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Sweet Company

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Bard College

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Sweet Company

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

by
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Acknowledgements

Thank you,

To my mother, for forever supporting me and who has shaped my thinking in all ways.

To my dear friends, my peers in colloquium, and anyone else who I have shared my project with.
I love you all.

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“Sweet Company” is dedicated to my grandmother.

Sweet Company

One

I found the ad in the Monday Job Market section of the newspaper. I was eating cereal with raisins and grains, flipping through the pages. Each listing is a life, separated by four bold lines. A rectangle for everyone. I read: hiring at Fellow Feeling Care Hospice. I checked off each requirement with my eyes: *high school diploma, ability to speak, read and write in English, must be able to stand and walk for extended periods of time, and ability to communicate with patients, staff and visitors.* My eyes lingered on *Carry weight and lift up to 10 lbs frequently, and up to 40 lbs. Occasionally.* Downcast light came through my kitchen window. There was a number to call underneath. I stared at the milk circle my bowl left on the paper, holding the receiver to my ear.

I knew I had the ability to stand and walk for extended periods of time, so I fit the criteria for my job title Mailroom & Environmental. I've been here four years and after a while I don't remember how long I've been standing, or sitting, but that wasn't in the description. It's only when I realize I'm grasping the edge of the table for balance that maybe my resignation would be a good thing. In this place, my center of balance sometimes falters, and I'm pressed down onto the tiled white and yellow linoleum floors, or so it feels. Everything in the rooms are identical. Even the patients look the same.

I like to think that I'm here for everyone. People could talk to me, if they wanted to, but I might look past their eyes and stare at the tip of their ears. Their words fly by my head. In my second month, I figured out listening to someone old and decrepit isn't in my pay grade. That was when a patient told me he didn't want to stare at a piss colored floor while dying and that if I couldn't figure something out he'd find a way outside and walk into the busy street. His head

shook back and forth, the tremor making it look like it could fall off at any moment. I suggested I paint each yellow tile blue. He nodded yes.

He was asleep the whole time, blissfully unaware of me by his bedside and the stench of thick paint. He stayed like that for three more days as it dried, still and asleep, until his family took the body. The room stayed vacant for two weeks, flecks of paint speckled the floor moving with the dust. It only took thirty minutes for the janitor to mop the blue away.

It was a Tuesday, and I was sitting at my desk. Steph, my co-worker, who's indifference feels like a cold spot a blanket can't cover up, pointed at the recent pile of mail that came into our claustrophobic room, my magazine on top, and said:

"If you tear out pictures of them, you're weird."

"Of what?" I said.

She rolled her eyes.

"Of the birds," she said.

"Oh" I said. "They're just birds."

It was a Smithsonian magazine, special edition, about the feathered animal and their different habitats. I made the address of my subscription to my workplace. She rolled her eyes again and went back to counting stamps in our inventory. I counted envelopes then glue sticks, thumbtacks, staples; our cheap and cheerful supplies stared back at me dully. I fingered the yellow envelopes with our hospice name stamped as a return address aware that Steph was side eyeing my counting. The most letters to ever come in a day were fifty. There hadn't been a number that even reached forty since.

"I can feel you staring at my back," I said.

Steph hmped and swiveled back around. She was always busy.

The recycling was heavy today. I was picking up waste from the garbage cans at the receptionist desk, collecting the bits and pieces of trash like they were meant for something. I heard the front automatic doors open and shot my head up. An old woman, wrapped in a purple fuzzy blanket was wheeled through our threshold. She looked like a china doll in tissue paper, because of her small size, meant to be preserved as if her joints were attached by loose strings. Her head hung to the side. Her eyes were closed. The middle-aged woman pushing the

wheelchair, dressed in teddy bear print nurse clothes, let our nurses in white take over. I put my head back down, grabbing the last few pieces of trash. When I looked up again, the woman in the blanket had her eyes on me.

Allison

She was facing away from me. Her head pointed towards the window when I came into her room. I think it's her third day here. A vase of fresh tulips sat on the bedside table next to a red tin box and a small, framed picture of a little boy. A patchwork pillow shaped like a heart with the name "Allison" sewn on looked like it had been jostled to the edge of her bed, the friction of the blanket providing the only support for it to cling onto. I stuck the letter she received under the vase and turned to leave. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the pillow fall. Now I had to go pick it up. I turned back around. She was staring at me. I stared at her unmoving, nervous that she'd call a nurse accusing me of being a disruption. She smiled.

"What's your name?" she said.

I ignored her, bending down to pick up the pillow.

"That's not necessary," she said, "I want it there."

"You sure ma'am?" I asked.

She paused and slowly looked towards the window. This would be the perfect moment to slip out.

"Yes, I don't like it."

I lifted myself back up. It wasn't an ugly pillow, just maybe a little outdated, but so was she.

"I don't have anything with my name on it," I blurted out.

She pointed a thin hand towards the ground,

"You can have it if you'd like."

"Ma'am, what would I do with a pillow like that?" I said.

Taking things from patients wasn't allowed. She smiled, shrugged and turned her head towards the window again.

"So you really don't want me to put it back onto your bed?" I inquired.

"I really don't want you to put it back onto my bed, yes," she said.

"What if the person who gave it to you sees it on the ground?" I said.

"My brother, and he won't."

"Who's your brother?"

She looked at me. "Rick is my brother, and I'm Allison."

Two

The dog in my face smelled like a wet chip. A Scottish terrier had run up behind me as I was petting my favorite therapy dog, a golden doodle named Jules. I turned around and there was a paw on my face and then a slimy tongue ran over my brow just missing my eyelid.

“Oh sorry, she's so excited when we come here” the owner said.

The dog pressed its paws into my thigh to move and sniff a stain on the floor. So excited for what? The lukewarm water we give the dogs in the same flimsy water bowl or the 99¢ treats someone hastily runs out to buy when they realize it's Friday the 15th: therapy dog visiting day. They have an hour to lift the spirits of our dying patients. The brown, black, white, red coats of all textures gather together in the lobby, they look like one big dog. Sometimes they leave hundreds of little paw prints from the grime of the city streets sprinkled all over the floor. One time there seemed to be other brown marks going down the hall and into every room. The janitors talked in Spanish to each other a lot that day, cursing under their breath. It smelled terrible too.

I was feeling happy. Maybe it was the dogs and their jittery energy. Or maybe it was that Steph wasn't here and I got to do the work at my own pace, which meant sipping my can of coke and taking a break every fifteen minutes. A black lab passed by my desk, its leash trailing behind it with a frisbee in its mouth. Five minutes later it passed again and side eyed me apprehensively. It stopped in its tracks.

“What?” I said to it.

It dropped the toy and licked its nuts, the neck stretching all the way down there. It was me and the dog surrounded by silence in the open hallway. I could hear his tongue lapping around the skin. We stayed like that for thirty seconds, me observing the peculiar grooming of

this creature and him ignoring me content with his decision. Then he unraveled himself and picked up his frisbee looking at me from the corner of his eye while walking away.

“Have a good one.” I said.

The yellowing envelope on the top of the stack of mail I had just sorted would never make it to the intended. That patient had died a week ago. It would go back to its sender, along with a few other things that might weigh down on them, heavier than the mass of the letter. I think if I were living through my last week on earth I’d want no letters, no last-minute goodbyes or notes. The first envelope of the more fortunate pile had several stamps, the return address read: Oxford, England.

It was a rainy Monday. The loose pill bottle I was inspecting had a bloody label on it. I didn’t know the prescription but I shoved it into my pocket anyway. I was a few feet away from the medicine cabinets, usually there’s a security protocol to just get in if you don’t wear scrubs. If I listened carefully, from the hallway, the laundry machines down the hall hummed, the clack of gum popping in between sentences, the beeps of heart monitors and then Steph’s voice broke through:

“Quit staring at nothing and do your job.” she said.

Only four letters and three packages. One of them was a big box, with a bow on top, in wrapping paper designed with kittens and hearts. I caressed the hard corner, the tail end of the yellow ribbon brushing against the back of my hand.

“Why would anyone spend money on something like that?” Steph asked, to no one in particular.

She shook her head. I shuffled through the letters, all of them white and simple, the names of the patients in pen looked like thin cursive skeletons. Allison’s was last. The sender

address was from Colorado. The name read A. Knowles. It felt thick, like someone had stashed a check or another piece of paper in the thin envelope. Maybe A. Knowles had a lot to say. Maybe there was a picture drawn by a grandchild or friend.

Three

I try to avoid reading letters out loud to patients. The last one I read had a string of apologies, a list of “I’m sorry’s” vertically arranged as if listing guilt was the same as owning it. The silence was very loud after I had read it, and not just because the patient was hooked up to a ventilator. I felt guilty, and I had done nothing wrong.

Allison was propped up, with an old tempurpedic pillow squished behind her back. Her room was dark. The curtains had been drawn, leaving only a crack for a bright gray ray of light to shine through. The colors from the TV broke the bleakness in the room. She stared blankly ahead. I approached the bed knocking on the side of the plastic rail.

“Here you go Allison,” I said.

She looked me up and down.

“What funny clothes these people wear,” she said.

I was wearing a black polo and black slacks.

“The woman the other day had on blue pajamas,” she continued. “Pajamas are meant for bed.”

“That’s nice,” I said.

“Where are you off to today?” she said.

“Oh I’m just delivering letters.” I said. She blinked. “I am delivering LETTERS.” I half shouted, slowly. I sighed.

“See, I put one on your bed.”

Allison looked slowly at the envelope I balanced on her legs. Her mouth spread into a thin smile over her brown delicate skin pulling back into dimples.

“Will you stay with me while I read it? Sometimes I can’t read handwriting.” she said.

I looked at my watch. 10 past 2 pm. I could sit still for a few minutes. I was hoping to get out early.

Allison struggled to open the thin flap with her thumbs. She froze in concentration. I reached out from where I was standing obviously trying to help her but she jerked her hands away. I've been told I'm hard to read sometimes. Finally the letter came out, crisp, and it was thick paper where the edges were fringed.

"Boy, whoever wrote to you did not waste a cent." I said and slapped my knee. Here we only have printer paper, the kind that gives you a paper cut. The scribbled down phone numbers or fax numbers will be lost the next day.

It took Allison ten minutes to read one page silently. The letter was three pages long. I didn't have thirty minutes. I was supposed to be sorting junk mail, usually I stuffed the coupons into my bag. The nurses like when I save them any beauty product discounts, the pile is always picked at, their manicured nails snatching at the cheap squares of paper.

"Ah" she sighed. "It's from my son."

She folded the paper back into the envelope, the way someone who takes good care of things does; thoughtfully and slowly.

"I hope you have sons," she said. "It's wonderful."

I stared at her in disbelief. I've never really thought of kids as something I want.

"Will you write back now?" I said.

She nodded, touching the TV remote.

"My word is my son," she said sincerely.

"I don't think I have that," I said. I was fingering the outer edge of the doorframe, no one had stopped by to check on her.

“Think of someone you would do anything for,” she said.

I thought about it, all the way back to my seat. Steph slammed a pile of files and disorganized papers in front of me. I would do anything to leave early today.

Allison

To my dear Son,

I had been trying very hard to lift my pen from my lap to the paper. Since you are reading this, I succeeded.

Today, my nurse said that my thick grippy socks remind her of the Peanuts cartoon characters. Their feet are wide and bigger than their bodies, a nonhuman detail, which is what I must look like. I think being compared to Snoopy is one of the best things to happen to me yet, he spreads joy and has a knack for mischief. You told me that, one evening when we were home together just the two of us. You were watching TV and I looked over my shoulder, asking you to tell me what was making you laugh. Your little chubby hands pointed at the glowing screen, your eyes glued to their plain sketched faces with two dots for eyes and a curved line for a smile. What a way to portray human emotion on a cartoon face, and to think it made you laugh so hard your head flew back every time. I thought you might fling yourself to the ground and get a bump on your head. Now you are the one consoling me which I guess, I've realized, isn't so new to you.

I've found it funny that in my current state, I have realized many things. I didn't know a person could think so much before I was sitting around, waiting. Now all I do is think! Mostly about my life, the people and things I hold close to me, what I could have done better. I think this might be my practice of self-compassion, something I thought might be good to work on instead of feeling that I've lost. Of course, someone could call my preoccupied mind of my own life selfish, like your grandmother who always told me it was a blessing I could even think of others. She was also the parent who smacked my hand back into place when I reached for seconds at the

dinner table. I hope you've never felt controlled by me, and if you have maybe you can tell me when, if you feel so inclined.

Do tell me things, please. You think a question is a breach of privacy. I've witnessed the thoughts turning in your brain and then when you opened your mouth nothing came out. You always had so many questions, I should have encouraged you to ask more.

I don't remember if I told you this already but the statue I love so much at your uncle's, the one of the metal stick figure sitting on the toilet with his chin on his hand, like he's contemplating, is on the windowsill in my room. The nurses love it, "What a funny little man" they'll say. Since I have nothing else to do, besides to think, I stare at this statue all day. I stare and stare. I've found that I feel hope for this statue man and that one day he will get up from his position of relieving himself and find something else to do. It would be such a pleasure for me to see him silently slip away. Maybe when I sleep, he wanders around my room or the long hallway outside, finding tools and notepads, a few discarded needle caps to keep him company.

When I am alone is when I feel most alive these days. It is not as depressing the way it sounds, the relief of no one trying to touch me is what I mean. Those are the moments when I can write to you and relieve myself in private which is harder than you probably believe!

Your thinking mother,

Allison

Hank

The bumpy ride to the hospice center was silent. Hank's son was on his pager and his daughter filed her nails. The drivers were listening to music on the radio, Hank could see the buttons on 89.9 FM. He could also see their lips moving from the back of the van but could not hear them. Loss of hearing was a side effect of his condition; one he wasn't prepared for after he learned his lungs and heart were slowly giving out. He felt betrayed.

His children arrived the night before, each in separate cars, both without a packed bag. Lily had a small flashy handbag and Simon had a smooth black briefcase, something to be carried just for the day. They had found the hospice center together a little over a year ago, three years into Hank's diagnosis. They deliberated on several phone calls to each other for the spanse of two months, the most they had talked to each other since living in their family home as siblings.

Hank saw them last at Thanksgiving. He was still able to hear out of both ears, but other parts of his body were declining, fast. It wasn't silence he experienced, it was as if bees were constantly buzzing behind him. He was caught, by his worried housekeeper, swatting his back in the full-length mirror insisting they were about to sting if he didn't kill them all. The housekeeper called Simon, explaining that she was frightened the bees would wind up on her and she had to leave. Hank rang his son up the day after his employee quit explaining that it was all a misunderstanding. It wasn't bees he thought were trying to kill him, it was the breeze, which he could feel through his windows.

“Sounds good Dad,” Simon had said.

Hank didn't tell his children he was sick. He didn't want to. Someone like himself didn't say those things. When he finally called both of them and said it, a young woman knocked at his door a few days later and let herself in before Hank could tell her to please leave. Her name was Katie, but Hank called her Kate. She's been his nurse for the past three years, her duties changing from only taking his blood pressure and making sure he bathed, to spooning him food and lifting his arm above his head, weighed down by the gathered rubbery skin. Once Katie made her way into his comfortable life, his children began to visit more frequently, always separately, asking her about his routine and habits.

Hank didn't do much besides squint at the Sudoku section in the paper and watch the ducks that got into his backyard fountain. He was happy that way and didn't mind his children staying only for thirty minutes at a time. Hank was very fond of them. Before he became sick, they sometimes got together for holidays, if he remembered. He never missed his grandkids' birthdays, stuffed toys in hand as a gift. Lily's two boys had every animal that could be seen on a Safari.

His Multiple Sclerosis began to relapse more frequently during the last year Katie lived with him. One day his legs stopped moving, and Hank was stuck on the second-floor stairway of his home. He stayed there for about an hour, not moving until Katie came looking for him. She settled his tired body onto the bed, it took many slow steps where his feet dragged on the floor to get him there. That day, Hank rubbed his rigid knees together. Maybe that would give him good luck, or jumpstart his nerves, reminding his body that they were supposed to be working together. In the days that followed, Hank stayed in bed, and for the first time he wished he was a devout, instead of a skeptic and realist. Hank always told the truth, and the truth was that his last steps were at home, on a staircase that led to empty rooms.

Afterwards, arms and hands became his entire existence. He tried to communicate with Katie about what he wanted to eat, his legs limiting the use of the kitchen. “The ham! The ham! No no, not the bread!” his raised voice would tell her as he waved his arms like a blind chicken thrashing its wings and squawking.

He learned he couldn’t wipe himself clean the week before he was scheduled to move into the hospice. He couldn’t reach back without missing, like a toddler learning how to use the potty. The bathroom became a place where he looked into the toilet bowl and asked for mercy.

“What was the name of the restaurant you said you went to with Carl?” Simon asked his sister in the van.

“Pisticci,” Lily said. “Why?” She tapped her file on his knee. “Do you have a date?”

“I happen to have an important meeting coming up,” he said and sat up, straightening the form of his back.

She rolled her eyes and went back to grooming her fingers.

“Are we almost there yet?” Hank said.

His children looked at him both wide eyed.

“Are you okay Dad?” Lily asked.

“Just want to know where I am.” Hank mumbled.

He tried to move the plaid blanket that was wrapped too tightly around his legs but was barely able to pull it from underneath his thighs. He glanced up and saw Lily and Simon exchanging a look. He refrained from moving anymore, placing his arms on either side of the wheelchair. The van jerked to a stop. Lily put her file away and straightened the edge of her skirt while Simon snapped his briefcase open and shut, taking nothing out and putting nothing inside. Hank looked in front of him, aware his concerned children were on one side of his peripheral

vision and that the place where he would die was on the other side. He didn't even try to look at it through the small oval window next to him in the seconds it took for the driver to go to the back and open the trunk door.

His eyes focused on the tip of his feet peeking out from the blanket as his wheelchair was lifted onto the pavement. He could see another one waiting for him. This one was big and plush. The transportation of his stiff body was easier than expected. The care people, Hank noticed the side of their van said they were part of a private service for the elderly and "differently abled", eased his body into the new seat the way delicate furniture would be moved into a truck. His children shook hands with whoever was in charge. He stayed gazing down, blurring and deblurring his vision.

"Hank, I'm George," someone said.

Hank nodded and grunted.

"He's probably tired from the trip, I don't know why he isn't engaging..." Lily rambled on.

Simon turned away from the brick building to face his father. Hank always wore suits. His formal jacket, tie and trousers were striking next to the old van and fading green shrubs that surrounded the cul de sac.

"Can we go in son," Hank said, averting his gaze to Simon's face.

"Yes, let's go in." Simon said and went to hold the two handles on the back of the chair. As the troupe slowly walked towards the automatic double doors, Simon remembered something from his childhood: the sensation of a yellow tablecloth on the dining room table in his parents' home brushing his knee, the sound of scissors cutting cardboard, and black wet paint. The black

mask had two tiny holes meant for eyes. It was his Batman costume and he and his father were building it together. It would be perfect.

“Dad, look!” he had said, holding the mask up proudly.

“You’re doing so well Simon!” Hank said, his glasses on the tip of his nose from leaning his head over in concentration.

Now, Simon bent over his dad's nearly bald head and said quietly:

“You’re doing so well, Dad.”

Four

“Who do you know in England sir. Certainly very far away?” I asked the patient in room 107.

No response. His bed was angled towards the window. The whole thing looked like a very big lawn chair but with the pole of an IV next to it instead of an umbrella or palm tree. The sheets were different. He had silk sheets. Pee wouldn't come off of those. There was some sunshine today in the middle of winter, but no blue sky. I read the name of the addressee, Hank Walsh. He didn't seem like the talkative type. I could only see the tip of his wispy haired head, the few silver and white strands matted like baby bird feathers in a nest. I hear the British like to talk a lot about the weather, however this man was silent like an owl perched in a tree, present but also not present. He was the only patient that got a letter today, on a Thursday. That's not normal. The smell of microwaved soup guided me back out of the room. I've always wanted to visit England.

“Can you quit biting your pencil?” Steph snapped at me. “It's seriously annoying and there's a lot to do today.”

I switched to eating a Twizzler.

By a lot to do she meant inventory and her secret boyfriend coming to gather her for lunch. I caught her with him in the alley way when I went to take out the trash. It was the first time I saw her speechless, she didn't know whether to scold me for leaving the mailroom unattended or for figuring out that she is capable of love and affection. It wasn't brought up again, I don't know if from embarrassment or she thought I'm dim witted and forgot already.

“I'm going... out.” Steph said.

I twirled my rolley seat around, a piece of the candy in my mouth grinning at her.

“Shut up.” she said and grabbed her jacket and hurriedly walked out.

I don't know why she cares about other people figuring out her personal life. I certainly didn't mind if someone saw me outside of work. In fact, that's happened before quite a few times at the Stop and Shop a few blocks away, but no one seems to ever want to wave back. I'd invite them over of course, if I had a nice couple of chairs at the ready and there weren't any take out spicy sauce packets lying on my apartment table and ground.

I grabbed Hank's letter and got to my feet, stretching my arms over my head. Maybe he would show me his face today. Maybe he wouldn't. When I entered the room I saw the other letter, sitting where I had left it, untouched. Hank was asleep, his head heavy on the right side. If he moved another inch his head could miss the pillow. I put this letter on top of the unopened one. Maybe he was dead. I quickly looked towards his torso. It was slowly moving up and down, up and down. The sound of the heart monitor I didn't hear before startled me into motion. It beeped quietly as I slipped out the door, matching the pace of my feet. Beep...beep...beep.

Hank

Hank didn't like when the nurses turned him over in bed. He could do it, with some more time, but no, things were done fast and efficiently. Hank usually liked efficiency. He was like that as a young boy too. At school, children made fun of him for keeping an ironed handkerchief in his pocket, wiping his hands on it, as if to separate himself from his prepubescent friends. He was disgusted that his schoolmates never scrubbed their hands with soap. In college, Hank's roommate urged him to go to a therapist when he left a class he needed for graduation because of the way the professor dropped a stack of papers: it was too much of a disruption for him to handle. But that same night he ignored the fact he had a test in the morning and stayed out until the sun was rising just as fast as it had gone down.

He thought fondly of that night now, in his bed and with his grippy socks on. The sky was blue today, an excellent way to tempt him to go outside. It was too much of a fuss to think about something like that right now. Besides, his wife had always wanted him to stay in bed more often.

"Don't leave quite yet, work is there, soon one of us won't be here." she would say her arms open, a warm embrace waiting for him always. Hank sighed.

"Okay Hank," his nurse Jessie walked in.

"Are you ready for your favorite part of the day?" he said.

Hank liked Jessie. He was kind and had a sense of humor. Essentially, he understood that Hank would rather be anywhere else but here. He was good at his job too.

Hank grunted.

"I'll take that as a yes," Jessie said.

Hank turned his head away from the window towards the middle of the room, he braced himself. He never tried to make eye contact with Jessie, even though he liked him there was still no excuse for the pain he felt. No one could stop that.

The young nurse carefully moved the pillow out from underneath him. Hank's body dropped to the mattress of the bed, unable to hold itself upright. Hank kept his head still; he believed this might help the nurse so that the whole thing would be over and done with quickly.

“Hank, relax” Jessie said.

He didn't relax. Jessie put both his hands on Hank's torso standing on the left side of the bed, he was cradling his patient's head and the lower of his back, reaching over the rest of his body. As Jessie walked slowly to the other side of the bed his hands never let go. Hank's body rotated.

Hank thought about the pool at his house, Lily on her wedding day, and the can opener he kept on his desk shaped and painted like a mallard duck. He missed all of those things in an instant. He closed his eyes when the left flap of the hospital robe slipped off of his hip, exposing him.

Jessie kept one hand on him as he looked at Hank's back. All good. Just a skinny back with a spine protruding through. The inspection didn't last long, really it was just to make sure a bone hadn't broken in the middle of the night. Hank was on the thinner side of patients Jessie had seen. At first Jessie was even nervous to touch him fearing that his strength could break the old man, but his arms and hands helped a lot of people every day. Jessie shuddered at the thought of laying Hank back onto his bed and the brittle bones breaking. Although that didn't happen, Hank was back to his favorite position looking out the window in no time, bones and all.

Hank itched the side of his ear aware that another nurse had come in and Jessie was giving her the full rundown of his body. Hank wondered if this was how women felt on the street. He worried about Lily and how he stopped being able to protect her, as a father. It seemed that once he heard what the doctor said, his body took that as confirmation that it was alright to rapidly shut down and fall apart.

“You have MS. Multiple Sclerosis.” the doctor had said. “Now, yours is Primary Progressive MS. We can see that your immune system is damaging the nerves around your spinal cord, but the good news is the Myelin nerves in your brain seem to be doing just fine, for now.”

Hank could only remember silence after that.

Five

“Fellow Feeling Care please hold. Hello this is Fellow Feeling Care, please hold.”

The rhythm of the greeting was lulling me to sleep. Sometimes I get to answer the phone but ours are never that interesting, usually it’s the same guy at the USPS asking for credentials and updating us, otherwise it’s a spam call or one where all you can hear is static and crackle. My mom called me here once, to remind me it was my dad’s birthday. I had already purchased him a tie, like last year and the year before, but this one had yellow flamingos on it. My mom convinced me to try a little harder this year. I got him a fountain pen and a Japanese knife, both were useful, something he could use more of. My mom on the other hand devours anything edible. I’ve recycled the same fruit basket, chocolate basket and baked goods basket for the past eight years. The last time she received her gift, she called me to say thank you and exclaimed “It sure would be nice to go on a trip one of these days!”

Allison

Allison had a sound machine next to her bed. She explained to me that it helped her think, but that she liked it turned off to go to sleep.

“I like when a sound from outside my room startles me awake, it reminds me I haven’t died quite yet. It made me believe that deaf people really are unfortunate. If I wasn’t able to hear things when I got old I think I would’ve been gone already.”

I nodded. I would also like to keep my hearing, take anything else maybe besides my tongue.

“Even teeth?” I asked. “What about your tongue?”

She shooed me with her hand but chuckled.

“I have a letter for you,” I said.

As I passed it to her, she sat up a little straighter, I noticed she didn’t need any help to do that. How far gone was she? How much longer did she have?

“Ah, it’s from my son. Antoni is his name. I picked that one because I had just seen the movie West Side Story, and I thought Tony was beautiful and brave. My son happened to turn out the same way, only he looks different.” she said proudly.

“I’m sure that must be your doing.” I said.

She looked at me, her eyes lit up.

“Why, thank you so much, no one’s ever said that to me,” her head turned to the side, the letter gently laid in her hand, still folded.

“Why don’t you read it, out loud. To me,” I said.

The look in her eyes made me nervous, in such a way that in all her life no one wanted something she had. She read the letter as if it was a secret. She didn’t whisper but she spoke

softly, with intent. Her son was describing his job, his new girlfriend, and what the sun felt like on his face on Longs Peak Mountain. He was driving through the country, stopping at national parks and hiking trails. Allison's voice broke at one point when he said how he wished she could've seen the Atchafalaya River Basin in Mississippi. He tells her it's called the Bayou and people love it because they feel close to nature. He confirmed that he was on his way to visit her and stay for as long as she needed.

"We thought I would be at this place at a later date," she interrupted and explained to me.

"Mhm" I said.

She continued on with his letter. He explained the route he was going to take to get to her and for her not to worry about his safety. He was with friends. She laughed when he told her about the "Cats" themed motel. He booked it thinking it would be sweet to have cats around for a night or two, but they didn't realize it wasn't just cats living in the motel, but the decor was inspired by the musical "Cats". It was unbearable to go downstairs for the crappy free breakfast and a random song from the Broadway soundtrack playing every morning. He and his friends tried everything to get out of there but evidently the nearest motel was four hours out of their way.

"Oh he's having fun!" she exclaimed.

I itched my elbow, Antoni seemed to have written a lot in three pages. Maybe his handwriting had the style of being spectacularly tiny, with the letters connected by a single loop and the sentences touching all the way up to the corners and sides.

"Your son really leaves no details out," I said.

She finished reading the letter, he signed it: *With love, Antoni.*

Allison didn't respond to me at first and by then I was wondering why I hadn't left yet. She stored the letter in the tiny drawer of the bedside table but had trouble fitting it in at first.

"This darn Bible!" she said and snatched the small leather book out of the drawer. It took a few minutes to compose herself again.

"It's a beautiful thing to feel close to someone in a way you can never explain," she said quietly.

"I think you might've just explained it to me," I said.

She locked eyes with me and smiled, but there was something behind the smile, a trace of sadness or longing. I shuffled my feet.

"It said he would be here soon," I said, which came out reassuring I think, because she nodded and pushed back a few loose pieces of curly hair.

"When he comes, well it will be my last time seeing him. No matter how long it might take me to..." She didn't say it.

"You know some people wind up staying here for more than a week, I'd say average is a week and it sounds like you're above average." I said

Allison sniffled, then let out a small halfhearted laugh.

"My favorite teacher in primary school told me the same thing," she said.

I nodded. My words provided some comfort. She raised a tissue to her nose, the sleeves of the hospital gown she had on were billowy and layered in the crease of her elbow which revealed a very thin and veiny wrist. She blew her nose, the way an old person does: loud, slow, and dry.

"I'm sorry. I'm keeping you." she said.

I didn't say anything and shuffled my feet again.

Six

A patient died today. The body was carried through the halls in the arms of funeral home employees. Somehow the stretcher had a loose wheel, and it couldn't be used. I watched as it was carried through the hall, like at a celebrity's funeral, when the body is carried in the coffin except this body only had a few blankets and a white sheet wrapped around it. It looked like a frumpy ghost, no longer emitting its haunted magic and see through form but tired and heavy. I swear I once saw a ghost sitting in the visitors' armchairs. I saw it out of the corner of my eye. It was there and then it wasn't, like my eyes had been playing tricks on me, or that I was beginning to develop schizophrenia. I believed in fairy tales and ghost stories as a child, but I roll my eyes whenever anything superstitious is mentioned.

When I was seven, I brought a black cat from outside into my aunt's house, she put me in the closet for two hours. My dad promised me she was just worried about rabies, but she kept her distance from me for a few months. That wasn't the only thing that happened at her house. My cousins failed at convincing me a ghost haunted the basement. It was only after I was down there by myself, when a rat startled me from a dark corner, that I thought maybe there was such a thing as ghosts or ghouls. In a building where soulless bodies are found every few days, it just might be so.

After the body was removed, I stayed staring at the long hallway. Conversation resumed.

"Hey you! Take the trash out and mail is here." Steph hollered in my direction.

"Yeah okay." I said.

I ruffled through the pile of mail delivered today. Two letters.

"Drop the attitude." she said.

“There’s no attitude, just that I work with someone who somehow always gets the easier tasks.” I said.

“You’re meant for the rats,” she said.

“Very funny.” I retorted.

I stepped outside the back door and the smell of rotten food hit me. Yesterday's lunch was sitting in a clear plastic bag, the food was already rotten, the air changing the poultry. It began to drizzle outside while I was piling on bags into the too small recycling container. The streets were damp and dewy, the sprinkle of water refreshing like when lotion is smeared onto dry skin. The musk of the air grew stronger as the rain came down harder. I never liked umbrellas anyway.

The walk home was quiet. The rain led people into their apartments and houses. The noise of wet tires speeding on the gravel and shrill honks of cars blended into one. The splatter of big, wet, solo raindrops slapped the top of my head as I made my way under scaffolding and awnings. Red brick buildings gleamed, while white and gray buildings were washed out and dim. It was the windows, a soft burnt orange, on the dull buildings that let you know where they stood in the dark cloudy sky. The light in each square twinkled. The five, thirteen, or more horizontal rows of windows were standing straight up as if someone had lined a deck of cards, one on top of the other.

I managed to trip on something I couldn’t see. My other foot landed in a deep puddle where the few front pages of a newspaper were floating effortlessly on the surface. The colors of the pictures had bled together, blue and red, green and yellow, looking like distorted watercolors of faces and things swirling on top of the soaked white paper. I didn’t realize until I was at my front door that a piece of the paper stuck to the bottom of my shoe, the color dripping off of the corner, leaving a trail of purple droplets following me home.

Allison

Dear Antoni,

I am so very glad to hear about your travels. It sounds like you are having an amazing time and I feel sorry that I am the reason your trip will be cut short. I had wished I could hear all about your journey from one side of the country to the other, but it seems that your stories will only be from Maine to Colorado. Apparently, there were other plans in store for me. I hope I am not overstepping in believing you will tell me at least some of your memories. The thought of you going on adventures with friends and girlfriends, I know you will be good to them, there will be more than one. It's exhilarating. For me to have that thrill about you and a life you have yet to create, even if I am stuck right now, is something I cannot explain. Knowing that you will live for a long time and that you have decided to make the most of your life, leaves me with a warmth that spreads to the edge of my fingertips and toes. I wish I was able to give you the ability to touch every side, crevice and corner of the world. The globe in our living room gave me hope that someday you would be on the other side of it, not where I am. I would come home after a night shift, your grandmother would be asleep by the TV, and you bathed, wrapped up warmly in your bed, dreaming. That globe whispered out to me saying everything would be alright and I was doing the right thing.

This letter is short because I know the next time you will hear from me you will be sitting on the plastic chair that is in my room. See you soon.

Love,

Mom

Hank

Hank looked at the picture of his wife on the windowsill. Jessie put it there, something Hank had asked him to do by peeking out a thin white finger, pointing at the frame. Leah was young and smiling, her curly blonde hair blowing in the sandy wind. Morocco was their honeymoon destination. They did all sorts of things before they realized Lily was in her stomach. They rode camels through the desert, he bought her parasols to block the hot sun, and they fed each other oranges sprinkled with cinnamon, licking the brown powder off their lips while the warm air rippled around them. Hank cherished those moments with her, and when he did daydream during his previous busy days, the two of them were always in Morocco back in each other's arms.

Leah was able to sway him in any direction she took part in. He wouldn't think twice following her into a ditch deep under the earth or a basement with no way out. After the birth of Lily, Hank noticed his jaw would always clench whenever they were away from home together, and he would need to rub his fist against the bone. It wasn't just his paranoid fear of something bad happening to her, it was that she had the ultimate choice of staying or leaving. He imagined walking on a street with Leah, she decides to skip ahead, and she looks back, her light eyebrows raised, but then she starts to skip faster and faster until he can no longer see her.

His wife was someone who had everything under control. The idea of needing him was revolting somehow. While the vessels in Hank's eyes were red and his dark circles got deeper as the years went by, Leah looked rested and soft. He felt as if she was proving something to him. She didn't ask him for help, not even when Simon was born and she had to take care of two needy children, not finished learning from the first. He once caught her asleep at the dinner table. Lily was playing on the floor with her doll and Simon, also asleep, had spaghetti on his face.

Leah's chin rested in her palm, balancing her heavy head. When he woke her up she gently insisted that she was okay, rubbing her eyes and carrying the children to bed, leaving him with the mess of food in their dining room.

There was one peculiar night they shared together. Leah put on her silk nightgown, a fabric that clung to her body, which in turn made Hank fear he might rip the pretty dress just to get it off her. She took extra time getting ready for bed: brushing her hair in front of the vanity, rubbing lotion onto her skin, even tending to her feet by polishing them with her leg up on the dressing table. She flexed her tiny toes back and forth. When she was finally done, and Hank was in his robe and boxers, she arose and went over to him. She didn't move towards him, didn't snuggle into the covers. Leah just laid there with her eyes open, both arms at the level of her head resting on the bed. A few moments later Hank rolled over and turned off the lights. They both stayed awake that night, their breathing never slowing down and their bodies never sinking into a slumber. Never moving.

Harper

“What are you doing?”

I was startled. The girl had big green eyes and a green hat on her head. Maybe to match.

“I’m delivering you your mail,” I said.

“You’re the mailman,” she concluded.

“No,” I responded. “My job is to make sure this envelope arrives in your hands. Like a protector.”

“No one good writes to me,” she said. “I bet you that letter is from my teacher at school. She probably wrote it at her desk where she puts gold stars on our tests.”

She snatched the envelope out of my hands and ripped it open. Her eyes moved fast finding the signature.

“Yeah, I knew it.” she said. She turned the letter towards me, I leaned my head down peering at the cursive handwriting. *Love Ms. Martell*. I could also see that the girl's name was Harper. She wasn't a Joane, Maurice, Howard or Frederick. The name was modern and new, unexpected, just like it was unexpected to see a patient that looked seventeen.

Harper took a sip of her apple juice. I studied her, aware that if I looked too long she might feel uncomfortable.

“I have leukemia,” she said. “Acute lymphocytic leukemia. My parents don't think I can handle it, they just say I'm going to heaven, leaving for a better place, which is a bunch of bullshit. I'm gonna be left in the depths of the earth pretty soon with the worms. I'd much rather get cremated and become all spiritual,” she said.

She took another sip of her apple juice and stuck a sponge soaked with water into her mouth, something all the patients get.

“How long have you known?” I asked.

She looked alright to me, although I guess her hair was gone if she was wearing a hat. I would probably end up bald too, when I reached forty.

“None of your beeswax,” she said and grinned. “Move here.”

She pointed to the edge of the bed, to the side.

“Why?” I said.

“I can’t see you with the center of my eye, only from the side,” she said. “Side effect. It’s annoying as hell.”

I walked to where she pointed.

“You’re young too. Do you have kids?” she inquired.

“No... I don’t have kids.” I said.

“Well, do you want any?” she asked. Then suddenly she winced, reaching her fingers towards her hip.

She groaned and the high-pitched sound that came out of her mouth made me feel like someone was pinching my ears. Harper’s brow furrowed. She pressed her lips together, the way some people do before they cry. I lick my lips before I cry.

“There’s the button for the nurse,” I said and hurriedly gestured at the red button.

It was a small button; it didn’t look like something meant for emergencies. Right now I am more useful going back to my desk.

“I know,” she barked at me.

I quickly walked out of there.

Two grownups were coming my way, rushing, their bags sliding off their shoulders and the woman’s jacket dragging on the ground. We made eye contact, the kind where your eyes dart

unexpectedly to the person, back to facing forward, and then to the person again. I could see her eyes were green.

“Are you a nurse?!” the man with her asked me, still walking quickly but looking back, his gaze following me.

“I am not, sir.” I said. “I can get you-”

“Well for God’s sake get one to us right now, hurry up!” he ordered.

He ran after the woman into Harper’s room.

Dear Sarah,

I cannot say it was nice to hear from you when I have not heard from you in two months. Everything hurts and I am basically blind, just like we used to joke about when we get older. I'm not so sure if I'll get older than my age today. I like the idea of us being two little old ladies cursing at everyone and running around. It's going to be just you now, but I know you will find someone else that'll want to join you.

If you are mad at me: I'm sorry I missed prom since I know no one asked you and we promised to go together. Maybe try reaching out to people first. That's what I meant to tell you, in different circumstances, when you were so nervous to ask Ben. I can still see you crying on your bed even though you knew it would never happen. I tried to be a good friend by letting you know you could've just talked to him but then you got angry at me. I don't think everything is easy by the way, it just seems you might need a little push, more than me. Which is a good thing though, you're cautious and think things through, I'm impulsive and am always trying to get myself out of something. This time it seems that no matter what I do I am still in trouble.

My own body wants to destroy me. Maybe that's a good excuse for gym class, my college essay will be one any admissions team won't forget too. All I'm saying is it would have been nice to see your face by now or at least get a letter. I hope you got the Hello Kitty plushie keychain I sent.

Your best friend,

Harper

Seven

It was a Saturday. There were no personal letters today, like the mailman had taken an early break, rather than waiting until Sunday. It was okay if he did. When the day is slow I wander around. The cafeteria for visitors and employees is the last place I want to go. I tucked my Smithsonian magazine snugly under my arm and began to look for a good place to read it when it was time for my lunch. I had an hour. I usually wind up back at my seat. I walked up to the second floor, peering into different rooms and passing nurses that kept their eyes on clipboards. I pushed an emergency door, the alarm was busted and it didn't seem like it was going to get fixed anytime soon. I took the stairwell down again to the first floor entering from the door at the end of the long hallway.

I wonder what it feels like. To take your last breath. No one's ever confirmed with me that life flashes before your eyes. I've always imagined that whatever someone might see, looks and sounds like a rewinded VHS tape; the distorted talking and backwards body movements. Looking at life from a different perspective is said to be good for a person. At my grandfather's funeral I wish I could've announced to the guests that everything was going to be just fine, but everyone was crying. I saw my mother sobbing into the arms of a friend of hers. Something about that day felt like I was a part of something bigger than just myself and my parents. It felt endless and then it merged into the next day, and then into the next day and so on.

I wonder why it wasn't a friend that wrote Harper? She could be one of those girls that didn't have any friends. I can barely remember any of my teachers' names. The ringing of the last bell was what I remember most about school. I had a friend named Tristan, but everyone just called him TT. We became friends when I was hit in the face with a basketball and our entire class laughed, but he told them to stop. That basketball led me to the nurse's office where they

used to give out ice for any type of discomfort a kid had. TT waited for me as I was given my own plastic bag of ice chips to hold on my forehead for the rest of the day. I think if that ball had hit me any harder, it would have jolted my head, and changed my perspective.

It was quiet. I skipped down the hall, my few strides taking me past the several rooms. I could feel my hair go up and then back down, the air hitting my scalp. I halted when I came to the corner. My magazine was still under my arm. Maybe I will go to the cafeteria. Vitamin Water is what people live off here. I tried sneaking a cupcake to an elderly woman once, but the icing smeared all over the inside of my shirt and she didn't want it anymore. I stopped doing favors, I didn't know she was prohibited from eating something where she would have to insert her dentures.

“What am I going to do about this shitty ring?” Steph said.

I looked over her shoulder. She had a book open and several loose Junior Mints candy scattered on her desk area. But she wasn't reading, she was looking at her hand holding it up to the light, and what sat on her ring finger was the biggest diamond I had ever seen. The ring was gold, with two connected bands that made a circle. The middle encased the center diamond. On both bands were chiseled square diamonds. It looked like someone had tried to put together two rings as if they were able to fit into each other. It was ugly.

“Do what?” I asked innocently.

I didn't dare turn around.

“Turn around.” she said.

I turned around, stuffing my face with the sandwich I brought from home hoping that it would buy me some time for what I could say.

“This.” she said flatly and sternly.

Steph wiggled her fingers on her left hand, shoving them into my face.

“Oh what a lovely ring? Did you get engaged? Congratulations.” I forced out in a rush and quickly turned back around clutching my sandwich.

“No no no, what do you think about the ring?” she said and turned my stool to face her.

She was actually very strong.

“Oh the ring, of course! ...It’s great” I said too meekly.

“Great? Not spectacular, beautiful, gorgeous? Not any of those?!” Steph said as she raised her voice.

“No, it is,” I said. I gulped my food down my dry throat.

Steph groaned and fell back into her chair, her right hand clutching her head. She looked down at the floor.

“I know it’s not like that,” she said. “I can’t believe I thought I was ready, he doesn’t even know what type of ring I want.”

“You like jewelry?” I said.

I turned back around and cocked my head to the side. Steph looked up from the floor.

“Psht, don’t act so surprised.” she said.

“I thought you only liked sweatpants, iced tea and that TV show I see you looking at the tabloids for,” I said.

Steph leaned back and looked at me, her left hand relaxed, balancing on the back of her chair.

“I give you so much less credit for being observant than how much you actually are,” she said.

I sat still, stunned. My two hands were squeezing the sides of my sandwich.

“What else do I like?” Steph asked, her eyebrows raised and her eyes were pointed.

I shrugged. “I dunno.”

She leaned forward, her eyes focused on me. I looked to the side.

“Yes you do. Go on.”

I sighed and put my sandwich down. A lettuce leaf fluttered to the floor.

“Okay. You like green iced tea with two packs of sugar. You only drink coffee on Monday mornings. You look at the tabloids and circle the outfits your favorite actress wears. You also use mousse in your hair because it’s curly, and I can tell because it has a sweeter smell than hairspray.”

I took a breath.

She sat in the same position, her small smile started to widen.

“What?” I asked.

We stared at each other for a few seconds before she answered me.

“Nothing, I’m just impressed.” she said and pulled back rearranging herself on the chair.

“Well we’ve been working together for three years, almost four now.” I said and turned away from her eager to finally eat my sandwich.

It was silent, and I thought about what I could do next for the last three hours of my shift.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Steph said. “We have been working together for three years. I just... I don’t even know if you can tell your right from left let alone what kind of product you wear in your hair.”

I didn’t say anything. I might’ve crossed a line.

“All I’ve ever noticed is that boring magazine of yours and your shoelaces come untied way too much for a person.”

She laughed at this, snorting and covering her mouth with her hands.

“You know that hand still has the ring on it,” I said.

That made her stop laughing. I began to eat my sandwich again, the crisp and wet sounds of lettuce and tomato filled the air.

“So what do you think I should do?” she said.

I turned back around, confused.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Well... since you know me so well... apparently, what should I do? C’mon, the question isn’t that hard.” Steph said.

I munched on my sandwich aware that she was on the tip of her chair, I allowed myself a few more seconds of eating as she sat waiting for me. I swallowed.

“Well, I think, if I found the person I love I’d want them to know what I like, and what I don’t like.” I said.

“So you mean I have to talk to him.” she said. She was fiddling with her thumbs, her hands now clasped in her lap.

“If you love him, why not be honest with him,” I said.

She thought about it for a moment. I finished my sandwich, my stomach full and content. I slurped my juice.

“I guess you’re right,” she said. “But I don’t want to hurt his feelings.”

“Then don’t.” I said.

“Yeah...” she looked off into the distance. Then she abruptly turned back to me. “Don’t think because I’m asking you this that we’re friends or anything.”

I stood up, it was time to go to the bathroom and maybe do a loop around the second floor.

“Oh we’re definitely not friends,” I said to her.

She smiled at me and gazed at the sparkling ring one last time. I saw it wrapped up in a tissue shoved in her bag before the day was over.

Hank

“Daddy’s never liked Chagall,” Lily said. Her brother was hanging up the print of a painting of a man playing the fiddle. The face was green. Simon sighed.

“Lily you’re wrong” he said his voice wavering in and out, teasing his sister.

“No, I’m not,” Lily said, copying his tone. “Hockney is his favorite. Daddy says the latter looks like crayon drawings done by kids.”

Simon took down the tack he just stuck into the wall. He managed not to look at Lily while rolling up the poster just so she wouldn’t have the satisfaction of his defeat.

“Do you think he would like that type of art?” she continued, “Messy?”

“I don’t know!” Simon said incredulously. “I barely pay attention to him.”

“I mean really, how can you not know your father’s favorite artist?” she said.

“Hey, I was just trying to cheer him up, that’s all. This room has no color in it. Can you at least give me some credit,” Simon said.

Lily brought her index and middle finger to the side of her face. She nodded, already past the subject.

“I mean look at him, he’s just staring out the window.” she said quietly to Simon.

Simon looked.

“I know. I asked his nurse what else he does and he told me not much, besides eating and drinking what he’s supposed to.”

Simon watched his father: he was breathing, his chest was moving although it would lie still for too long. His eyes were closed right now, maybe to hear his children better. Simon realized someone needed to cut his father’s ear hair. It was a darker color from his thin hair on

his head, but bristly, like a cat's whiskers. It made him look unkept which he never was. He glanced at Lily who was also surveying their father.

"I know this might sound bad, but I don't know how to help him," Simon said.

Lily looked at her brother and touched his arm.

"I don't know either. I thought I might be able to by getting him a room here, closer to us, but now I'm not sure."

She realized just how uncertain she felt. Her father stayed resting. If he was awake he would tell her to fix how undetermined she sounded. He used to have them practice their speech, no child of his would speak without proper grammar. He would do it with their math problems, making them sound like adults in a business meeting, Lily was eight and Simon was five.

"Now how many apples does Jill have? Say it like you picked those apples yourself, counted them, re-counted them, and put them in her basket." he used to say.

Their parents always clapped afterwards, but they thought Simon might have a speech impediment. He was finally able to pronounce his "r's" the summer before he started high school. Their father switched from fruit problems to essays, and then their final lesson was with their college applications.

The siblings looked at each other.

It was Lily who laughed first. Simon's eyes widened and darted to their father and back to his sister.

"What are you doing?" he mouthed to Lily.

She laughed again, this time louder and with her mouth open. She covered it with her hand.

"Shit, I don't want him to hear me."

She started to laugh again.

“I’ve just never been so unsure in my life, and he looks ridiculous in a nightgown. I never thought I’d see him in a dress!”

Her laughs grew louder.

Simon took one more look at her before he joined his sister. The two siblings laughed and laughed, they tried to keep quiet which made them double over from aches in their stomach. It was silent laughter, no sound escaped from their mouths. Lily and Simon wheezed together, blowing air out as if there were candles. Their father didn’t stir, oblivious to his children and the world around all of them.

Lily was the first one to stop. Once Simon caught his breath he was done too. They stood in front of Hank's hospital bed keenly aware of feeling frenzied and deranged that they were laughing at a time like this.

“Do you think he’s thinking about us?” Simon said.

Lily nodded.

“I believe he’s thinking of everything,” she said. She looked at the clock, it was time for her to leave about ten minutes ago. She picked up her bag on the windowsill.

“Simon, where did you get that poster?”

Simon looked down at the rolled-up poster he was holding. He forgot his attempt to include it in the room.

“Oh, I got it in college. My art teacher passed out a bunch, I only got one. I wasn’t very good at that class.” he said.

Lilly nudged her head toward Hank.

“Did he ever find out?”

Simon shook his head.

“No. I lied and told him my grades weren’t ready yet and he eventually forgot.”

Lily nodded and put on her coat, making her way out of the room.

“When are you visiting next?” Simon said. He only brought the poster with him.

“I’m not sure. I’ll call you.” Lily said.

He nodded.

An employee entered the room as she was leaving. Simon watched his sister go as she blew him a kiss goodbye, the tails of her burgundy coat trailing after her and the leather purse resting on her arm. The sharp tap of her heels faded down the hallway.

“Hank has another letter,” the employee said. “From England!”

Simon nodded his head.

Allison

Allison had a man in her arms when I entered her room. I was waving the crimson-colored envelope with a stamp of a rose on it, and immediately put my hand down when I saw them together.

“Sorry, I didn’t want to intrude.” I said.

“Oh that’s okay man, you can come in. Is that for my mom?” the man asked.

He was young, had a square jaw and bright eyes. He was identical to his mother, just his eyes were further apart and all of his teeth were in his mouth. His head was shaved, cut close to the scalp. Allison’s brown hands were grasping his brown hands, intertwined, a bond between mother and son. They didn’t pull apart when I came in.

“This is my son Antoni,” she said.

“Anton for short,” he said to me.

“Has anyone ever called you Ant for short?” I said.

Antoni and I made eye contact.

“I’ve gotten called all of those: Ant, Tony, Anty. In fact, kids used to call me Ant when I was about this high,” he said, his hand measuring the distance from the bottom of his chair to the armrest.

Allison turned to him.

“Did they really?” she asked, concerned.

Antoni patted her hand and chuckled softly.

“Yes, but it never bothered me Ma, you don’t have to worry now.” he said.

She nodded and said, “That’s my good baby,” grinning widely at him.

He kissed her cheek.

“So partner, you haven’t given us that letter yet huh,” he said directed at me.

I handed it to him, and he took it with his open hand, his mother looking eagerly at the interaction.

“Ma, who’s Cindy?” Antoni said.

Alison bent her head towards the letter. She didn’t respond for a few seconds while Antoni fixed his eyes on her face.

“Do you know a Cindy?” he asked gently.

“Why yes, I think so! But I never would’ve imagined that she would write me a letter.”

The way her eyes stayed on one spot of the envelope and her body froze made me think that she did know a Cindy. It was infinite, who Cindy could be someone who rose from the grave, maybe someone looking forward to visiting Allison’s grave. Allison may have made a few mistakes in her life.

“Ma, who is it?” Antoni said. His eyebrows dipped.

“I told her to never contact me again,” Allison said. “We were supposed to open a beauty salon together, you see at the time I didn’t tell you Antoni, it was supposed to be a surprise, a fresh start for us.”

A raspy cough interrupted her. I was standing under the silent TV aware that this story was meant for her son but that I was invited to stay.

After weakly positioning a tissue to her mouth, hacking out the flem sitting in her throat, she continued.

“We had planned the whole thing. Her and I and our salon. Something we could both look after, maybe pass on, and a spot for women to connect over things. I think part of Cindy really wanted to do it so she wouldn’t be alone most days. You see, her husband had left her, and

their two daughters were all grown up and practically married when I met her. Surrounding herself with people was one thing she wasn't good at, she didn't know how to make friends. I met Cindy when she saw me struggling with your stroller, Antoni, and rushed over to help when everyone else passed me by. She liked when people depended on her, and our salon would've provided that."

Allison sighed.

"Cindy showed me how to do lots of things, I was still so young when you were around two years old. She helped me set up a proper bank account, how to calm you down at night with warm milk, and anything else a good mother needed to know. Your grandmother only came once a month before she passed away. I relied on Cindy a lot until I got the hang of things with you, but by then we had become like sisters and being with her was like second nature. She did more things I'm sure than a husband would've done for me."

Allison and Antoni took a breath in unison, unaware that they looked so much alike, acted alike and breathed alike. I took a breath on purpose, but ultimately unable to match the rhythm of their wind.

"So then what happened Ma, keep going." Antoni said.

He gave an encouraging tap on her knee. Allison squinted at him and smiled. It seemed she kept forgetting that she had an audience.

"We came up with our idea right on my couch. We were daydreaming, laughing about it because it wasn't going to be real, because we could laugh at the imaginary. A few days later I was walking you down a street I didn't usually turn on. You were cooing and I was singing our favorite song: *You Are My Sunshine*. The next thing I knew we were in front of an empty store front. The glass had old yellowing tape on it, the door was smashed and inside there was only

dust hanging in the air and turned over tables on the floor. My eyes were glued to the window. I thought to myself this was it, I found our salon. Only after I had reached out to the landlord, studied the costs, observed other salons and asked around for a man that wanted to assist two women, did Cindy start to help. It was right up until the week of our grand opening that everything was going smoothly, but with just a few words of false information she was able to change my life and trust in people forever. She told me the wrong place and time of our contract. I arrived at the right place two hours late, and the secretary told me everything had already gone through.”

Allison wiped spit from her lip. I was leaning against the whiteboard, smudging her meds schedule drawn with dry erase markers.

“So are you writing back to her?” I said.

They both looked at me, mother and son, with looks just as curious as I was. It seemed that none of us knew what to do about Cindy.

“Don’t respond to her Ma.” Antoni said.

I gave a shake of my head to show my agreement. Allison looked down at the envelope in her hands. She rubbed the rose stamp and shook her head.

“I like roses a lot,” she said.

I stepped out of the room, wondering if Steph got red roses when proposed to. I’ve never bought roses for anyone but it might be cool to see what would happen if I did.

Harper

“Are you married?” Harper asked me.

She was getting a lot of mail. Maybe the most I’ve ever seen addressed to a patient. Some of them came in a bundle held together by a string or in those large yellow manila envelopes. Most of them were from adults who knew how to properly address the envelopes and place a stamp. The cursive was distinct and deliberate, sharp against white, blue, and pink envelopes. The loopiness of the words were calculated and connected to each other. The other letters had crooked writing on them, the addresses were slanted or too much to one side of the envelope, and the lines leaned downward, uneven and not straight.

“How many friends do you have that are children?” I said to her, handing over today’s collection of letters.

Her mother made a sound with her legs while crossing them. Harper swiftly glanced up in her direction which made me turn my head to look at her too. I saw her eyes narrow, but she didn’t look up from her novel. She sat in the corner of the room on one of the big green leather chairs from the storage closet. I had never seen one outside of the tiny room. She had her feet propped up on a long coffee table where trays with garbage and empty bowls piled on top of each other. I could see her nails as she held the hardcover, they needed to be redone. One of the plastic ovals was chipped and ridged, and her pinky and thumb had fallen off. Harper blankly looked back at the stack of envelopes, different colors and lengths protruding out.

“Maybe just put these on the table next time,” she mumbled. “I don’t understand why they think letters from a bunch of kids might tell me something I don’t know.”

“Maybe they know more than you,” I said.

“I know more than *you*,” she said.

I didn't answer.

"Harper!" Her mother put her book down and sat up. "Apologize right now, that wasn't nice!"

"Sorry," Harper said flatly.

Her eyes peeked out from the brim of her pink hat. It was baseball style and made her look nonchalant, like she was reclining, waiting for the fireworks while the smog of BBQ drifted through the air.

A man swiftly walked into the room. He was the one that hissed at me to get a nurse the other day. A crisp breeze followed him, the smell of the cold from outside pinching my nose. He was wearing a bright blue sweatshirt with *ITALY* on the front in white letters and an Italian flag stitched on top. He was one of those men that was in a perpetual state of rushing.

He passed by me. The rustle of plastic bags filled my eardrums.

"Did you get the extra croutons like I said?" said the mom.

He nodded looking down while taking out the plastic container of greens. The mom looked at me again.

The dad moved towards Harper's bed. The mom began to munch on her salad, using a napkin to blot away the dressing.

"Hiya honey, how are you feeling? Need the nurse to come in at all? I have your poncho and a few little things to put on the windowsill and wall, alright, for you to look at for any reason at all."

Harper's father didn't stop moving until he had all the items next to her in the bed, or on her lap, and on the wall like he said. He hung up a few disposable pictures of a group of people

and a brown dog. He handed me a green glass vase, to hold, I assume, and took out fake purple irises.

“These will do, right honey?” he said.

He stuffed the flowers into the vase as I was still holding it, and then took it out of my hands and balanced it on the narrow white windowsill.

Harper whispered to me from across the width of her mattress.

“His name is Mattias.”

I raised my eyebrows at her. I wonder if he would shove a hand of pinched fingers in my face if I asked, like they do in Italian restaurants. Harper abruptly changed her demeanor by looking down at her lap and fondling the edge of the blanket.

“Sweetheart, I know it’s hard, but look at all these wonderful things everyone is giving you, and no one in this place is getting more cards and visitors than you are.”

Mattias started to hum, still rummaging around the less empty room.

“Make sure to get the nurse in here in around ten minutes, Mattias, look at me... okay?” said the mom. She hadn’t gotten up from her seat.

“Mhm” Mattias nodded and continued to hum, setting up a tray of spaghetti and orange juice.

Harper broke through his jolly melody.

“I don’t want people’s sympathy. I want my hair back, and the strength my fingers used to have to play my cello, and I want to walk through the school hallway, ordinary, like everyone else. God. Why do you have to bring so many things into my room! I didn’t ask for that!”

She was yelling, the screams ringing into the corners of the room. It got quiet fast and I was aware of my breathing, way too loud. Mattias stared at her his jaw clenched.

This was a window. I waited for Harper to look up before I left, hoping that her father wouldn't hand me something else. Once I caught her eye, I raised my arms in a salute but she didn't react. Walking down the hallway Harper's screams echoed. Everyone found out her parents were too nice, too caring. She didn't want any of the letters I delivered to her, and she thinks everyone here is a sad and clueless sack. She wasn't eighty or ninety, but she wanted to be treated as such, when all of this would be normal.

Eight

Sometimes you forget the night is another beginning. If someone tells you that everything good comes to an end, run away from them fast. My mom told me one of those things, I don't remember which. Once I mistook an ad on the side of a bus to be a prayer of good fortune, just for me: *I believe in my ability to create a miracle*. When I looked back I realized it was an ad for a pregnancy product. I missed the big smiling face of a baby next to the quote. At the time it felt like the eyes of that baby were watching me as I turned my back to it, walking away.

Two bodies were removed late at night. Apparently the daughter of one of the funeral home employees was getting married, so their pickup services had to be postponed. I knew this because one of the nurses doesn't know how to speak in a hushed voice, I also knew her baby daddy was coming back after two months of them being on and off. By trial and error, I was able to figure out which of the nurses liked me and which ones didn't: some of them said thank you after I dropped off their mail, and the rest wouldn't notice if I quit because they never looked at me. If I had a dog they would be the last people I asked to watch it.

A few years ago my friend suggested I get a dog. At the time I really liked that idea. We were in front of a toy store display window. There were three or four of those realistic looking dogs curled up on the floor, forever sleeping. It was sweet. I would have named a real dog Joey, something that would ring as a man's best friend, or Julie, good get-to-the-point names. I think I'd like if a dog were my best friend, it would know who I am. People usually forget my name, but it's not a hard one.

Hank

Hank was growing weaker. He didn't keep food down, not even applesauce they served in little plastic cups. It looked like baby food. He was like an infant that needed around the clock diaper changes. Snow from outside stuck to his window. He noticed droplets of frost sliding down a narrow branch, waiting until the very last second, at the thin tip, to fall off. Hank wondered what was going on, in place of him, without him, whatever it was called.

He had a dream the other night, of people he didn't recognize. Something was preventing him from looking at them, like his eyes were loose in their sockets. Hank knew he was doing the right thing when he took a step closer. It was a group of people, and they were laughing. He got closer. They were laughing at a girl, hollering and whooping. She was spinning around and around as a little gray dog followed at her feet. Hank stepped forward. When his foot touched the ground, everything became silent and still. The little girl stopped dancing. She turned to look at him, he caught a glimpse of her curly blonde hair as it whipped around her face.

It was the first time I'd seen someone wearing a fascinator at this place. I think. It was black, fancy and looked like it smelled stale, like the old woman whose head it was on. They were both antiques. She was engulfed in a big brown fur coat and was wearing powder on her face, you could tell.

"This way Ma'am." someone said.

"Simon, make sure she knows...okay...yeah. Thank you. Simon, can you help her a little more since I'm on the phone?" the younger woman standing next to the old woman said.

"She doesn't even know I'm here," the man said.

Which seemed true. The old woman hadn't made a sound. The man, Simon, was helping what looked like an aid guide the old woman in the right direction: step by step by step. I was pretending to count our stock of supplies, I had counted three full times while watching the four of them. The young woman was the obvious leader of everything. She kept sniffing, her phone ringing numerous times. She was wearing heels that Steph scoffed at when she saw.

"I hope those aren't her work shoes, mhm." she murmured as we watched them pace around before the group made their slow way down the hall.

Once they had made it to the room they were looking for I wrote down the number I counted of our stock and propped my feet up on the desk. I had seven minutes until my break.

"Want me to get you one of those hats?" I said to Steph. "You know the funny looking kind?"

Steph, without a glance, said "No."

"What about for your birthday?" I said.

"No."

"Thanksgiving?"

“No, and why would you get someone a gift for Thanksgiving?” she said.

“For being thankful,” I said.

“Did you see how old that woman was?” she said. “It looked like she’s the one about to be carried out of here.”

“Mhm.” I said.

I was fashioning a rabbit origami, something I liked to do when I got bored. I used to leave them as gifts for patients but then word spread that someone was leaving paper animals around and this place wasn’t a zoo enough already.

“Do you know what I just said?” she asked.

“Woman, old, should be dead.” I said.

Folding the edges was the hardest part. They never quite lined up the way they’re supposed to.

Movement from down the hallway caught the side of my eye. The man named Simon had the woman who was on the phone in his arms. She was crying in lengthy wails. The old woman was standing next to them, her face scrunched up. It seemed that she was not a fan of the crying. The hospital men I see at least once a week, I don’t know their names, were standing a little ways from the embracing duo, leaning against another door frame. They were waiting for the right moment to collect and wheel out the body in that room, knowing their cue better than any stage actor.

“Can you take this to room 102?” Steph said.

She pointed to a bulky package.

“Why can’t you do it?”

“I’m really busy,” she said and went back to reading her book.

I made sure to tip toe, to go unnoticed, around the mourning family.

Allison

It was hot in Allison's room, the heat had been cranked up. Someone would notice and turn it back down. I waved at her and she waved back. Two and a half weeks she's been here waving at me every time I come in. I waved first this time.

"Aren't you hot?" I said.

She moved her shoulders, the most miniscule movement, showing me she didn't know. Allison was lying down, her bed almost fully positioned as a traditional cot, 180 degrees. The pillow barely lifted her to a sitting position, a homemade polka dotted pillowcase covering it.

"Do you want me to adjust your pillow?" I said.

She shook her head no and exhaled a long wheezy breath. She might have a trachea infection.

"Well you have a package, I'll leave it right next to you." I said.

She was unmoving. Just blinking and breathing.

It wasn't a box because it had soft edges, a bundle, rolled up in tape. Clothing or a tapestry could be packaged that way. I wonder what it is. I watched her try to open it. Yellow fingernails got in the way as her thin thumbs tried to tear the opening apart, losing grip when the two sides of hard oval skin knocked together. I helped her, removing the seal and holding the package in place as she pried it open, her hands reaching inside, cupped, as if she was about to receive water. I kept my head up craning away to give her space. I heard a faint gasp and looked down. In her hands was a tattered doll. It was made of sewn and knit fabric, not china or plastic. There was a note attached.

I found you an old friend. I know she will keep you company.

Rick

I stayed with Allison as tears rolled down her cheek. I kept my hand on her shoulder.

Harper

“So I’ve heard rumors.” Harper said.

“About what?” I said.

Today she received four letters and two vases of flowers. Her room was beginning to look enchanted. I would feel trapped with so much living foliage around me.

“That man that just died, his family is giving this place a lot of money.”

“How do you know that?” I said.

I put the letters by her feet on top of the bunched-up blanket.

“My nurse told me,” she said and took a sip of her juice box.

Maybe we would get new stamps and a few fountain pens in that case. Sunshine was coming through the drapes, leaving uneven tilted rays of light over everything in the room, which made it seem everything was in the background of a spotlight, even Harper and I.

I didn’t notice at first but the CLUE board game was strewn all over a fold up table on the other side of the bed. The small metal piece of the game that resembled a wrench glistened in the lines of light.

“You play?” I asked her.

Harper nodded. “My little cousins visited the other day, this was the only other thing they wanted to do besides watch TV.”

“Board games aren’t meant for people your age.” I said.

“They are not my age.” she retorted and rolled her eyes.

“So then what are they?” I said.

Harper took a second to answer, her eyes glancing upwards towards the ceiling. She looked at me, gesturing her finger as if to make a point.

“You know, I’ve wondered the same thing. Cousins are supposed to be there from childhood and at holidays and maybe even birthdays, but the most I’ve ever seen them are here, in this stench filled tiny room where I pee through a tube- which they couldn’t stop touching.” she said.

I nodded my head, as if I understood her.

“So why do you care about the supposed donation?” I asked her.

“I don’t, that’s the point. It’s about you. Which is what I want it to be right now. I don’t want anything to be about me anymore.”

I quickly said, “Well it would be nice if I got a room for myself.”

Harper took another sip of her juice box, the liquid slurping inside as she reached the cardboard bottom.

“Describe it to me.” she said.

“What? My office?” I said.

“Well,” she tilted her head and side eyed me with a small smile. “It’s not exactly an office.”

I rolled my eyes which made her laugh.

“We’re far away from the lounge, the cafe, and the reception desk- which are all towards the front- and the oval nurse desk too, which has its own room. Behind two swinging doors is the laundry room and a break room which no one uses besides to use the vending machine. I smell pee in there a lot.”

I needed air.

“Across from that are the doctors’ offices. I don’t see them there that much. They come in when they want to, but those rooms are the nicest ones we have. There are four and the doors

have their own gold plaque with the doctor's name on it, and at the end of the hall near the back exit is us. We have a window, looking out into the hallway. My desk faces the other way while Steph's desk faces the window. She's the first person people see when they come down to us. She's on a first name basis with the mailman."

"Does he know your name?" Harper interjected.

"No," I said.

"Do you like your job?" she asked.

"Yes... I love it." I said.

"That didn't sound super convincing," she said.

"Well be convinced," I said.

Footsteps approached us and I clasped my hands behind my back. A nurse I didn't know came in. She glanced up from her clipboard and glanced at me, then at Harper.

"You're gonna have to go." she said, her eyes going back to me.

I lifted my arms up in surrender and began to back out of the room.

"Hey! Find out what you'd like to do with all your days!" Harper shouted after me.

I walked to my desk, past the hum of drying machines in the laundry room.

Dear Sarah,

Thank you for not responding to my letter. I get piles of them but I haven't seen your name once. Maybe that means you're on your way to kneel beside my bed, as I take my last breath and say my last words, like in Romeo & Juliet although it would be Harper & Sarah, the gay version. But I wouldn't die for you. I don't have that choice. If you read this, you're thinking that I'm being mean by saying that. Cynical. It's not simple with you: either you laugh at what I say and think I am the wittiest person you've ever met, or you scrunch up your nose as if you've smelled something rancid, which makes you look like a pig. I can also tell when you think I've crossed a line with my jokes, your cheeks get rosy, not the sides. I think you think I don't know you well, but I do.

Love,

Harper

Nine

I've stepped on gum and cannot get it off my shoe. The squeaking of my foot as I rubbed it against the side of the metal leg on my chair, makes it sound like my sneakers are cheap, but they're not.

"Can you do something else, anything else, other than what you're doing." Steph said.

I rubbed it extra hard, until I noticed the pressure was making the gum spread into the rubber crevices of the sole. I bent down, cursing.

"Not my problem," Steph said.

I liked my new chair. It wasn't made out of thin mesh cloth that back sweat easily seeped into and it didn't have soft handles that had been violently picked at, out of severe boredom, leaving missing big chunks of foam, like my old chair.

"That family was very nice, too nice, to give this place any amount of money. Respectable people... rich... virtuous. The daughter could still use some advice about dress code." Steph said.

She marked off our timesheet carefully, gently signing off below, turning the paper towards me to sign too.

I leaned over, concentrating. On my first payday I learned her favorite method with anything was to get it perfect: she made me sign my name four times, each on a different timesheet, before she said it was good to turn in.

"It's getting better, but stick your tongue back in your mouth, that's no way to sign official documents."

I hastily added a final loop to the "y".

"That man was always really quiet." I said.

“And you think he wanted to chat you up?” she said, folding the paper into its designated folder.

“Maybe he wanted to,” I said.

“No, maybe he was dying and didn’t want nosy people in his business.” Steph said flatly. “Like my mom said: A woman should know when they’re not wanted around anymore, but in this case... it’s you.”

Harper

I could barely see past the meaty shoulder of a giant man standing in the doorway. If I stood on my tiptoes, foreheads were what lay ahead, that and one nervous looking man with glasses in the far corner of the room, his hands tucked underneath his armpits. I stood up straighter, tapping the dense shoulder of the giant man. At first I thought I'd have to touch him again because he didn't flinch or turn around, but then the pink skin of his big neck swiveled followed by the rest of his torso and his legs, like a broken robot.

"I'm-, I ha-... mail," I sputtered.

He squinted down at me while I looked up at him, waiting.

He smiled and jerked his head towards the inside. I darted past. Everyone was either sitting or standing, too close to each other.

The white flashes of crumpled tissues in different hands, moving back and forth between lap and face, spread out across the room like a patchy field of flowers. Harper would not be talking much today. Her father's hand was caressing the side of her sleeping face. Her mother was in the bed with her on the right side. She moved her hand to Harper's leg, cheek, hand, then each individual finger, one by one. I could have sworn they were wax figures, made to stay still for a long time. Someone touched my back.

"I can take that sweetheart." I heard.

I turned around to a middle-aged woman with messy eyeshadow smeared over her eyelids. I could smell the breath of coffee and gum. I handed the two letters to her and watched her approach the parents.

"Here, this was just-"

"Analy, don't, right now." Harper's mother said in a harsh whisper.

I slid over to the side of the room, hoping at least one person could tell I was trying to leave and would move out of the way so I could make an invisible exit.

“Susan, I’m trying to be helpful, this is mail for her, maybe read it out loud.” the woman named Analy whispered back forcefully.

“Not. Now.” Harper’s mother said, waving the other woman away, clearly irritated by her intrusion.

I looked at Harper. If I didn’t know any better, she was everyone’s superior by the way the adults surrounded her. Someone shifted their spot with just enough room for maybe a fishing rod to fit through: my way of getting out. I walked swiftly towards the gap between bodies, arching my back. I side-stepped out of the room past the giant man again who was now eating a sort of bun.

I realized I still had gum on my shoe. I picked my foot up off the floor, bending down, and inspected the bottom of it. The yellow candy separated into thin sticky strings and had turned to a light gray color, the dust of the floor collecting. Some of them were falling off. I liked that color. It reminded me of a hard boiled egg yolk before you eat it, the soft buttercup yellow revealed after taking a bite.

“Is this Harper’s room?” the voice of a girl asked me.

I raised my head up, my body still in the position of clutching my shoe, one foot off the ground.

“Yeah.” I said.

She was right in front of me. I could see her snow boots were wet from outside.

“Can I go in?” she asked.

Her eyes locked mine, the brown iris intense. She was asking me, as if I had authority over the matter.

“Yeah...she’s not okay,” I said.

The girl nodded, the hood of her sweatshirt falling off in the process. She was looking at the doorway, her cheeks rosy.

I unwinded myself and walked away. The sobbing girl was almost inaudible.

Allison

Dear Antoni,

I've made sure you will read this when I am in heaven. I thought it might be nice to hear my voice again when you can't. I am sad that I wasn't able to be the best grandma to two beautiful grandbabies. I've always thought you would have a boy and a girl. The other week, when my jaw still worked, I imagined breaking up my bread roll for them, leaving myself the smallest piece, giving my baby birds strength and comfort. I would limit myself with everything, just so they could have more and I'd insist on spoiling them even though crinkled bills are never in my wallet. I can picture you now chasing them around your kitchen table. I will look down at you and your family someday and you can look up at me. Think of me as a star if you'd like.

I feel as if I've never belonged anyplace more than by your side, the thought of going someplace new makes my heart twist. You don't know this but the curves of my hand grew around your hand when you used to hold it all the time. Now there are grooves where your missing fingers and small palm belong.

I miss my hair and body. I used to be very attractive, except now I couldn't care less and still feel pretty okay. I've learned something new about myself, even now. When I was your age I couldn't wrap my head around how big the world was, it took me ages to leave my mother and father. It was on my first train ride that I gasped and realized one day the world would go on without me. I thought I would live forever, and now I'm glad that's not my fate. I do not even wish forever for you! After you left for college there were many days that I didn't know my purpose.

I remembered something. When you were around ten years old. We were home. You came out of the shower and I went to check on you, except this time you covered yourself with a

towel. I realized that you would be a man one day. At that moment I understood I would not see you as a person in the world, only the Antoni at home. Sometimes I wish I had followed you back to your world as you wandered away from mine, but you never took the same route.

Be better friends with Rick, he is a simple man and I know once you let him in he will love you with his small heart, but he is not like me. When I was younger people always told me to go get my older brother, like he was the one who made decisions, and he was, which is what turned him sour. I was always the sweet one.