

No one spoke on the walk to the movie theater, which was a lot farther than Millie remembered, just as the movie theater’s candy selection turned out be a lot more limited. One isolated example in a series of mounting disappointments to her nieces. Millie almost kicked herself for not thinking to bring along those Poptarts, which seemed to be the only thing that anyone had agreed on the whole time. Johanna settled for some buttered popcorn. Harriet opted for the off-brand sour gummy worms. She tore open the bag at the counter and shoved two in her mouth.

Neither Harriet nor Millie wanted to be at the movies, so the choice went to Johanna, who had picked some computer-animated movie about fish. The poster sported a sickeningly cheerful posse of underwater creatures, none of whom seemed to betray the sense that there was a
problem worth solving. Johanna squealed when they passed it as they walked down the hall. Something something tiger shark.

After a brief debate about whether or not proximity to the movie screen correlated to the amount one would enjoy the movie, the three compromised on sitting dead center, popcorn and gummy worms in hand. Millie had to restrain herself from huffing loudly when an elderly woman sat right behind her, of all the empty seats in the theater. She calmed down as the lights dimmed, as if whoever had shut them off had the power to subdue her temper as well.

For the first act of the film, Millie was pleasantly surprised at her ability to not hate every saturated line of dialogue in this fish movie. The characters got along well and interacted with bickering. No one had a grating voice. There was no singing or slapstick, thank God, which automatically made it ten times more tolerable than the cartoons she’d sat through that morning. In retrospect, they’d annoyed her. Or maybe now she was just annoyed and everything that had happened that day had contributed in some way to this annoyance. She shook it off. The octopus on the screen was giggling.

“Can I have a gummy worm?” Johanna whispered to Harriet. Harriet said nothing. “Harriet. Can I have a gummy worm please?”

“Stop talking,” Millie whispered.

“Aunt Millie, Harriet’s won’t give me a gummy worm. She can have some of my popcorn.”

“Harriet, just give her one.” The old woman behind them shushed aggressively. The hair on the back of Millie’s neck stood up. She bent down to keep the woman from seeing her.

“Harriet. Harriet.”
Harriet turned to look at Millie. “They’re almost gone anyway,” she said.

“Harriet, I just want one.” Johanna whined.


Again, the old woman shushed them.

“Harriet, please!” Johanna continued. “I’m hungry!”


“Ma’am,” the woman behind them said as she leaned forward. “Can you please be quiet?”

“Sorry,” Millie said. She settled back into her seat.

This was supposed to be the easier alternative to eating pizza. There wasn’t supposed to be a hassle in just sitting in front of a screen. In hindsight, getting lunch would have prevented this, but also did that goddamn woman have to sit so close to them? Harriet tapped her foot anxiously, Johanna swung her legs furiously. They continued eating their respective snacks. Millie sat there, her face awash with the blues from the sea, feeling completely underwater herself. Not a single thing all day had gotten through to either of her nieces, she’d almost lost one and now the other had turned into a completely unmanageable brat who thought that the brunt of her power lay in her ability withhold from her sister. Had Cassie been like that? Had she been like that? Millie couldn’t remember a single thing from either of those ages. She couldn’t remember the name for that feeling her mother made up. She couldn’t remember the television shows she had watched as a kid, the ones on the channel Johanna had switched to. She couldn’t figure out why Harriet kept praising Zeus, or why Johanna had thought it was a good idea to break off and stand in front of a flower stall with the five dollars her mother gave her expecting
to bring her dying father home a bouquet of orchids or whatever the fuck her plan had been. She didn’t know how to tell them over the phone she was sorry that their father couldn’t stop coughing, couldn’t stop sleeping. She couldn’t think of ways in person to tell them that she was sorry that she was sorry, that she was just as confused as they were. She was afraid to say that she too grew up without a father, because maybe that’s not what would happen. She was afraid to tell them that Gramma Beatrice might stay a lot longer than anyone anticipated. She was afraid to admit that the only consolation she could think of for their confusion was Poptarts, was “field trips,” which she couldn’t even managed due to all the things keeping her confused and upset for herself and for them and for the whole fate of the Stern/Abrams family. She sat there thinking this as a fish told its mother it loved her. Fuck that goddamn fish and its false sense of security. How could they market this to kids whose parents were sick? Didn’t they have any sympathy? How in the hell could a fish summing up things nicely possibly teach a child any kind of lesson? Would things be wrapped up neatly for her nieces? She thought back to the moment she’d opened the door and seen Matt there, less of an oak tree and more of a sapling with its limbs tied to its stem to keep it from growing the wrong way. Fuck this movie and fuck this messy day.

“Harriet, I’m really hungry. Can I have a gummy worm?” Johanna asked.

“Johanna, oh my Zeus. Stop asking I ate them all,” Harriet said, not looking away from the screen.

“No you didn’t! They’re right there!”

“Shut up, Johanna.”

“Guys,” Millie whispered, the word rendered almost unintelligible by its hoarseness.
“Ma’am,” said the old woman behind them. “If you can’t control your kids, maybe you should leave.”

“You know what? We will,” Millie said, and stood up. She did not bother to see her nieces’ reactions and began walking down the aisle.

“Aunt Millie!” Johanna called, scrambling to move past Harriet. “Wait!” The two ran to catch up to her, but Millie was already out the door.

“Aunt Millie, why are we leaving?” Harriet asked. Johanna struggled to keep up, popcorn spilling from the bag as she ran. Millie did not answer. Any answer she gave them would be incomplete. Any explanation she offered would be unfair.

Again, they did not speak the entire way home. Millie knew the blocks well and kept a fast pace. Johanna spilled popcorn all down the street until her bag was empty, and the only thing left to do was crunch it into a ball. They entered the apartment and Millie turned on the television for the girls. She did not bother to wait and see whether or not that was something they were interested in doing. She walked into her bedroom and shut the door.

The room was small, barely big enough to fit a bed, a desk and a dresser. Everything about the room seemed manicured, well-placed. The blue of the curtains matched the carpet, which also matched the details on the dresser, as well as the pillows on the bed. The books on the desk had been stacked in order of thickness, creating a kind of pyramid. A day planner had been left open to today’s date on the desk. A pair of slippers had been set out in front of the night stand in preparation for the next morning. Millie took five deep breaths and did her best to absorb the order she had created for herself. She let out a whimper at the thought of how easily she could organize a room, but how difficult it had been to organize a day. She could do better.
Millie walked into the living room to find Harriet and Johanna sitting on opposite ends of the couch. Harriet was drinking milk out of a carton, taking small sips in between giving her sister the side eye.

“Are you guys still hungry?” Millie asked. No one answered. “We could order some pizza.” They said nothing. She went into the kitchen and dialed the number for the place up the street, then took a seat in the chair next to the couch and waited.
OK first things first ------ updates:

1: Painted my nails blue this time. Hideous. May have to remove it early before anyone realizes I’m out of remover again.

2: Dad is back from the hospital. Gramma Bea is still sleeping in the spare bed in Johanna’s room. Mom says the doctor said he’s fine but she also said Gramma Bea isn’t leaving. I guess it’s OK. She made ratatooey (ratatouille? Ratatuille? I dunno I dunno I dunno) for dinner the other night which was better than anything we’ve had in a month so I don’t mind.

3: We’re out of cough drops again and this time my throat is scratchy I MEAN IT!!!!

Anyway. If you had asked me what I thought I’d be doing on Halloween night, I probably would have said oh you know, just sitting in front of the TV watching Here Comes the Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown because any normal sane human person would be doing that instead of what I wound up doing. Mom would have put out cheap candy and I would be eating that PLUS stealing from the good pile that I was supposed to pass out to trick-or-treaters but no one comes down our lane anyway so we probably would have been stuffed. Maybe I would have fallen asleep on the couch first and missed the whole thing because Dad would be upstairs in bed coughing or passed out from taking real medicine instead of drinking Mom’s teas. Maybe dad would have fallen asleep on the couch first and I’d just let him snore because it’s not fair to ask him not to especially when sleeping’s the only thing that makes him feel better these days.
But as I said already, I did not stay home and watch *Here Comes the Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown*. Dad probably slept on the couch but no one was home to make sure there were leftovers waiting for him when he got up because Mom and Johanna and Gramma Bea were in town getting the good candy. And there I was, with Mars, sitting on these basement stairs listening to Frank make out with Kelly and Brett with Meg. Before you ask me what the HECK is wrong with me pardon my French, diary (have I cursed at you yet? I'm sorry) let me explain myself because I am NOT the type of person who sits in basements, but you already know that.

So Meg called on the house phone (the one with the long cord that lets you walk from the kitchen to the living room and sit on the couch when someone who talks a lot like Aunt Millie or Mom's friend June calls) and said she was throwing a party. Ok now here is the thing about Meg Ceszara because I have told you about her before but maybe not as much as I would have liked to. She is tall (but not quite as tall as me) and has long hair that follows her when she twists around (not like mine which I have said is curly and bunches up and pokes out the bottom of all of my hats). She is also made of ferromagnetic metals because everyone is drawn to her like as if she were a giant magnet. (I only know this because we learned about this in science two weeks ago. Frank made the joke but I am taking it because he sucks, pardon my French). She moved to Beringer Mines last year with her dad and since then everyone has been in love with her. It’s forgivable because she’s not insufferable. Yet. Anyway, so Meg calls, tells me to dress up tomorrow (Halloween) and hangs up. She was mid giggle when I cut her off on accident. So instead of watching *Here Comes the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, I was living *There Go All Your Great Plans, Harriet Stern*.
To be fair to Meg, she told me what everyone was going to be so I had some idea of what to do, which didn't help in the long run but I will explain. Frank, the basketball player that Kelly has had a crush on since sixth grade, was going as a Power Ranger. I didn't have to ask whether or not he'd be the red one. If there is a macho costume to be worn, Frank will be in it as always. This was true when he was Godzilla in third grade (although I was going to be the same thing until I found out I'd been beat). It was also true when he was Al Capone in 5th, and I can't remember the others but just KNOW, diary, that they are all very similar. Brett was going as Spiderman, but I think he might just like wearing tight jumpsuits because before that he was the BLUE power Ranger and before that he wore a spandex suit with a skeleton body and before that he was mostly things that just let him get away with wearing a Morphsuit. It's a little uncomfortable but Meg said she was fine with it because at least Spiderman is famous and everyone knows who the heck that is. Kelly, she said, was going to be Marilyn Monroe because of course. She has the blonde hair and that smile that always comes off a little crooked so it looks like she's scheming on something. Meg said she was going to be a mermaid, which I guess is normal enough. But I had no idea what costume would work so I ran upstairs.

OK here is a confession I don't readily make so consider yourself special. My closet, I am telling you, is like an archaeological dig. I say that in part because there is some dirt on the floor somewhere and I think my seashell necklace is somewhere in the pile but also because the deeper you go the older things get. Let me explain, please. On top there are the clothes I usually wear. The blue jeans, the sweaters, the T-shirts that will one day get passed to Johanna, those things. They're usually good for a second or third wear if I just whip them in the air a little to get the wrinkles out. Mom doesn't know I do this. Dad used to just walk by whistling usually, all
sneaky-like. In the middle are things I sometimes wear, like the Christmas sweater Gramma Abrams' friend knit me with the ribbons and bells. It makes me feel like a cat. There is a reason it is in the middle. On the bottom are things I have not touched in a long time, like the pants that are too high above the ankles or the shirts that say things like CUTE and GIRL POWER that you could not catch me dead in. I figured there was something down there I could use so I pretended I was digging for dinosaur bones. There was a pair of orange jeans and dad's old hunting sweatshirt I told him I lost last season but actually just didn't want to try and find. There was also a green beanie, which when you put together, adds up to a kind of neon carrot.

Now OK before you call me Harriet the Carr-i-ot or tell me that a carrot is not a costume, I REALIZE this. There is a very specific Halloween Hierarchy (I had to ask Gramma Bea the other day if I've been using this right) that was established long before my silly ass (pardon my French) decided to take Meg up on her invitation and abandon the warmth of my own silly house for what turned out to be Meg's even sillier basement. Vegetables, you learn early in life, fall to the bottom of the pyramid, just like on the food pyramid they teach you in elementary school. The only difference is that in your diet there are supposed to be more vegetables than almost anything else, but on Halloween the less the better. And YES I am aware that showing up to Meg's house dressed as a carrot broke rules numbered one through eight million of the Double H but let's be truthful here: if we followed the rules one hundred percent of the time, the Great Holiday of Halloween wouldn't even exist.

Mom agreed to drop me off at the Ceszara's before taking Johanna into town, and she waited in the driveway while I stood on the porch. The Ceszara's house, I think I have said, is not in the woods like ours. It's in the middle of a big development that's in the shape of a loop so all
the houses face in and there's a big dog park in the center of everything. At night it looks like a little village, and you imagine that everyone looks out their windows before they go to bed and wave goodnight to each other. It's that kind of place. Meg says no one does this. I tell her she should start it. If we had neighbors in the woods, I tell Meg, I'd wave to them. She says what about the deer. I think about this as I stand on her porch dressed as a carrot and I think maybe I have made a mistake. Mom was sitting in the car, which made me nervous. Not necessarily because I was embarrassed that she was there, but the Ceszaras were taking a long time to answer the door and maybe she thought they were not answering on purpose because I wasn't actually invited and I, her daughter, am not as assertive as she would like me to be. She flickered the car lights and I rang the doorbell for a second and third time.

Mr. Ceszara opened the door finally and sang a great, musical "Helloooo!" He's tall with broad shoulders and wire-rimmed glasses and a thick head of hair with streaks of grey that look like our classroom's chalkboard after it's been erased at the end of the day. He reached his hand out but I forgot to tell him I'm not a fan of hands so instead I stood there with my eyes trying to figure out where to look and my arm moving up and down like a robot's while we shook hands like businessmen. I will admit it made me feel like an important carrot but I was still standing on his carpet the color of nice, sophisticated wine shaking his hand while dressed as a vegetable. Girls dressed as carrots and wine and people who look like such intellectual things as chalk boards don't really go together but Halloween kind of lets all those things come together I guess. I had a good laugh with Meg when she came downstairs. Her mermaid's tail was too tight around the ankles and her red wig kept falling in front of her eyes so every time she took a step, she had to put her toes down first and then her heel and then swipe her hair out of her eyes. I asked if she
needed any help but she said she was fine even though I saw her foot almost miss the last stair. She hugged me, and for a second, I forgot about her wine-carpet and the paintings that made no fricking sense (pardon me) and it was like she had made up this whole party just for me. "I thought you said you were going to be a doctor," she said. I had forgotten about that but I lied on the phone when she called because I didn't want to tell her I hadn't figured anything out. "They only had the sexy kind," I blurted. She nodded. Mr. Ceszara looked a little uncomfortable which made me uncomfortable but he said he had to finish making the soup and ran away to the kitchen.

Can I tell you? The Ceszara's basement makes NO. SENSE. For a house that looks like it belongs in a cute Christmas movie, the basement is the opposite. There are no walls AND no ceiling which I thought were two out of three things you needed to have a room but apparently not. The walls are plaster, and there are boards interspersed around the room. Something like oil or water has stained the floor so that there are these big vague spots all around like floor freckles. Above you are all the pipes and aluminum foil tubes that criss cross and zigzag around and when someone flushes the toilet you can hear all the water. I had never been in her basement before the other night, but I am pretty sure if I were that guy from Texas Chainsaw Massacre I would just bring a pillow and a blanket down and never leave. In the middle of the room was a circle of plastic deck chairs and a card table. Had it not been for the table I would have thought it was a séance and I would have BOOKED IT out but Meg also promised that Mars was coming, which made things OK.

Frank, Brett, and Kelly were already sitting at the card table shuffling UNO cards when Meg brought me down. "Look who I found!" she said, like I was an actual carrot that had just
sprouted out of her welcome mat. The three of them said hello and Frank dealt me a few cards. Meg could have sat in the empty chair next to me, which looked clean, but instead she sat on Brett's lap. I almost said "Can't you see each other's cards?" but then the basement door opened and I was saved from having to ask.

Here is a brief history of Mars, aka Margaret Shannon Oliver. She came to Beringer Mines in 5th grade, which is the same year my old friend moved away. At first I was like No Way am I replacing a friend, but Mars sat next to me at lunch and let me listen to her CD player, which was mostly punk music her cousin had burned for her. Mars was the first person in our middle school to dye her hair purple. She was also the first one to chop it all off so she looked like one of the boys. Now, in high school, her hair is its normal color, but that kind of "I'll Do What I Want For No One but Me" attitude is still there. You get the sense from talking to her that nothing anyone ever said had chipped away at her, like she had been given a series of opinions at birth and not a single person, place, or thing she'd since then had changed her mind. Standing next to Mars is a little like being in her force field. Nothing can hit you hard because Mars lends you her strength. She, unlike Meg or Kelly, would also not be caught dead in shirts that said GIRL POWER. For me I just hate the sparkly shit (pardon my French), but Mars is different. She doesn't need to brag about her power, you just feel that she has it.

"Whaddaya say, Chappers?" Mars stood at the top of the stairs in a brown suit and bowler hat, leaning against a black umbrella. There was a black square smudge of something on her upper lip. She had a crooked smile, but unlike Kelly's, she always looks like she's mildly pleased with herself, rather than displeased at someone else.

"Hi Mars!" I called, maybe a little too fast.
"I'm not coming down until one of you guesses who I am." She twirled the umbrella and soft-shoed a bit down and back up the stairs.

"Fred Astaire," I said.

"Good pun, Harri, but no," she said. Frank and Brett looked confused.

"Al Capone!" Meg said.

"Nice try."

"Charlie Chaplin!" I yelled, again too loud.

Mars ran over, kissed her fingertips, and tapped my cheek. "Winner!" she smiled, and sat down next to me in the chair Meg had avoided. Frank handed her some cards and we sat there playing: Meg on Brett's lap, Kelly giggling at everything Frank said, Mars being nice and me being a carrot.

After the absolute bloodbath of a card game, we sat at the table, talking about classes and the people in them. Mars explained that her mustache was made of Nutella, Brett tried to impress Meg with a few feats of acrobatics in his Spiderman costume, and Kelly jumped on Frank's lap, the two of them shuffling the cards for what appeared to be Round 2. Mars scooched closer to me and started asking me about my Gramma, how she was holding up after having just moved in. I told her it's been nice, especially since there's someone to intervene when Mom's being harsh and Dad's saying nothing or visa versa. When Brett and Frank and Kelly and Meg were over on the far side of the room trying to make up their own Spiderman moves, Mars asked if I had told Gramma Abrams about how my favorite movie was RENT, or my big crush on Kate Winslet. I shouldn't have, but I hit Mars in the arm. "You're the only one who knows." It's true. I'll wear the GIRL POWER shirt before I tell.
Just then, Mr. Ceszara appeared at the top of the stairs saying the soup was ready. Mars and I asked the others if they were going up to get any, but they said they were OK for now. I looked at Mars with her Nutella mustache and she looked at me with my curly hair poking out of my beanie, and we both knew we were ready to get the heck out of there. So we went upstairs to the kitchen leaving everyone else downstairs. I felt bad for Mr. Ceszara. He had put out six bowls with six big spoons and left a ladle in the pot of beef stew for everyone to help themselves. I almost felt bad for the bowls and the spoons. From the kitchen, you could hear Drew Carey's voice in the living room awarding points and the audience clapping madly. If I were Drew Carey I would have awarded Mr. Ceszara some points for his stew.

Mars and I sat at the kitchen table, blowing into our bowls and hunching our shoulders. Not only was Meg's basement a HFM (hot fricking mess, diary, I think I've used this before) but it was cold as all Hell (PMF). Mars used the napkin to wipe off the Nutella, and her normal face was there, smiling at me, laughing at our costumes, which she agreed were bottom-of-the-Pyramid.

"Don't be dumb," I told her. "Yours is a real person! From the 1900s! That's classy."

"But no one got it", she said. "Next year we'll have to go as something people will know."

"Like what? Batman and Robin?"

"Sure," she said, making a face after burning her tongue. "But you have to be Robin."

"Or maybe you can convince Brett to wear that tight costume."

She laughed, and diary I could swear on my own future grave that I felt her force field open up over me like an umbrella on a rainy day.
Here is the thing about stew, or really anything hot that you make in large quantities and eat in bowls: it is like having your own personal Mars with a force field there to keep you safe. Gramma Bea has made exactly seven pots of chili in the month and a half since she's moved in with us, and every batch is like the first one. Mr. Ceszara has clearly learned the art of cooking, and although no one would ever ask where Meg's mother is, it is clear he is doing a good job of being both at once for her. You wouldn't catch my dad making stew, not over his dead sleepy body. He'll make you venison jerky until you have more of it than money in your bank account but his love is not distributed in bowls at late hours. I'm not saying that love given in strips of thick deer bacon is inferior, but sometimes you need a good bowl of something warm and full of potatoes to jog your memory back to all the other good times you had something similar. He had even thrown some carrots in there! We finished our bowls and Mars washed them in the kitchen sink, and after that we felt ready to brace ourselves and descend once again into the bowels of Meg Ceszara's house.

Diary, I don't know what I was expecting when we opened that door but it was not sheer and total darkness, I will tell you that right this moment. Mars followed behind me, our feet searching for one stair after the other, which made me feel a little sorry for laughing at Meg earlier when she had done the same thing. But there in the dark, I couldn't even find Meg. I couldn't even find the fricking floor (PMF).

"Hello?" Mars asked. We listened for a response but all we heard were the sounds of what I thought were people eating food. Mars elbowed my shoulder and whispered: "They didn't come up to get food, did they?"

And then it hit.
You never want it to hit.

You never want to be reminded that you're a carrot and everyone else is a movie star and you're in the dark and everyone's kissing but sometimes you are and suddenly the force field retreats and you are there on your own wondering how you wound up in an unfinished basement. All the beef stew in the world will not solve your problems and there is no one to award you points for your cleverness or your ability to go out and be a social person even when every cell in your body is programmed to watch cartoons and eat kid's candy. There is no excuse you can use to escape because you want to retreat back upstairs but the living room is right there and someone will always be there to ask why you're not hanging out with everyone else. Mars felt this too, I think. I know because I heard her sit down on the stairs behind me and sigh. The sounds of kissing did not stop. Mars' sighing did not stop. I was still standing there, thinking about Drew Carey and beef stew, too sad to wonder how in the world we were going to get out of that cold dark basement.

After my legs got too tired and my heart too heavy, or maybe my heart got too tired and my legs were too heavy, I told Mars to skooch and sat down next to her on the stairs. We sat there in the dark, just listening and sighing. Once or twice we called out and asked hello, was anyone there? And once a voice hushed us back. It might have been fifteen minutes we sat on the staircase, but you could have eaten the whole pot of stew AND entered to be a contestant on a game show in the time that seemed to pass.

"OK," Mars whispered after a while. "If you could kiss anyone in a dark basement, who would it be?"

"Can't they hear us?" I asked.
"Let me check." She cleared her throat. "SHIT." (pardon Mars' French). The kissing continued. "We're fine."

"Well, I'm not sure," I said. "If I did, I don't think it would be in a serial killer Basement."

"Fair," said Mars. "Me neither."

"Who would you kiss?" I asked.

"Can't tell," she said.

"Why?" Mars always does this. It's like playing 20 questions with James Bond.

"Doesn't matter. Just not here."

"Do I know them?"

"Doesn't matter." I could feel my cheeks getting hotter. My ears, too, started to burn, and I'd swear on my future grave my temperature spiked two degrees.

Now, diary, I think I have kept you for since seventh grade which means you have had two solid years to listen to me rant to you, and if you've learned anything, you know that I do not intend to hurt anyone ever but I will tell you right here and now that in that moment, I could have sworn at all of them for a solid hour and kicked over all the plastic chairs. All the "French" I have learned from people and taught you would have come spilling out of me so fast you could call me fluent. Who the heck was Mars talking about? Why couldn't she tell me? Why'd any of them invite me if all they were going to do was sit in that room full of mildew and pretend neither of us existed? Why hadn't I paid one lick of attention to the pyramid and come as something no one even cared about? I'd been there for maybe an hour and a half, but it was already dark out and there wasn't a whole lot of time for Halloween to be saved.
"Mars," I said. "We need to get out of here."

"OK, Harri. Tell me. What do we do? Go upstairs and eat soup for the rest of the night? Her dad will find out and then they'll get in trouble and we'll be the weird ones."

"I know I know," I said, thinking.

"Nothing is going to work. We can't just say 'OH hi hello yes your daughter is making out with a power ranger I think you should check in on th-"

"I KNOW," I said.

And then it hit.

"Come upstairs with me."

"Are you joking?" Mars whispered.

"No, trust me, this will work." So loudly I announced, "Hey Mars, I'm not feeling well, come upstairs with me," and we left the dark basement, our eyes squinting as they readjusted to the light.

I gave Mars what I thought would be one simple task: find a plastic bag. I know I called her James Bond earlier, but I will have to take that back because with all the slamming of cabinets and drawers, she almost blew our entire cover. She kept saying "Harri, what are we DOING" but I refused to tell her, since apparently we were now keeping things from each other. "What are we DOING Harri?" she asked, shutting the drawers more quietly now. Homer Simpson's laugh erupted from the living room. Swear on my future grave I have never been more thankful to hear that stupid laugh.

You remember I told you that I have never wanted to hurt a person in my entire life. I did not mean to hit Jeff Ford with the tee-ball in second grade but he was being so completely awful
I think now I may have accidentally aimed for left field on purpose. I did not mean to make
Johanna cry last summer when she wouldn't stop cheating at Go-Fish, and least of all if ever I
had hurt an innocent person I did not mean to. But there in that kitchen, I grabbed the plastic bag
from Mars and filled it halfway with beef stew plus a little bit of water and shook it up.
Ironically, (I had to check with Gramma Abrams about this one too), my bag of fake puke almost
made me actually puke right then and there.

"What are you DOING, Harri?" Mars whispered.

"We're going home, Mars."

"How?"

"Think about it," I said. "We're the only people who ate the stew. We can just say we
threw up." I avoided looking at the bag again to keep from gagging.

"Both of us?"

"Here," I said, and grabbed a second plastic bag. With every ounce of strength I had in
my carrot body, I poured half of my bag into the empty one and handed it to Mars.

"Put that in your suit and puke after I leave."

She almost smiled, but the sight of the puke bag stopped her. She nodded.

The barf bag felt a thousand times heavier should have, maybe because the weight of
ruining a party AND a Halloween at the same time was a burden I should not have taken on all at
once. The Grinch ruined Christmas but he didn't ruin that PLUS a party. And he saved it too, no
less, but I had no intentions of doing that. There would be no apology letters left in anyone's
locker after this, no "please tell your dad his stew was delicious. I'm sorry I wasted a quart of it
because you were too busy macking on Frank Harris in your basement that smells like wet

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socks." I remembered that in social studies we had studied Greek Gods and there was that one who always pushed a rock up the hill and I thought maybe that's what would happen after I died, that I'd be forced to carry a ziploc bag full of some nice person's cooking up and down a mountain for eternity (may Zeus forgive me). I almost laughed, but I felt really bad once I'd poured the stew into the toilet. For an extra kicker, I saved a little and rubbed it on my teeth so my breath wouldn't be minty fresh after having gotten sick. Mars whispered that I made a horrible carrot but a pretty good actress. Then, from the bathroom doorway, she yelled: "Mr. Ceszara, I think Harriet's gotten sick!"

If I could do it over again, I would do this: NOT cry. It has been two whole weekend days since this happened but I am still thinking about it. At first, I was just upset at the sight of the stew. I was fine when Mr. Ceszara rushed into the bathroom and asked me what had happened. There weren't any tears when he asked me my telephone number so he could call my house and have someone pick me up. But then he helped me onto the couch and brought me a blanket and Mars sat with me, her wide mouth that's usually moving so completely still and silent. Everyone came up from the basement, all four of them doing their best not to squint. Meg offered me water. Frank and Brett and Kelly stood behind her, silent.

And then it hit.

All the French fluency couldn't convey just how much I had wanted to cry. I thought of Mr. Ceszara, worrying that he had poisoned me. I thought of Meg, whose nice dad was just trying his best. I thought of the four of them, in varying degrees of love with one another, and how there sat Mars, whose force field could save me from everything except the one thing that had made me feel the worst out of every other person or thing that evening: myself. I wrapped
myself in the blanket and buried my face in my knees, sobbing and sobbing and sobbing. You stop being an actress once you realize you’re just a terrible person.

Gramma Bea was quiet for the first half of the car ride home.

“Your mom and Johanna and I had a nice time Trick-or-Treating. We missed you.” I wasn’t sure if this was a trap to make me feel worse. I feel like she knew.

“Did Johanna get a lot of candy?”

“Plenty. She tried to eat it all but we told her to save some for later.”

“Makes sense.”

“You know, I once got invited to two parties. One was a costume party, the other was a dinner party. On the same day. Do you know, I showed up to the dinner party dressed as a box of menthol cigarettes?” She was trying really hard to make me laugh. I’m still mad at myself a bit for laughing.

“Are you saying I shouldn’t have gone as a carrot?” I asked, wiping tears onto my sleeve.

“I’m saying we’ve all had a carrot moment in our life.”

When we got home, Dad was surprisingly still awake, eating a Kit Kat on the couch with Mom. Johanna sat in between them, and they were all watching *Here Comes The Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown*. No one said anything when we got in, except for Johanna, who asked why my cheeks were wet. Mom shut her up by giving her another tiny Snickers bar and turning up the volume.

I still think about the bowls of chilli, about sitting next to Mars in that basement, about crying into a blanket that Meg uses when they want to be cozy, and about Gramma Bea saying we all have our carrot days. I think about how Mr. Ceszara went to bed that night thinking about
all the things that could have gone wrong with his cooking to make me vomit so suddenly. I think about all the kisses Frank and Kelly and Brett and Meg didn’t give each other because they came upstairs to check on me. I think about how I didn’t get to kiss Mars in that basement because I decided at the very last minute that being far away from everyone else was more important than being with her. I think about all the candy Johanna didn’t get because she and Mom and Gramma Bea had to come home early so Gramma could pick me up. I think about the bowls and the spoons that had to get put back into their drawers because no one wanted to eat the poison chili, the costumes that got packed up early because everyone went home, the leftover candy at the houses Johanna might have trick-or-treated at. I think about all this and wonder if maybe I could have been like Gramma Bea and just done something different, like make the most of my time with Mars, or kissed her on the cheek in that basement, or just realized that carrots are just really good vegetables and are great in any situation basically. I think about the small things too, though, like Gramma Bea telling me her about cigarette party, like Dad being both home AND awake, like Johanna giving me two blue Jolly Ranchers even though I didn’t ask her to, and I wonder how to make sense of being a bad carrot surrounded by good eggs (ha ha). Maybe it’s not for me to decide in the long run. Maybe we just keep showing up to things and take notes after some time has passed so that we can review them after. I gotta stop writing though, someone’s coming up the stairs. Will update soon.
Visiting

You are heavier than I remember. The first time I held you, you were as small and pink as the buds on the rose bush I had been trimming. Then your father called. It was a warm, wet day in April and the only thing left to do was clip the last few branches on the bush near the porch. When I came home the next day, I was still wearing the same clothes I had left in. The scissors were still lying in the grass where I had dropped them when I ran inside to answer the phone.

When I got to the hospital, the nurse walked over to hand you to me. I said *Oh no, thank you, my arms are still shaking.* They wriggled like they were trying to get away from me. Your mother smiled weakly from the bed. Your father was asleep in the chair. The nurse insisted I take you, and I was immediately struck by how light you were. Your mama—I remember distinctively, Jo—felt like she was already on her way to being somebody. Not to say you weren’t. Your mother was heavy, like she was already born with some history. Had lived through some things. Your aunt, too. Snowballs, I called them, because I was convinced that the more time they spent living their lives, the more of the world they picked up, added to themselves, moved on. I called them this until one day Millie pointed out that a snowball could keep rolling, but people stopped growing. She must have been your age, maybe six or seven. Your mother was maybe three. She yelled *No Millie, look! I’m still a snowball!* and tried a somersault. She rolled sideways, which didn’t prove anything other than that maybe growth is not linear. Or just that somersaults are hard.

You couldn’t do somersaults yet when the nurse coaxed my arms into a shape that could hold you. Can you imagine? I kept my posture stiff because I was sure that the slightest
movement would allow you to slip out of my grasp and float out the door. There was no way you could have floated out the door, Jo. I just convinced myself that such a thing was possible. But then I realized that you were not a snowball, that you hadn’t figured out momentum, that you still needed someone to teach you how to move, and so I sat in the chair by the window and asked myself what kind of person you’d be. Your mama’s smile never left her lips. Your daddy woke up when a nursing assistant walked in holding your sister’s right hand. In her left, she held a can of Coca Cola. *Coke!* Your daddy joked. *Must be a special day.*

After I went home and picked up the clippers out of the grass, I got an idea, Jo. You probably don’t remember much of my old house, seeing as you and Harriet and your mama and your daddy stopped coming up after a while but that’s a different thing. There used to be a little bookcase in the closet under the stairs. You had to turn on the light bulb to read the spines, but I’d lived in that house so long I knew which one was which even in the dark. I walked in and pulled out the first album my fingers touched. It was a long, brown book with some old stickers you mama or Millie had stuck on it years before. One of them was an apple with a goofy smile and two stems, for some reason. The other was barely recognizable. A peach maybe. I scratched them like you’re supposed to. You don’t see too many of those anymore. The scents were gone. My heart ached a little.

Anyway, Jo, I sat at the table and looked through the photographs. You probably don’t know half of the people in there. Those were the days when the women had their haircut and the men had theirs, and nobody really bothered to ask why this was. Their dresses and suits were all more or less the same, like someone had used two models for each photograph and just pasted different people’s faces on them. You keep things like that in a closet under the stairs long
enough, they do start to look a little similar. But they’re not, I think I said out loud. That’s Cousin Hattie with her old boyfriend, whathisface Jones. The one who kept a pet turtle through high school until he went off to college and set the poor creature ‘free’ in the creek. I found a pen and a pencil and wrote his two names on the back of the photograph: Whathisface in pencil in case I remembered what it actually was, and Jones in pen. Usually it’s safe to assume that everyone is a Jones. There were plenty of Joneses in that first book. My mother’s sister married a Jones, too. Edwin Jones. Those names I wrote in pen. Hard to forget a man who’s six foot four with a glass eye and eleven fingers. I went through the whole book and wrote everyone’s name on the back of their pictures. If I couldn’t remember one, I just wrote what I remembered of them using my tiniest, tightest cursive. She lived up the street. Joined a convent, read one. Sat behind me in chemistry. Had three kids before she turned 21, read another. I tried to leave judgment out of my captions, but some people -- like one of the second cousins who pushed his brother into a river and almost let him drown -- I wrote never liked him. He has living relatives somewhere who might have other stories to remember him by. The Abrams always thought of him as a sinister figure.

I’m telling you this now because someday I will give you the book with the labeled photographs so you and Harriet know that there’s a world beyond the tiny house in Beringer and more family than me and your mama and your daddy. You’ll see that there’s a world outside of classrooms and your bedroom and hospital waiting lounges like the one you and me and your mama and Harriet are sitting in right now. If you were awake, I’d get you to help me make up stories about the people passing through. That girl with the purple glasses. What does she do in her free time? That woman crying in the corner? Is she in pain? Did the man she love jump on a
sailing ship and set off to fight a sea monster? The old man across from your mama looks like a bank robber. Maybe a train robber. Your brain is probably much better at coming up with these things than mine, but I am also sure that wherever your brain is right now, it’s much nicer than sitting in a hospital, waiting for someone to come out and tell us your daddy’s gonna be OK.

You’re a little bit lucky, though. My gramma wasn’t around when I went to visit my daddy, but I was also a lot bigger than you. He stayed in bed mostly, in a room with a vase of fake marigolds and a window that looked out into a garden. Sometimes, he confused my name with the characters he watched on the little television that sat at the foot of his bed. *Laura,* he’d say. *Laura, how’s Eric? How’s Eric doing?* At first, I tried to convince him that there was no Eric, or Michael, or whatthisface Jones. *But there is!* he would yell. *Why are you calling me a liar!* Even when no Eric came to visit him with me, my daddy created excuses for himself. *I thought you said he was with the girls today.* I never brought your mama or your aunt. They were too little to understand.

Finally, I stopped trying to argue. I started making up excuses about this mystery spouse’s whereabouts. Your grandfather did not stick around long after your mama was born, which maybe was part of the reason my daddy was so eager to make up someone to care for me. I always took my cues from him, using whatever name he had given my invisible husband that day. *Oh, Steve took the girls out for ice cream today,* I would say, even though I usually left them with a neighbor. *John had to take the car to the shop today, so he won’t be back for a couple of hours.* *That’s nice,* he would say. *You got yourself a good one.*

After a while, he stopped asking about the men and started asking about me. *Cheryl,* he would say, and it was back to square one. *Daddy, it’s Beatrice. You remember me.* It was harder
to make up stories about my own life than about people who were made up themselves. I always faltered on the details, which somehow he caught onto. *You just said you were a seamstress, Betty. Why would you be working at a bank?* Sometimes, Jo, people like the stories they make up for themselves better than the reality they have to live. It’s easier to say that your husband is doing the grocery shopping with your daughters, or that you alter business men’s suits for a living. Trying to explain that you work two jobs because the man you thought you loved didn’t even bother to stick around to watch his kids grow up is more trouble than it’s worth. I don’t know if my daddy even remembered Thomas at all. I’ve spent a good portion of my life trying not to, and I don’t look forward to the day you inevitably ask me to. In a way, it was ok with me that my daddy got us all mixed up at the end. He didn’t hound me about finding someone to help out with your mama or Millie. Every time I walked into that bedroom, we were two completely new people. I couldn’t tell which affected me more -- the fact that he couldn’t remember all the good things that had happened, or the fact that he had freed himself of all the bad things. There were moments when he looked at me clearly through the same eyes he had watched me grow up with. When he called me his *Bumble Bea*. When we met in the middle and suddenly it was like old times again. It gave me an idea.

When I went home one Sunday from visiting him, I dug an old camera out of the closet and went to the neighbor’s house. She took a picture of me standing against a plain white wall. We waited for the colors to appear, and on the bottom in big, neat letters, I wrote: *Beatrice Abrams. Daughter of Charles and Margaret,* along with the year. The next week, I brought it to my daddy’s room and handed it to him. *Hold it up to my face, Dad. Look. It’s Beatrice.* His hand shook slightly as he reached out to compare the two. *So it is,* he said. *It’s such a lovely picture,*
but why did you bring it? I know who you are. He tucked it under his pillow. I just thought you could use an updated picture of me. Next one I’ll bring you one of the girls. He closed his eyes. I’d like that. When I did, he insisted that I, Jean, did not have daughters. Not everything works always, Jo. We learn that the hard way, and it usually hurts to be reminded. I didn’t mention the picture under his pillow. On good days, he didn’t need me to tell him that it was there.

I was so happy when I first moved in with you and Harriet and your mama and your daddy in September. Nobody needed pictures to keep track of things. Your daddy would come in and pick you up and swing you around. It would have been too confusing to explain it to you, but it gave me back a lot of things I forgot that I lost when my daddy started to lose his memory. Sitting next to his bed all those afternoons, I spent my energy trying to keep up with the events and people he confused and invented, which started to confuse me too. The Joneses weren’t the only whatshisfaces anymore. It spread to the Abrams, the whosey-whatsits Miller, Mrs. Mae Somebody-Something. That Boy Who Came Around And Mowed All The Lawns Every Summer. We used physical descriptions as placeholders for things that could have been tied up in a single word, and even those descriptions took time to agree on. Didn’t she have red hair? I thought it was more of a strawberry blonde. No, the strawberry blonde was a different woman? In your house, everyone’s name matched their faces, matched their histories. You might have been figuring out who you were still, but there was no confusion that You were You and Your Mama was Your Mama and I was Me and Everyone was Alright. Seeing your daddy swing you and your sister around reminded me of growing up with my daddy, Jo, and it gave me back some of myself. I didn’t have to remember my daddy as the most recent version of himself, as every little detail rolled into one confusing person. I could remember him in moments, like pulling a
cherry tomato from behind my ear and joking that I hadn’t washed up properly. In sounds, like a snore, or a laugh, or a poor attempt at a lion’s roar. In scents, like basil. Like flour. Like sweat. Even, sometimes, in things too intangible to recreate intentionally. Sometimes the light in your backyard is the same as it was on a day I can recall. Sometimes the wind tosses my hair the same way it did on an afternoon almost fifty years ago. I don’t think you would be able to appreciate how exactly I have felt watching you and your sister grow. Maybe I will save it for another day.

You’re about to wake up, I think. This is one of those times where I’m not sure I’m ready to give you the kind of explanation that you deserve. The girl with the purple glasses and the crying woman and the old man have all left. It’s just me and you and your mama and Harriet. They’re both asleep too. Your daddy is somewhere beyond the double doors, in a room the color of forks and cars and machines and coins. There are no fake marigolds. No TV at the foot of his bed. Even if there were a window, the chances of it looking out into a garden are slim. Your mama got mad when I suggested we bring him some flowers for when he gets out, just in case. Don’t give her false hope, she hissed at me under her breath. It’s not about bringing the flowers to him, I told her. It’s about giving her something to hold onto while we wait. They’ve lost their color slightly in the hours we’ve been sitting here. I have half a mind to put you down in the chair next to me and run home and bring back fresh ones so you won’t notice that the ones we brought are dying.

Perhaps your mother was right. Maybe it was cruel to let you bring them. I just wanted you to have some of the comfort I did when I visited my daddy that June. The fake marigolds seemed brighter. The light in the garden was blinding. He smiled, and held the photograph up to my face. Beatrice, he said, find me the picture of the girls. I went to the living room and came
back, but the outstretched hand had slackened. The photograph resting on his chest. A name half uttered on his lips.

You’re too young for me to make the comparisons out loud. A huge part of me is glad that you neither have to be awake for me to entertain you in this sterilized waiting room. Another part of me is glad I have to make some sermon about how we’re “all going to be OK.” My daddy died with faded flowers beside his bed. I often wonder if it would have made some kind of difference if I had just thought to replace them a little earlier. Someone’s coming down the hall for us now, so I hope you’ll forgive me if I wake you so that you can enjoy the smell of your sad little bouquet. May they be the only thing we lose today.