

Writing and Revision: Works of Fiction

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Table of Contents

Part I: Advanced Fiction Workshop Capstone Work

Teacup in the Garden	2
When You Serve Coffee to Zombies	6
Medical Logging Journals Trial #001	9
Stuck	15
Skillet Smoke	30
Revision Summary	46
He Was Sentimental	47

Part II: Independent Study Portfolio Material

Letter to the Readers	65
The Intimate Scenes	68
Sugar Water	80
Mischief Night	95

Teacup in the Garden

“June, what are you doing?” yells Richard over the explosion sounds in that ridiculous war movie on television. I hate it when he turns it up so loud, but his hearing is going faster than mine. What can I do?

“I’m looking,” I answer. “I’m scoping out... I’m not going out there until I’m absolutely sure.” I squint against the double glare between the glass porch door and my bifocals. I move the red leopard print frames just far enough down my nose to see over them. There is no movement out there. I see only the green of my yard, and since there is no wind, even the flowerbeds and the larger bushes are still.

I imagine that super-duper, sneaky spy music from the movie my grandson seems to watch every week as I continue to sweep the area for intruders. It seems “the coast,” as they say, is clear. I’m not dressed in all black like the man in that movie, but my green gardening sweats should blend in perfectly with the foliage. I should be hidden. The only problem might be the bright red ribbon bow on my straw hat. I take it off quickly, using the gardening shears, afraid to attract attention even from inside the door.

“June, don’t be ridiculous. It’s *your* garden, and no animal is going to keep my wife from her own garden. Just go out there! If I hear anything, I’ll be right out there to help,” Richard nagged, as if he could hear anything outside even without the television blasting a billion decibels. He’s right, though, I suppose. Just an animal. Nothing more. My garden. Mine. Just an animal. My garden.

With a deep breath I reach for the latch of the porch door. It’s a little difficult to open it quietly with my yellow gloves on. The door opens with a loud *pop*. I freeze. My eyes are back on

the yard, looking for any movement. Still none. I swing the door. It is silent for a moment, and then, *sssssqueeeeeeeeeeaak*. I freeze again.

“June!” Richard calls.

“Fine!” I react. “Fine. I’m going. Whether it’s to my death I don’t know, but I’m going! Lord help me.” With that I’m outside. The door swings shut behind me. I listen, and the new slow-close device I made Richard install last week works perfectly. No slam. Just shuts silently. I move quickly, but quietly, just like the spies in the movies. I made my grandson pull up clips of the sneaking in spy movies on the YouTube, so I could study. I think I’ve done pretty well because my garden is still quiet. Peaceful.

“Finally,” I murmur as I kneel, sinking my knees into the dirt of my favorite flowerbed. “You ladies need weeding like my eyebrows need waxing.” I sink my gloved hands into the soil and begin to pull out the yellow-green leaves from around and in between my wave petunias. I have to be careful not to break the stems of the spreading blooms. After a while I forget about that God-forsaken animal, about Richard’s hearing, about my grandson’s movies. I’m only here in the sun, working in the dirt with my plants. There’s even a lovely breeze rustling the blossoms on my newest hydrangea bush—

“Wait!” I realize that there is no breeze, and I know what this means. I jump up, but before I can run,

“*SSSSQUEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAAAL, SSSQUEEEAL, SSSQUEEEEEEEAAAL,*” and that hairy white demon, with two black ears and an ugly snout charges at me from inside the bush. He may be no bigger than a hangnail, but I still say this is the most evil creature that ever lived on earth. Downright possessed. Full of the Devil himself *just* like the pigs in the Bible parable—only this time, Jesus isn’t here to send the rascal running off a cliff.

“Richaaaaaaaard! Richard, Richard, Richard! He’s back alright,” I scream, running in circles, and dancing my feet around as much as a woman my age can. All the while that wretched creature squeals and squawks and carries on so loud I can’t hear my own bawling. “Richard! You turn that TV off, right now!” I don’t know how much longer I can keep up my evasion tactics before I get tired—I’m not as young as the spies in those movies. The demon-monster-beast squeals and chases after my feet, ramming my ankles with his slimy snout, and *never* stops that screeching. The devil’s wail, if you ask me.

I’m on my last leg, actually standing on one foot, on tip-toe, trying to climb on top of Richard’s grille if only I had the balance, when little Meg Halford comes running round the corner.

“Mrs. Goodwin, what’s wrong?” She whines. She’s a very sweet girl, but she’s not so observant of the facts: I’m under attack! And my assailant is her demon pig.

“Well, good morning, Meggie,” I answer, trying to sound calm, wobbling on one foot. I never yell at children. It isn’t right. “As you can see, honey, your pet... your pig... has gotten into my garden again. It seems he’d like for me to leave it, too. Could you...” I’m still half-trying to climb onto the grille, but the cover is starting to slip off. I’m running out of time.

“Oh, Mrs. Goodwin!” Meg giggles, but I don’t see what’s funny. “You don’t have to be afraid of Cupcake! He’s only trying to be friendly!” She continues to laugh, and she’s got a lovely smile, but for heaven’s sake, she hasn’t yet harnessed the aggressive.

“Meggie, that’s nice, but pick up your pig. Please. Pick him up!” My voice is very quiet and calm, but I’m dying to scream out to Richard. Meg, still laughing, starts to chase the evil animal, who runs from her like the bad seed he is. She finally catches him, though, and plops down onto the grass, holding the writhing, wriggling animal between two hands.

“You can come down now, Mrs. Goodwin. Come pet Cupcake! He’s just a teacup pig! They make the sweetest, cutest little pets! Not scary at all. Hush, Cupcake!” She tries to convince me, over the noise of her dessert friend’s squawling, that the animal who drove me onto my own grille is sweet and cute. Jesus have mercy on me if ever I break a child’s heart, but someday that girl will have to be told that she’s letting the Devil sleep on a pink pillow at the foot of her bed.

“Thank you, Meggie. I’m sure... Cupcake... is very sweet to you. We just don’t seem to get along,” and by that I mean, he has it out for me. He’s always on the lookout for the day he’ll catch me off-guard. I got away from him today. Thank the Good Lord. But I can see it in Cupcake’s eyes even as Meg makes kissing noises in his face: he’ll get me someday. “Well, I’m pretty tired now, Meggie. I think I’ll do my gardening... later.” Can the pig hear me? I shouldn’t say when I plan to come back out. Element of surprise. I gather up my tools and begin to back away, eyes on Cupcake.

“Okay, Mrs. Goodwin. Sorry your gardening got interrupted, but thanks for finding Cupcake! I looked everywhere this morning,” I can see from the dirt on her knees and shorts that she must have crawled around in search for quite a while. Cupcake waited for me—I know it. The girl stands, balancing that filthy, conniving creature like a baby on her hip. She walks back into her own yard, and I wave. I swear those beady, blackest-black eyes are staring right at me, over Meg’s shoulder. He squints, revealing his plan to return. It sends shivers up my spine, and I run back inside, not caring about how much noise the door makes.

“June? Back already?” Richard calls from the sofa in the next room. “See, baby, I told you it would be fine. I was listening to make sure you’d be alright.” Just wait until I tell him. Or better yet, I’ll send him to do the weeding next time.

When You Serve Coffee to Zombies

Do you have any idea what it feels like to sweep this floor every morning and every night, knowing y'all are just gonna keep coming in, everyday, spilling coffee, dropping trash and food crumbs? No one notices you've swept at all, but you keep sweeping, sweeping, sweeping. And when you're done sweeping, you move onto the next unacknowledged task, one after the other.

You offer your service with a smile—"What can I get for you today? Will there be anything else for you this evening?" You know they haven't even looked at you. You watch their eyes dart from the baked goods to the menu board to the total when it pops up on the register. They hand you their cards and cash, and they mutter obligatory thank-you's as they're texting someone else. They don't even watch you count the change! You could steal so much money from these zombie-students between 10 PM and 1 AM every night that you could quit this job entirely. They don't even know when you're done swiping the card on the little machine until you've stretched the entire top half of your body over the counter to wave the card around inside the zone of peripheral vision—noise helps too. You wait and wait until finally the brain in front of you comes back alive, takes the card and walks away—leaves the transaction without having looked at your face, without making eye-contact even once.

You'd like to think that some of these kids who come in every day might be able to recall and wonder, "What do you suppose the-girl-who-gave-me-coffee-every-day-of-my-college-life is up to these days?" You'd like to think that they snapped out of their individual lives long enough to have acquired sufficient information to form a mental image of you in your uniform, which they will associate with the word "coffee." But it's simply unreasonable to expect that

these people will ever be capable of guessing even what color uniform you wore everyday, much less retaining some memory of your hair color or facial structure.

You are keeping them alive. You are keeping them awake. You are keeping them from being utterly depressed when all they can see for themselves for the next several days is the library. You watch them come in looking fresh in the morning, looking progressively more and more bedraggled and run down each time they return for a re-fill. You're there, but they have no idea who you are. You're invisible. You're invisible despite the fact that you're unavoidably, consistently, and significantly participating in their lives.

Eventually you just accept this all as fact. You stop waiting for the morning when a normal customer interaction will turn into a quippy, slightly humorous conversation. You stop waiting for the friendly relationship you're supposed to have with "the regulars," in which they'll learn your first name while you memorize their "usual." No, it doesn't happen. You learn to be okay with providing daily sustenance to and cleaning up after thankless, heartless zombies.

You learn to actually be grateful that none of them look at you, because then you would have to look at them. You aren't just used to the distance; you need it. You need to only think of these people in terms of non-human traits. Yesterday, veggies-and-hummus left her trash on the table, and you picked it up. This morning, you mopped up non-fat-latte's puddle after you made him a new one. You are safe, then. But if you start thinking about guy-who-wore-the-same-red-sweatshirt-everyday-last-semester-but-now-he-got-a-new-maroon-one-that-looks-better, or girl-whose-hair-gets-shorter-every-week, or girl-who's-always-stressing-about-an-ever-impending-math-test, or seems-to-be-on-the-verge-of-tears-at-all-times-guy, or incredibly-sweet-but-incredibly-loud-on-her-cell-phone-lady...

If you start to think of them as humans then you start to get attached. If you start to get attached, then you start to hope they think of *you* as human. You start to long for recognition. You want to be their always-saves-the-corner-piece-of-the-lemon-bar-for-me-girl, the has-my-order-ready-for-me-before-I-ask-for-it-girl, the if-I-don't-see-her-every-morning-before-I-start-my-day-it-won't-be-the-same-girl. You hope for that; you need it. But you're not going to get it. It's not going to happen to you.

You have to give up on it, or pretty soon you're pouring your heart out to first-time-anyone's-ever-said-"how's-your-day-going-I-like-your-necklace-"to-you-before-ever-guy. You have to stop talking before he doesn't even want his coffee anymore, because you're holding it hostage, and the ransom is conversation. Then you won't ever see him again, and you know he probably switched to Starbucks, because they're so much more efficient over there than girl-who-needs-to-talk-more-than-she-wants-to-make-your-coffee-girl.

So, anyway, all this to say that you don't know what it's like to work here. You don't. You had best stick to ordering without engaging in any pleasantries. It's safer for both of us. You want to avoid becoming the next girl-who's-scared-to-come-back-because-the-coffee-girl-talked-about-zombies. Here's your change.

Medical Journals Logging Trial #001

I've bitten off more than I can chew with this one. Human trials may have been a terrible idea. I knew it was too early, but there really is no way to test this on rats or guinea pigs. I'm backing this with all my savings just to experiment with my only volunteer: #001.

Day #1-Project Mindsweep Creation

#001 comes in for preliminary assessment. I explain the purpose and plan of Mindsweep Creation. I tell him exactly the extent to which his current life will end. I ask him to look over a binder full of liability and consent documents.

#001 is male, middle-aged, and non-descript in appearance. Based on extensive emotional, mental, and physical assessment completed today, he is perfectly suited for a test run of Mindsweep Creation. He has few to zero attachments to other humans. He is tired of his current situation, and has no fond or cherished memories, thoughts, or aspirations which he will regret losing. Advertising on the suicide hotline seems to have been my only successful recruitment endeavor. In short, #001 is ready, based on the following quote from his preliminary interview: "I called the hotline just to hear what they'd have to say. I don't really want to kill myself or die. I just have nothing I can live for." This chance, however slim, that Mindsweep Creation will succeed, is enough for #001.

Day #11

#001 returns with signed copies of liability and consent forms. He also brings proof of sale of his current living space and asks, "How soon can you start? I have to be out by the weekend."

I make a few calls and get him a room in the research hospital. We'll be starting even earlier than I expected. I am nervous, sweating all the time, and never sleeping, but I am ready. Let the Mindsweep Creation begin.

Day #14

#001 arrives with a small suitcase and asks, "Was I supposed to bring anything or trash it all?"

I have my assistant take his belongings and agree to sell or dispose of anything he has left behind. He signs an agreement to turn over all funds and finances to the use of Mindsweep Creation. I cannot run the risk that anything he has left will trigger an emotional response or memory.

I show him to his room—we have made it as plain and nondescript as possible. He remarks that the faded, pink blanket on the foot of the hospital bed reminds him of his deceased grandmother. I have it removed by my assistant. I instruct the nurses on this floor to conduct an intense and total body-cleansing plan, which I have written. They arrange to begin #001's regimen at 6:00 AM tomorrow, Day 15 of Mindsweep Creation.

Day #20

I arrive at the research hospital with my belongings and equipment. I check in with the Chief of Staff to be shown to the set of rooms and lab I have arranged to occupy, all on the same floor as #001's observation suite. When my lab is set up and my room is done, I go to bed early. Tomorrow I begin.

Day #21

After years of education, research, sacrifice, philosophical and medical debates, heavy criticism and censure from mentors, colleagues, and friends—here I am. I will begin the test trial of Mindsweep Creation.

I have the necessary medications to induce a coma in #001. He is living his last moments, if all goes as planned, as the person he has been since birth. This identity will be erased, essentially killed, and a new one reborn, completely blank and open.

I give him one last chance to back out, to burn the signed documents. He doesn't, though. The nurses put him to sleep. I stay until I see his eyes close on the world as he had known it—forever.

Day #24

#001 sleeps. We wait to make sure the body remains stable and the brain active before we start the trial drugs. We log the brain activity so that we can track changes as we progress through the trial. #001 looks peaceful, less sad than he ever did when he was conscious during our meetings. The face already, in this first step, proves what I hope for Mindsweep Creation—that it will offer hope to those who only despair. It will end ruination without death. #001 will be new.

Day #25

My assistant and I administer the first round of the drugs regimen—phase Mindsweep of Mindsweep Creation. This will go on for several weeks, over time so as not to deaden brain activity. The goal is to slowly erase what remains from the life of #001 before this hospital. I will stay in my rooms at the hospital, carefully logging my observations and any changes in #001's status. My assistant has already begun to ask for time off, vacation days. My assistant also remarks that I will need a vacation soon. Perhaps it is time for a new assistant.

Day #60

My assistant returns from a 10-day vacation and is required to take a cleansing shower before entering the observation suite for the next 10 workdays. My assistant needs to be reminded that chatter concerning the outside world may contaminate #001's brain function. The risk that the brain will record and recall any sounds emitted during the interim period between Mindsweep and Creation is too high. #001's brain activity level remains constant, though it is lower than I originally recorded. The nurses remark that #001 is losing weight. I make a note to gradually increase the nutritional intake, so as to accommodate for an apparent increase in metabolism without shocking the digestive system. Soon it will be time to start the creation phase. The nurses remark that I, too, should increase my nutritional intake. What does "Darlin', you're a beanpole" mean?

Day #70

Today marks ten weeks since the start of Operation Mindsweep Creation. Today is the last day of Mindsweep. Tomorrow I begin Creation. My assistant has taken the day off "to prepare for the long haul, the interesting stuff." I'm going to bed early.

Day #71

The nurses warn me that #001 may not wake up today. Sometimes it takes a patient longer to come out of the state of comatose, depending on the length of time spent in unconsciousness in comparison with brain activity levels. As a doctor, I know this. Nevertheless, I am anxious for #001 to wake up. It will mean Creation can begin.

Day #74

Brain activity has stabilized as the coma inducing drugs cleared the system. Blood tests are clear of all drugs. I wait. I sit by the bed, not willing to trust even the most sensitive of brain

activity monitors. I have to see #001's eyes when they open.

Day #75

They open. They are blank. They look at me and at the room, but they are blank, unfocused, not recognizing anything. #001 has yet to move or speak, but the coma is over. The eyes tell me what I need to know.

Day #77

I return to my years of studying for my doctorates specializing in speech therapy and fine motor skills development. After a review, I am confident that I can assess #001's status. I enter the room quietly. I ask my assistant to take thorough notes from behind the one-way mirror. I want #001 in as little contact with others as possible. Only the nurses and myself are necessary—they are trained not to speak while they are in this room.

In order for Creation to proceed, I must know the extent of Mindsweep. I run through a series of test with #001 for language comprehension, speech ability, ability to handle objects such as writing and eating utensils. I also test eyesight, hearing, and ability to recall certain words, if any. Where Creation begins depends fully on the results of these studies.

Day #84

One week of studies show that Mindsweep is a success. It seems I have thoroughly and completely wiped #001 of all memory in the specific target areas. The thalamus, hypothalamus, midbrain, medulla, and other low order memory functions remain intact, while the amygdala, hippocampus, and long-term emotional memory storage have been generally drained with little exception.

I have my assistant send one of the nurses in with the pink blanket from before. #001 exhibits no visible reaction either physical or emotional. The nurse removes the blanket. The risk

of recognition is too high.

Day #85

Today I begin. The slate is clean. #001 will be the first. I begin with rudimentary lessons, explaining first about the room in which #001 has stayed and will continue to occupy. When I enter, the light is still off from the evening before. I start with this. I flip the switch and say, "Let there be light. Light. Good."

Stuck

Every time I ask my husband what to write next, he says as if it's already won a Pulitzer, "Tell the story of this guy who started playing with super glue in the school cafeteria, and his hands get stuck to the table forever, and he starves. To death." He said it for the first time at the age of 19, when I was 18, and my answer was, of course, "no," with a smile. It is the only idea he has ever given me when I ask that question. I continue asking it, though after years, I've come to expect the answer. I've written many stories, but I've still never written that one.

At the age of 18, I was not interested in mixing his "silliness" with my writing—I wanted to be serious. But now that I know silliness can save you, that life will get serious with or without your assistance, I think maybe I should have tried to write that story.

At 18, I did not expect that unexpected phone calls could change your life in minutes, seconds actually, because I remember 0:33 flashing across the screen when I hung up. I did not expect the words that fit into 33 seconds could change everything for almost the same number of years. I did not expect, at the age of 18, that the stories I'd already written would not have been powerful enough to eradicate this kind of *wrongness*. I did not expect that my stories had not fixed the world.

Even though I learned my lesson, at 18, to expect the unexpected, to accept what my husband calls "the brokenness of humankind," I *still* was not expecting it. Another phone call. Very much like the one I received at the age of 18, but longer, and roughly 25 years later.

When I was 18, the phone call came in the evening, depriving me of sleep that night. This time, it came in the morning. A Thursday morning. I woke to the moisture of a kiss on my forehead and a whispered, "Bye, honey—the Woodson surgery was moved up to 6 A.M. He wants to be awake in time for lunch." I rolled over and watched light horizontally infiltrate the

bedroom window coverings. Before it quite turned into the daytime kind of light, I slipped from beneath the blanket, breaking my only barrier against the cold. In slippers I moved to my desk and wrote prayers for hours, for my husband, for his patients, for my grown sons, for my mother, and my brother and his wife and kids. After petitioning for the care and keeping of my loved ones, I moved to the kitchen to seek the care and keeping of my stomach. There were eggs long past their sell-by date in my refrigerator, but I cracked them anyway, over sizzling butter in a small skillet. Just when the color of the eggs began to turn—that's when the phone rang.

I picked it up. I answered. I stretched the cord from the wall to the table—I'd demanded an out-dated kitchen phone complete with a stretchy cord, because my mother always had one. I sat down, twirling the spiral cord in my finger and said, "Hello."

I did not expect the kind of call that would change my day. I did not expect the kind of call that would change more than just one.

According to the digital numbers on the face of my microwave, this call lasted about 11 minutes longer than the one I remember at the age of 18. When I was finished with the conversation, I had to stand up slowly, so as not to get dizzy, and cross the room to hang up, watching the cord shrink back into place like the slinkies of my childhood. I left my hand on the dormant phone a moment before I smelled the char. It turns out you are not supposed to cook your eggs for 12-13 minutes. I tossed them out, thinking they probably would have made me sick anyway.

At the age of 18, I received a phone call. It was my father's voice somewhere on the other side of my cell phone. Sometimes I imagine what his face must have looked like in that moment when he knew what he was going to say and I did not.

“You have a brother,” he said, and for a moment, I didn’t understand. I thought, I’ve always had a brother. Why would he call to point this out?

“I have a wife,” he continued. “I married her months ago. She gave birth to my son two weeks ago. You have a brother.” That is when 0:33 began to flash across the screen that had been pressed against my ear. The seconds, minutes, hours, and several days that followed are a blur of harried breathing, heaving sobs, and racing thoughts.

Since the age of 18, I have spoken to my father only in my stories. In some of those stories, I am angry.

“You liar,” says the character that somehow represents a part of me. “How dare you reproduce again? You already had two perfectly successful chances to ruin a person. You already completely screwed up. I never want to see you again,” the character says. “If you must be a father now, go spend time with number three.” In these stories, the father figure cries, and the angry character coldly walks away, stonily aware that this is justice.

In other stories, I am sad. The character that is part of me, though on paper he is a 36-year-old business-man whose wife is a dog walker who sleeps with the man who pays her to walk his schnauzer every morning, says,

“Why wasn’t I enough? Why did you feel the need to form a new place in your heart for another person who performs the role that I was meant to play? I feel inadequate now. You’ve made me useless.” In those stories, the wife (my father) scoffs and blames her husband for not fulfilling her. The husband cries. The wife leaves. It’s heart breaking, and I always end up shedding tears before the final sentence.

But then there are the stories in which I am neither angry nor heart-broken. In these stories, perhaps some mother whose children abandoned her at a time when she was utterly alone says to no one,

“It’s okay. There is nothing you could do to put a stopper in the love I have for you. It flows. I will love you from afar forever, even though the most recent lies you told were doozies, even though they weren’t the first, even though they were unexpected. I will love you from afar, but if you ever choose to come to me, I will not scream at you, I will not cry, but I will hug you as if you never lied, as if you never left.”

In some of those stories, the character dies alone, having accepted there are some things that never change no matter how hard we pray. But in other stories, one child, or the wife, or the friend, or the puppy-dog returns. Sometimes the character finds resolution, comfort in that restoration, and sometimes the story ends just as the character sees that this lifetime has not yet closed the door on the child, the wife, the dog. But always, always, always this story ends in relief.

At the age of 18, I did not feel relieved. I felt grieved, betrayed, and driven to love more fiercely and completely than my father had ever loved. I would not be my father’s daughter. I would not say in words that I loved people while my actions said, “I hate you,” “I feel indifferent toward you,” “or “I’ve forgotten you.”

“I vow to be your husband, and I love you,” he said to my mother in June 1982. He proceeded to steal from her until she had no money. He left her with two children looking for answers and protection.

“You’re my one and two. Don’t ever let anyone tell you that I don’t love you. You’re my whole world,” he said to me and to my brother. He would forget to call the week after that; work

became too busy for us to take the trip we planned. He once left my brother to wait at the airport for seven hours, but at least he sent “I love you” texts.

At the age of 18, I imagined wrenching out of my father’s hands a bottle of super glue on which he’d written “LOVE” in washable marker. I took it from him, and I tore myself away. I broke the bond he’d claimed to make. I turned the bottle upside down and poured milky, white glue onto my right palm, and I pressed that hand to my heart. I wore my hand pressed to my heart from that moment on, and in my left hand, I forever carried with me the bottle, which I would wield as my weapon of goodness and love. I formed very permanent attachments.

No one ever doubted whether I really loved. No one ever thought I was just saying so. No one ever missed the fact that I stuck around, determined to at least let them know I was there to be theirs if they wanted me.

I carried on from there, from the age of 18, with my hands full. And all that from a thirty-second phone call.

The burnt eggs smelled so strongly I took the trash out before calling my husband. I got his voicemail, which I expected. After all, the doctor can’t take his cell phone into surgery. I told him to call me, and he did.

“Woodson’s awake and trying to gain it all back by eating his weight in pudding,” he greeted me, feeling jovial after a successful operation.

“Congratulations—I’ve had an odd phone call. You should come home,” I bluntly stated. I didn’t know how else to approach the topic.

“How odd? Should I come in my scrubs or do I have time to shower off the operating room smell?” he joked.

“Your choice,” I replied. “Although I haven’t seen you in scrubs for quite some time.” I wanted to joke with him today, but I suddenly felt it was inappropriate, after hearing the news.

“That can be arranged,” he hung up, and I knew I heard a smile in his voice. He arrived home, having showered, but wearing clean scrubs, “Just for you!” He settled into the kitchen, where I was still waiting. I gave him a moment then told him what I’d learned on the phone.

“What do you want to do?” he asked, his hands moving up to the chin of his short beard, his nervous habit.

“I never expected this,” I answered. “So I don’t know.” We sat together at the kitchen table.

Eventually, he asked, “In your shock, did you attempt to burn the house down?” He crinkled his nose, acknowledging the lingering smell of burning. I explained about the eggs. He nodded. After a while, he stood up from the table, took his car keys from the hook on the door, and held out his hand to me.

“Come on,” he said. “We haven’t been for a drive in a while.” So I took his hand and followed.

We drove out of our neighborhood, turning onto the busy main street. Instead of turning in the direction of town, he turned away from it. We followed the flow of traffic for a while, but then he turned again, onto a road we don’t often drive. This road led us further away from the city and cars and people. We followed this road until in the distance I could see a country church, one I’d often told him I admired because it looked pretty, with white walls, black roof, and tall steeple. It would make for a perfect photograph, I’d always thought.

“Let’s stop there,” I suggested. “We’ve never actually stopped there.”

We reached the church, and he coasted into the small, empty lot—no one is at church on a Thursday. We got out of the car, and he followed me as I walked around the pretty church, disappearing behind it. When he turned around the corner of the church, he saw me waiting for him a few feet away from the black, iron gate of a graveyard very much out of the movies—beautiful in daylight but definitely haunted at night, too picturesque.

“Eerie,” he remarked. He sidled up to the gate and threw his arm around me. Even with him so close, I felt uneasy staring at what happens after death. I turned to leave, but my husband’s arm tightened around my shoulders.

“Looks like fun,” he teased. “Let’s go in. It’s old. Maybe you’ll find a good story.” He moved closer to the gate, and I mimicked his steps hesitantly.

“You want to go in there?” I asked, not understanding completely, suspicious. I stopped short of the gate, not close enough for my husband to reach and drag me in.

“Might as well—looks like as good a place as any,” he answered, holding out his hand. I thought about it, nervously chewing the inside of my lip, practically digging through to the other side. I studied the ground around my feet as if it would yield some sort of answer. The hole developing in the toe of my house-shoe stared silently back at me, and the tiny particles of dirt that together made up the piece of earth I stood on offered me no advice. My husband waited.

I watched one shoe, the one with the almost-hole in the toe, slide haltingly forward. I picked up that foot and took a step toward him. I tore my eyes away from my feet to look at my hand, forcing it to take his, letting him lead me into the graveyard, so perfect it seemed made up.

I followed my husband down row after row of strangers’ graves, stone after stone with name after name of stranger after stranger. As we continued to walk deeper and deeper into the yard, the stones seemed to get older and older. First, they lost their shine, then they began to

crumble, until finally they weren't even stones anymore, they were pieces. I stopped. One of the stones was so broken the name once carved into the face could no longer be read. It had weathered away. This grave belonged to no one. I felt it begging me to pay it some attention. I looked at it, and my husband squeezed my hand.

"I'll leave you two alone. You'll find me over by where the dead people are buried," I heard him whisper. I couldn't see him. I could only see this gravestone, this blank and broken image of a life completely unknown to me.

At the age of 18, my father called me on the telephone and told me something that made me so angry, hurt me so deeply, that I never spoke to him again. I lived my life strangely and defiantly apart from him. My brother and my mother eventually softened in the wake of that final blow. My mother forgave him and moved on with her life. My brother forgave him and agreed to see him for lunch every Father's Day, sent him a Christmas card for the first few years he was married. I got married, too. My father didn't walk me down the aisle. He wasn't in attendance. My brother gave me away, and my mother gave her blessing. My children never met my father—I wouldn't expose them to someone who would lie about loving them. My boys only had a Big Momma, while my nephews knew Big Momma and Poppy.

"Big Momma's called 'big' because she does it all by herself," my husband explained to our sons. "She's a cowboy. Doesn't need anybody else—Clint Eastwood in *Fistful of Dollars*." The boys proceeded to go through a wild west phase that lasted too long, into middle school.

When my father died, I boasted that I felt no guilt, no shame, no regret for having lost him before we could be restored. My mother, brother, and husband flocked to my side when we received the news.

"Are you alright?" my mother asked.

“Don’t worry—I think he understood,” my brother assured me.

“Whatever you need,” my husband said.

But I was fine. I had mourned the loss of my father at the age of 18. That he had continued breathing after that had never meant to me that my father was alive. He had been a stranger, and I was busy bonding myself to people to fill his place. I had my husband and my sons.

Some 25 years after the last time I ever spoke to my father, I received another phone call. I answered it as I was making breakfast in the quiet home my husband and I had made for ourselves. The voice that spoke to me through a strange plastic barrier was one I had never heard before. She said she was a nurse, in a hospital I had never heard of, in a place I had never been to. She said a patient had asked her to call me if anything happened. Something had happened. Her patient had passed away.

“Was he alone?” I remember asking.

“His family stayed until the end,” she reassured.

“Then why?” I asked, confused.

“He said that he wanted you to know. He said to say he always understood. He said even when he was a kid he got it, and he always hoped you were happy.”

“How did he find...” I was still confused.

“I’m wondering,” she interrupted. “I’m dying to know, actually,” she continued, almost excitedly. “He only gave me your number and your first name—he didn’t tell me anything about you. Were you sweethearts? A long time ago, when you were kids? He never forgot you. You always loved each other just a little bit, from afar?” She sounded so pleased, so fortunate to be

involved in the story she'd written in her head, a real-life love story. I told her my name, and then I gave her my full name, my maiden name, the name we shared.

"Oh," is all she said.

"He was my brother," I corrected her. "Well, half-brother. We never met."

My husband backed away a little bit at a time, leaving me alone, graveside, to face what I had never thought to confront. The pieces of rock at my feet stared back at me, daring me to fill the silence.

"Is this allowed?" I queried, half to my husband, looking over my shoulder, and half to the rock. He just shrugged his shoulders and continued to wander off, pretending to be interested in reading the stories on the grave-markers.

"This one's from 1846—old!" He focused on his task, reminding me to focus on mine. I was forced to return my gaze to this stranger's grave.

"I guess that's what you were," I began. "A stranger. We never met. I never knew a thing about you, except that you were born." I was painfully aware of the vulnerability of my position—I was talking to a rock, to no one, and for my own benefit. I felt in danger, but I carried on. I didn't know what, but something needed to be said.

"Am I supposed to kneel? What's the protocol?" I shuffled my feet, starting to lightly kick at the corner of the broken marker. I realized that might be disrespectful. I stopped. "Am I supposed to cry?" I didn't kneel, but I felt like I should get closer, so I crouched. It didn't feel right. I stood back up, but that was too far away again. I tried sitting on the ground, crossing my legs Indian-style, picking at the crumbling stone with my fingernails.

“I had all these things rehearsed from my stories. I imagined what I’d say to him. For some reason, I never thought about this one. This wasn’t a story I ever imagined, or needed to write.” I felt ridiculous, admitting all this to the dirt. I saw my husband, several rows away, leaning in close to make out the inscription on another marker. His ignoring me meant that I wasn’t released yet.

“So maybe I should have thought about you more, as a person. It was always about him, though. When he died, he wasn’t dead, because of you.” My hands started to become sticky with nervous sweat. The stick reminded me of my oath to love, my super-glue lifestyle. I’d never loved this person.

“He ruined my only chance to love *everyone*... I wasn’t strong enough. I missed my chance with you.” The bits of sand-like crumbs of the gravestone began to stick to my palms. “I always wished there’d been a way to take only the parts of him that weren’t so broken... no... hurtful, so I could love him then. I guess you might have known those parts. I wonder how he treated you.”

I imagined a small child sitting on my father’s lap. I imagined my father, graying, leaning over the hood of a car, teaching an older boy to wax it properly. I imagined my father sitting with a nearly grown man, handing him his first beer, nodding proudly.

“I was too busy writing all these convoluted stories about what I’d say to him to say *anything*. I was too busy trying to make up for all the love that he stole to remember *you*. I had my hands full. I was stuck.” I looked at my hands, covered in dirty grit. “You know what it was? It was super glue,” I said. “I was playing with super glue.” I rolled onto my knees and reached forward with my dirty hands. I pressed my palms side-by-side into the face of that crumbling gravestone. I pressed them hard until I felt as if they were stuck. I pushed all my weight into my

knuckles until I felt the ground was actually pulling my hands into the stone. I stayed this way until my husband, whose approach I hadn't even heard, gently took my by the shoulders and pried me away from the rock face.

"You ready?" he questioned, really asking if I'd said the right things, made peace. "I'm hungry. Let's go get some pudding."

"I just never really thought he'd die," I told him.

"Which one?" he asked.

"Either. Both. They meant the same thing." I was still on the ground, his hands cupping my sweating shoulders. "I thought this kid I'd never met would always be around to breathe for Dad. He was so young. He was just supposed to exist." The first sign of tears appeared on the scene. I fought them—It's such a movies thing to cry in a graveyard about ancient baggage. But a few tears came. It didn't reach sobbing until bedtime, leaving the dark, circular evidence of yesterday's mascara on the white pillowcase.

I called my brother, the one I'd always known.

"What was he like?" I begged for the information I had shunned for an entire lifetime.

"Like Dad," my brother answered. "Only he didn't live long enough to become a total liar." My brother laughed, as if joking about our father, but he only confirmed my fears. This man had been my second chance with Dad. Gone now. Dead.

My husband ordered take-out. "This is a night that calls for both pizza *and* Chinese," he reasoned. "Have you ever tried to eat pepperonis with chopsticks? It's a sport."

We ate in bed while we watched cartoons—the only think he could think of that wouldn't accidentally remind me of delinquent fathers and long-lost brothers. The tears dried to my cheeks, leaving salt behind. I didn't bother to wash my face. My husband fell asleep in his scrubs

while the TV still flickered bright colors. I muted the volume so he wouldn't be disturbed. Without him, distraction was impossible. I needed to do something.

I snuck out of bed and tiptoed toward the kitchen. I slipped the keys off the hook as quietly as possible. In the garage, I rummaged around my husband's workbench until I found a tiny, silver tube of Loctite super glue. It wasn't the same as the one I imagined in my husband's story. That one would be the size of a giant ketchup bottle, cartoonish. This one was practical, reminding the user to be sparing—less is more.

I got into the car and retraced the drive we'd made earlier in the day. The church looked different in the dark, the white almost glowing against the black of the empty landscape. I fumbled to open the black iron gate without light, but I made it in, wincing at the sound of its swing. I wove through the rows of markers in the direction of the grave I'd adopted for my deceased half-brother. I squinted to distinguish the right one, and when I found it, I took the glue from my pocket.

On my knees, I leaned over the broken pieces of the stone. I traced the cracks, and when my fingers reached the corner piece, I picked it up. I opened the tube of Loctite and applied the substance to the jagged edges of the corner piece. I gently returned the rock to its spot, pressing firmly to set the seal. I went on until I was no longer leaning over pieces of a marker but a gravestone, whole and singular.

Sweat dripped into my eyes as I surveyed my handiwork—I'd used almost the whole tube. The only problem left was that the stone remained blank. This was still a stranger's grave.

I looked around the edges of the marker until I found enough pieces of gravel and debris for what I had in mind. I alternated between spreading the remaining glue with my fingers and

arranging the fragments, until I affixed a perfect “3” across the seams in the mended marker. Number three. That’s what he’d been to me.

My eyes were so adjusted to the dark by now that I’d forgotten how late it was. I took in all that I’d done one last time, as the bell chiming in the church tower reminded me I shouldn’t be here. I reached to touch the grave once more, to feel connected for the last time, to say goodbye to number three. I pressed my fingers into the rock, harder and harder. He wasn’t really here, under this rock, but I wanted him to feel it. I wanted him to know I’d fixed it.

When my fingertips started to tingle from lack of circulation, I relaxed and inhaled deeply. It was over now. I could go.

I went to pull my hand away so that I could stand and leave this place. I stopped short when I felt a sharp pain, like a pinch in the pads of my fingertips. It subsided when I relaxed my hand against the stone. I waited, and when the feeling disappeared I pulled away. The pain hit me again, and I froze. No way. I used my free hand to try to pry my fingers from the rock, but the skin had bonded to the stone. Excess glue from the reconstruction project had formed a Loctite seal while I said goodbye to number three.

I glued myself to a gravestone. Just like the kid in that unwritten story, I was stuck. I could either stay here forever or rip the skin from my fingers, carrying scars for the rest of my life. Either way, I wouldn’t be leaving this behind tonight. I was stuck. Even in death, my father’s blood, his legacy demanded a bond, demanded my attention in a tangible way. For years I ignored the wasting away of the only person who could save how I thought of my father, and now that it was too late, I couldn’t get away.

I never wrote the story my husband joked about because I lived it. I lived in a world where the potential for restoration existed, but I turned the other way. I busied myself with other

things, became attached to other people. I missed out on the chance to love the only person I wanted to love when he was only a phone call away, like starving in the middle of a cafeteria. My attempt to fix it now had only backfired. I should have listened to my husband, when we were kids, and he thought himself brilliant. If I had only written that silly story, I might have learned—I never should have played with super glue.

Sitting in the dirt with my hand stuck to a gravestone in the middle of the night, I wasn't overcome with panic. The feeling that filled me, though at first I couldn't name it, was relief.

Skillet Smoke

She unfolds the letter. It is crisp and white with official letterhead at the top. She reads the first lines then drops it onto the kitchen counter.

To Kelsey: Congratulations! We are pleased to offer you a spot in the incoming class this fall at the Arts Institute for the Culinary Arts program. Please follow the instructions to open a student account, officially enroll, and learn all you need to know about becoming a student at the Arts Institute.

She picks it back up from the counter. She reads it again. She smiles to herself, but then she feels her heart pounding in her neck. She folds the letter again, and puts it back in the envelope. She hides the letter underneath the stained and worn recipe cards in the drawer and shuffles through them until she finds one of her favorites. A staple. Whole-wheat loaf. She gathers up the ingredients, dons an already dirty apron, and begins to measure whole-wheat flour. One and a half cups.

“I didn’t expect to get in.” All purpose flour. Two cups, or thereabouts.

“Johnson doesn’t even know I sent in an application.” Oatmeal, half cup. Salt. Sugar. She sets the dry ingredients aside and begins to mix the yeast and the two percent milk. She mixes everything together to make the dough, and she thinks through all the different ways to break the news to Johnson.

“We weren’t really serious yet.” Stir. Stir.

“It’s always been my dream.” Stir. Stir.

“I had to give it a shot.” Stir. Stir. The dough thickens to much to keep stirring with her favorite wooden spoon. She reaches for the white flour, in the big ceramic canister. With the metal scoop, she dumps the white powder onto the top of the dough in the bowl. She stretches

her fingers, moves to sink them into the flour and dough, then hesitates. She stares at her left hand, at the new sparkle there. She stares at the week old addition to her left ring finger. She slides it off and places it gingerly in the small, palm-shaped bowl that holds her car keys and paperclips. Without the ring, she can see the freckle that hides in the crease between two fingers. The ring covers the freckle completely. This is the first time she's noticed.

With bare fingers now, she dives into the mound of dough, using the flour to keep it from sticking to her palms. A strand of hair falls from the bun she tried to form at the top of her head. It hangs between her face and the mixing bowl because her hands are too busy to do anything about it. She continues to knead, pulsing from her knuckles to the heel of her wrists, waiting until she feels the consistency is right. Firm, but not tough. Springy, but not too soft. Just like Mimi taught her.

She usually times her kneading on the microwave clock, but she loses track of time today. She kneads for therapy and not for practice. It is habit by now. She stops, adds more flour because the dough sticks to her hands. She moves the dough from the bowl onto the bare counter. It is almost done. This is what she loves to do.

The smells of the yeast mixed with the nutty grains begin to pull her from her train of thought. How she will explain to Johnson disappears into the first flip of the roll. The shock of the acceptance letter is nothing after her fingers begin to get sore. By the time she feels the dough is perfect, good enough to let it well alone, the only thing on her mind is the warm smell of the fresh-baked finished product. Nothing else.

She flours a baking pan, lays the dough gently inside, and sets it aside so it will rise. She hears a knock on the door, but her hands are still covered in flour. She walks to the door of her small apartment wiping one hand on her apron so that she wouldn't leave a mess on the handle.

“Who is it?” She calls through the chipped blue paint. She rests her hand on the brass handle.

“What do you mean, who is it? Let me in,” answers Johnson’s voice, followed by a laugh she’s come to long for. She opens the door to reveal Johnson’s normally jovial face; only it is pale and tired, still wrinkled from the laugh. The strain in his eyes gives away the force it took to laugh behind the door just now. Something is wrong, and she only has one free hand that won’t ruin the shoulder of his suit if she reaches out to touch him.

“What are you doing here?” She asks, more surprised than startled, although she feels more disrupted than she has by any of his previous drop-by visits. The clean hand finds his shoulder, guiding him into the apartment.

“You’ve been in the kitchen again,” he observes. “Kelsey, I told you, wait until we move, and I can get you a better space. It has to be a pain to work with this... this,” he goes on. He pats the out-dated counter-top, and she can hear that his throat is getting tighter and tighter. She goes to the sink and washes her hands as she listens to Johnson, waiting for him to break like she knows he will. She turns just in time to see him cover his face with both hands, sinking into her favorite chair. She cringes as he crushes the decorative pillow.

“Is something wrong, Johnson? You seem on edge, and you didn’t call,” she ventures into the realm of concerned fiancée. Normally, she is actually concerned. Today, she plays the part because it is the right thing to do. She moves toward him, but remembers first, and turns back to preheat the oven. The bread is rising nicely.

“What can I do?” She asks, clicking the upward arrow button until the display reads three hundred seventy-five.

“Kelsey, baby, can you come sit down for a minute? This is going to be a little hard to hear.” Johnson stretches out his hand, beckoning her to come toward him. She waits to make sure the oven has started to preheat. Sometimes it doesn’t work. She hears the click that means something is happening, and she is satisfied.

“Kelsey, come here, really,” he asks, quietly this time. Fiancée or not, she knows that a human should always be concerned for another who sounds this pitiful.

“What’s up?” She queries, and she settles on the arm of his chair, looking down at his tired, broken face. He takes a deep, shaky breath, and reaches for her hand.

“Where’s your ring?” He asks, a little panicked, as if he discovered some huge loss or theft. She starts and glances at her hand, seeing the freckle again.

“Oh! I took it off. When I was mixing the dough... I’m making bread.” Her mind wanders back to the bread. She glances into the kitchen, trying to see if the bread has risen over the edge of her pan.

“You scared me,” he admits. He moves his thumb back and forth over the spot where the ring should be, as if he must have some sort of presence there, in diamond form or not. “It’s been a long day. My mom called me this morning. Her father died. My Pop-pop’s gone,” he loses breath in the last word. His face crumples into her hand, and he rolls his shoulders into her lap. Flour from her apron marks the dark navy of his suit. She moves her free hand in circles on his shaking back. She is startled by her lack of response to his grief. She hears the oven chiming, announcing it has arrived at the perfect heat to yield a delicious loaf of bread.

“I’m sorry,” she says. She pulls herself away from him, saying something about fresh-baked bread being the best cure for every ill. She gently moves the bread pan from the counter to the oven rack, careful not to collapse the dough. As she stands, she checks the clock for the time

so she can keep track of the loaf. She can hear Johnson's muffled sniffing as she cleans up her cooking space. She leaves everything in the sink for later and reaches for her ring, returning it to its place on her finger. She grabs the box of tissues for Johnson, but before she makes her way back over to him, she sees the recipe card. She snatches it up and returns it to its drawer. Before the drawer closes all the way, she stops, and stares at the corner of an opened envelope.

She reaches into the drawer and slides the Arts Institute envelope partially out from under several recipe cards. She remembers the letter. She slides the drawer shut and the smell of wheat bread follows her into the living room where Johnson cradles his face in his hands.

The letter sits in the drawer. The bread comes out of the oven, perfect. It feeds Johnson, who remains at her apartment until late that night. The warm, fresh bread is a comfort that she could never have expected he would need—food is that way. It's one reason she loves it. After the bread, she makes his favorites just because he seems to need it. Banana pudding. Lemon bars. Classic brownies. Whatever else she has lying around. Johnson thanks her and tells her stories about the memories he has of Pop-pop. How it was his time. How it's sad, but how everyone expected it. He is thankful that she had the chance to meet him once, on Easter, when he brought her to the nursing home to visit. She remembers Pop-pop was quiet, still, not really aware that she and Johnson were there at all. She offers Johnson another brownie. He takes it. He says he loves her. She says she loves him too.

The next day, Johnson asks her to come to the visitation hours with him, as a member of the family, as his fiancée. She agrees, feeling a little as if she is betraying the letter in her kitchen drawer. She follows Johnson into the funeral home and takes her place in the greeting line for the visitation. As fiancée she belongs next to him. Johnson's mother grabs her in a tight, squeezing hug.

“Johnson’s so lucky to have a girl like you. Not everyone is brave enough to show up to a family funeral just a week after getting engaged. You... just... thank you for being here,”

Johnson’s mother’s voice disappears into the shoulder of her nicest dress.

“You look beautiful in black. I didn’t know,” Johnson whispers, leading her away from his recovering mother. He steers her through the clusters of elderly mourners, some of them family members, some of them friends of Pop-pop’s. In the corners of the strange room, various potted plants and flower arrangements sit on brightly colored, floral carpeting. She wobbles a little when the spikes of the high heels she borrowed from her friend sink into the fibers of the carpet. She tugs on her clothes, feeling out of place and thinking of the lie it is for her to be here.

She doesn’t look right in this black dress. It’s sharp. *Fierce* is what her mother would say whenever she had to wear it for job interviews or formal family occasions. Even though she’d had it since high school, it had maintained its shape. All she had to do was tighten the skinny belt one notch more than she used to, and it looked like it had been tailor made for her.

Now she stands next to Johnson, feet together, arms hanging loosely at her sides, rhythmically lifting her right hand to accept polite condolences for a man that isn’t even her family. Johnson rests his left hand on the small of her back, leaving his right hand free to accept the same handshakes, one by one. He wears a suit, black, with a slightly more expensive tie than he usually wears to work. She wonders if he did that on purpose, and if he knew that it would be the only distinguishing factor between his everyday attire and his funeral garb.

On her left stands Johnson’s younger sister, Shellie, crying a little and leaning for comfort onto her shoulder. She is sandwiched between Johnson and Shellie, feeling a little off-balance in her borrowed black heels with Shellie leaning on her. She leans into Johnson for enough support to stand. He tightens his grip on her waist, mistaking her gesture for one of

loving comfort, which it would have been if this had all happened last week. Handshake after handshake cannot make her forget the letter.

She had taken it from the recipe drawer at home and hidden it in her purse before leaving with Johnson. She eyes the large, potted mum behind which her purse is hidden.

“You can take that one home with you after the service if you want to,” Johnson offers, noticing that her eyes have wandered from the guests that stream by. She guiltily twists the diamond ring around and around her freckled finger.

“It’s so pretty. Can I see it again?” Shellie sighs and asks when a break comes in the flow of visitors. “I can’t believe it Johnson,” Shellie murmurs dreamily, eager to escape the forced sorrowfulness of the event. Shellie alternates her admiring, longing gaze from Johnson’s knowing countenance to the quiet face of his fiancée.

“Kelsey, baby, we’ve been here for hours,” Johnson chimes in, eager to interrupt his sister’s moment of worship. “Let’s go hop in the car and get something to eat. We’ll bring something back here from Mom and Shellie.” Shellie looks ready to offer to accompany him, but Johnson steers them away from his sister, away from the crowd. She remembers to grab her purse from behind the plant.

Johnson leads her by the hand, past all the adults murmuring respectfully, past the couches in the lobby on which little girls in black velvet dresses fidget while the boys scoot around on the floor in their miniature suits. She watches them, pities them, wishes she could free them. It would be easy—their parents aren’t even watching.

She follows Johnson easily out of the doors of the home, eager to feel sun on her face and to breathe air that doesn’t smell like dust. She slows down when it hits her, and Johnson turns to face her. He laughs, and rubs his thumb across her hand in his.

“Sorry you have to do this. You deserve a break,” he sighs, tugging her closer to him as they walk toward his car. “You’re the best.” He wraps his arm around her shoulder, and she tries to shrink within his grasp. She wishes she weren’t something to be wrapped inside of something else. She ducks a little to escape him. When he turns she is stopped, holding her old, disgusting purse open with one hand and digging with the other.

“I think you left your chapstick in my car,” he offers. He gestures deeper into the parking lot.

“Johnson, look,” she pulls the letter from the bottom of her purse. It looks dirty now, either from the recipe drawer back home or from the bottom of her long-used purse. Johnson takes it from her, unexpected.

“The Arts Institute?” He eyes her questioningly, pulling the letter from the now ragged envelope. She decides to explain. To soften the blow.

“I applied. To the culinary arts program. Here in town,” she begins. Nervous at first. Careful to watch his face so that he can chime in when he wants. “It was.... before.” She goes on, rocking back and forth on her toes and heels. She almost loses balance for the hundredth time today. She pauses, removes one shoe, but before she can get to the second one, Johnson looks up from the letter.

“Kelsey... this school is here. It’s here.” He repeats the problem as if solving it for her. Here is not where their life is supposed to proceed. Until the moment she opened this letter she had planned to marry him, follow him to the new job he’d accepted hours away, and live in his house, on his money. He looks worried, wrinkling his brow and gripping the letter so that she can hear it crinkling under his force. “Do you want to go?” He asks. She looks up from the ring, which she has been twisting again. Around and around.

“Johnson, I promise I didn’t... I just forgot I’d even applied with everything that’s happened. You just swept in, and I was so happy, and I forgot,” she rambles, not sure how to get to the point, but Johnson heaves out a huge sigh. She starts and braces herself for his outburst, but he grins and encircles her with his long, thin arms.

“I’m so glad. You had me really worried that you wanted to change the whole plan or something.” He squeezes her tightly, and she knows that she has to finish what she started. Johnson goes on about how he should never have jumped to that conclusion, how he is only exhausted from spending the week at his mom’s side, how he knows he can count on her, and how she makes him so happy. All words that used to make her feel complete. She only thinks about the letter, and how he might be rubbing off the code she has to use to set up her student account.

“Johnson,” she interrupts. He stops. She reaches for the letter, which he gently releases. “Johnson, I want to go. I want to go to cooking school, and I want to go here, and I want to go this fall. I want to go.” She waits for him to process.

“What does this mean for us?” Johnson finally blurts.

“I don’t know.” And she doesn’t know. She only knows that cooking is what she wants to do, and that letter reminds her she can make a life of it.

“Not today. Give me time, Kelsey, time,” Johnson pleads with her, and she’s not exactly sure what he fears at the moment. “Just not today, Kelsey, please. My mom, and my sister... my whole family. Just wait. Wait... for me.” She nods, agreeing to whatever he is asking. “I’m going back inside. Not hungry anymore,” Johnson trails off. He steps away slowly, walking backward at first, to keep her in his sight. Then he turns, and she watches his back until he disappears through the double, swinging doors of the funeral home. She stands in the lot, alone,

and leaning to one side, still wearing only one shoe. She feels the grit of the pavement digging into the pad of her bare foot.

She can see the grocery store across the street, and she has the urge to go there. The first thing she would do would be to head to the produce section to survey the fruit, berries, anything that could go in a pastry or a cobbler. Then she would go for some alcohol, probably dessert wine. She needs to fill her kitchen and her head with the sweet distraction of baking. Returning to the fray of Pop-pop's visitation, to stand awkwardly and silently at Johnson's side, is the last thing she wants to do. The last thing.

She leans lightly against the nearest car for balance, and lifts her bare foot. She brushes the grit and dirt from the bottom with her hand and drops the empty shoe onto the ground. She slips her foot back into the shoe and straightens up, standing level again, ready to walk tall. It is the last thing she wants to do, but she walks, haltingly, into the funeral home.

She nods dutifully at the passersby who seem to recognize or know her, and she wanders until she finds Johnson, who has found a large portrait of Pop-pop by which to stand. She slips her hand into the bend of his elbow, like a good fiancée should, and she lets him lead her through the rooms that belong to his family's sad event. She is glad this is not an occasion that calls for her to smile. It is the last thing she wants to do.

"We can still go get something to eat if you want," Johnson offers after a while, not looking down at her. He keeps his distance, somehow, while at the same time cradling her hand on his arm.

"I'd rather make something at home later, thanks." She is honest.

Later, she pulls her cast-iron skillet from underneath the lighter pans in her cabinet. Still wearing the dress and heels, she dumps a carton of diced sweet potatoes on top of giant pats of

cold butter in the hard, black skillet. As the surface heats, she sprinkles cumin and salt, tosses in minced garlic, dices up a red bell pepper, half an onion. Everything sizzles together, but just before it turns brown, she gets crazy. She goes to the refrigerator and grabs the eggs. Over the frying, colorful mess she cracks three eggs, letting the yolks rest whole in the crevices between the potato chunks. She protects her hands with her favorite mitt and moves the skillet into the oven to finish off her meal. She didn't preheat, so she turns it up to four hundred degrees, so it will heat faster, thinking it only needs a few minutes.

She leaves the kitchen and goes into her bedroom to change. In front of the tall, antique standing mirror her mother gave her she kicks off the shoes she borrowed for the day. Her toes look red and pinched, not used to heels. She unlatches the belt on her dress, and reaches, struggles to unzip. Finally, she is out of the dress, and her body can breathe again. She tosses all the black material into a pile in the corner of the room—shoes, dress, slip, everything. She slides a giant T-shirt of Johnson's over her head, one that he must have left here at her apartment in the three months they've been together. She steps into a loose pair of gym shorts to complete the early evening ensemble, but her ring catches in the waistband as she tries to tie drawstring.

Frustrated, she slips off the ring, and slams it onto her bedside table. She throws herself onto her bed. She reaches for her laptop, and starts answering emails. To work: She needs one more day off, for the actual funeral. To Mom: She's alive, and all is well. Her inbox is forever full, and she looks at the top of the screen, searching for new messages. One from Johnson. One from the Arts Institute.

She opens the one from the Arts Institute. It is a reminder of her acceptance. It says this is the first day of the rest of her life, if only she will set up her new student account and officially

enroll. It says there are still openings in the classes for baking and pastry making in the fall. It says, enroll now.

She opens the one from Johnson. It says he didn't want to text, and it seems she wouldn't want to talk on the phone or in person, so he's compiled all his thoughts in one long message. It is a long message. It says he loves her. It says he supports her. It says he knows she wants to stay, but he wants to go. It says he's begging her to move with him, to marry him and find another school. It says he'll pay for it. It says he'll be her taste-tester and her cheerleader. It says they'll be the best business accountant-chef team his company has ever seen. It says, just wait a year.

The smoke detector goes berserk. She launches herself from her bed, knocking her computer onto its side. She careens into the kitchen where smoke is wisping out of the oven. She peers into the little window and sees no flames, so she grabs her oven mitts and yanks the door open, releasing a small explosion of gray smoke. She reaches blindly through the cloud until she finds the skillet and hoists it onto the stovetop. Her dinner is as black as the cast iron it cooked in.

She curses, hating that she ruined food, a crime. Breaking a sweat, she dances around beneath the smoke detector, beating a towel back and forth to fool it into believing the burning is gone. When the high-pitched beeping stops, she relaxes. She punches the OFF button on the oven and uses a fork to inspect the damage on her dinner. She peels back the charred top layer, hoping to find an edible something underneath. It is brown, too brown, no longer colorful. It is almost burned all the way through. It will stick to the skillet for sure.

"If the Arts Institute could see me now," she groans, taking up a wooden spoon. She prepares to scrape out the heavy skillet. She feels she has already flunked out of school. If they

could see her, they would take the letter back. They'd rescind the offer of acceptance. Forgetting food is in the oven—rookie mistake. She knows she isn't good enough now. She knows. She wraps her mittened hand more tightly around the handle as she balances the heavy pan against the wall of the sink. Large, unidentifiable chunks of black and brown char fall into the drain, and she worries she'll never get the stain off of her favorite wooden spoon. She's sweating bullets now, drenching Johnson's T-shirt so much that she'll have to change before she goes to bed.

If Johnson could see her now.

She knows he wouldn't flunk her. She knows he would clean this mess. She knows he would call her cute, and pull her away from the kitchen, force her to sit down, to breathe. She releases the spoon, the skillet, the mess, and lets it all fall into the sink with a loud, resounding thud. She goes to where she dropped her purse by the front door and fishes out her cell phone. She calls Johnson.

He answers quickly, and she tells him all about the mess, all about her failure. She tells him how the Arts Institute could hardly want her if they really knew her, how she wouldn't dare to soil their name with her undeserved enrollment. She rambles and carries on and whines and moans and hopes that he won't feel the same way as she imagines the Arts Institute would react. She waits for him to speak. He chuckles, blowing too much air into the phone. It hurts her ear.

"What exactly were you trying to make?" He questions, skeptical that her failure could have been so complete. She explains the experimental iron skillet conglomeration. "So you haven't eaten dinner yet?" He checks. She blows her own exasperated noise into the phone, and he goes on. "Why don't I bring you something? Can I eat with you?" She agrees, relieved. Maybe this is what she's meant to do—follow Johnson's lead, let him pick her up, let him fix

everything. She waits for him to get there. She changes into better clothes, washes her face, takes another shot at scraping the skillet. She hears his knock. She opens the door for him.

“Thanks so much. I’m starving now,” she explodes when she sees him, gladder to be in his presence than she has been in days.

“Not so fast,” he counters with a smile, aware of the change in her demeanor. He enters not with To Go boxes from their sandwich place, or pizza, or Chinese, but with grocery sacks. “Check it out.” He sets the sacks down onto her counter and begins to remove the contents. She helps him as nerves tighten her stomach. She is afraid she will sweat again. He sets out sweet potatoes, eggs, an onion, a red bell pepper. “I figured you’d still have salt and all that other stuff.” He waits for her to respond now.

“I told you, I screwed it up,” she starts. He laughs and says he trusts her.

“My stomach’s starting to growl too, so hop to it, Chef Kelsey.” He gathers up the empty sack and tosses them in the trashcan, clearing her cooking surface for her. She watches him, half perturbed, half touched. She moves for her apron, ties it and begins. The process is the same, only she makes a little more this time, and she preheats the oven in advance. Just before she adds the eggs, she surveys the almost over-flowing skillet. Something is missing. She tastes. She goes to the cabinet, browses, and selects a can of black beans. This she dumps on top and folds in with the spatula. A final touch.

She waits to crack the eggs until the oven is ready, and she sets a timer. Half of the loaf she baked yesterday is still in her refrigerator, so she slices it up and toasts it, lightly buttered. Johnson sets up trays by her sofa, and gets plates and napkins from her cabinets.

When the timer goes off on the oven, she carefully pulls the skillet from the rack, nervous to behold the result of this second chance. In the skillet are delicious, golden sunny-side-up eggs

resting atop a bed of perfectly browned sweet potatoes. The colors of the pepper, beans, and spices add to the dish's bright look of success.

"Total failure," teases Johnson, standing right behind her, peering hungrily at what will be his dinner, too. "I'll notify the Arts Institute at once. They'll be so grateful." She swats at him with her oven mitt, and dishes out a generous portion of the breakfast-like concoction onto their plates. They settle into their places on her couch, and she dips into one of the gorgeous yellow yolks with the corner of her toast. They are silent at first, too hungry to ignore quality food.

"Kelsey, this is delicious. I'm not kidding," Johnson finally breaks, not looking up from his plate, which is almost clear. "These black beans... genius. Best part." He swallows loudly. She shrugs. Johnson gets seconds, still chewing. When they are both finished they pile the dishes into the sink for later. Back on the couch, she nestles into his shoulder and thanks him for the second chance. He pulls away so that he can see her face.

"I want you to cook, Kelsey. It's your gift," he stares into her eyes until she looks away. They watch a little TV, and then Johnson has to leave. There is work to be done even though he hasn't been to the office in days.

"See you tomorrow," he gently reminds her that she will again be at the funeral home in the morning, but she doesn't mind as much after tonight. She considers washing the dishes after he is gone, but instead she turns off all the lights and retreats to her bedroom. Her computer still rests on its side, balancing on the angle of the opened screen and keyboard. She rights it and returns to her emails one last time before she goes to sleep. Still at the top of her screen are the messages from the Arts Institute and Johnson. Enroll now or wait one year.

She shuts the computer and pushes it aside. She reaches for the lamp cord, but she stops when she sees the ring on her bedside table. Johnson either hadn't noticed it was missing from

her finger, or he had chosen not to mention it. Her fingers rest in midair, still aiming for the lamp cord. She changes her direction, and picks up the ring. She holds it, rotating it, twirling it in her hands, letting the diamonds catch the lamplight.

Revision Summary

I decided to “go big or go home” with this revision. I kept as much of the original piece as I could to feel that it was the same story, but I ripped out a lot of major facets of the first draft as well. I feel that, even though this story may not be complete yet, I am satisfied that these changes have brought it closer to a being a story I am excited about. I am proud to present to you the following changes!

First, I cut characters and I gave the ones that remain names. Now there is only the narrator, Beth Inverness, her half-brother Ray, and their father’s estate lawyer Mr. Solomon. Their deceased father’s name is Riley Inverness, which only comes into play when they visit his grave together. The list of characters may call your attention to another big change I made—the half-brother is both alive and an active character in this version of the story. In workshop, one of the major concerns was that two deaths in fifteen pages was a little much, so I decided the story needed to focus on Beth’s processing her father’s death. This process now involves her being able to meet her half-brother, who was the source of Beth’s estrangement from her father but is now also her point of re-connection with her dead father.

Beth’s realization in the first draft, that the half-brother would have been her connection to her father, pushed me to make the decision to actually include the brother in the story in the second draft. I felt that Beth’s transformation or journey was a little forced and internal without any interaction with her family in the first draft, and with her brother actually in the scene with her, gives her a little more of a chance of having a story rather than just thinking for pages on end. Logistically, they are forced to meet to work out their father’s will—a device that puts them in the same room together, finally, with a focus on what has both kept them apart and brought them together—their dad.

I also kept the super-glue theme, but you’ll notice that she does *not* end up glued to a gravestone in this version. As I cut the husband completely and wanted Beth to be more focused on her father, I changed it so that the silly joke about the super-glue story had always come from her father, before they became estranged. This enabled me to keep the idea that she write stories, that she would have felt that story was too silly to write and that she would have continued to think about that story during the years when she was bitter toward her father. However, her “super-glue lifestyle” doesn’t work out for her in this version. She’s ended up lonely, instead of surrounded by a husband and children, which I felt raised the stakes for her character’s need to find connection with her half-brother. It also makes more sense to me that she would be ready to give up the things she’s been clinging to if they haven’t been working out so well. So, in this draft, she leaves a tube of super-glue at her father’s grave, sort of walking away from the baggage she’s been carrying and letting herself move on to better things. And this time she has a brother to face the new world with.

On the large scale, those are the major revisions I made in hopes that the story would be more focused and clear for both the readers and the characters. I hope you enjoy it!

Thanks!

He Was Sentimental

The phone call informing me of my father's death came in the morning. A Thursday morning. I rolled over and watched light horizontally infiltrate the bedroom window coverings. Before it quite turned into the daytime kind of light, I slipped from beneath the blanket, breaking my only barrier against the cold. In slippers I moved to my desk and wrote prayers for hours, for my stories, for my characters, for my cat, and for my neighbors and their growing kids. After petitioning for the care and keeping of my loved ones, I moved to the kitchen to seek the care and keeping of my stomach. There were eggs long past their sell-by date in my refrigerator, but I cracked them anyway, over sizzling butter in a small skillet. Just when the color of the eggs began to turn—that's when the phone rang.

I picked it up. I answered. I stretched the cord from the wall to the table—I'd purchased an out-dated kitchen phone complete with a stretchy cord, because my mother always had one. I sat down, twirling the spiral cord in my finger and said, "Hello."

I did not expect the kind of call that would change my day. I did not expect the kind of call that would change more than just one. The voice asked for Beth Inverness. I confirmed that I was she.

"The service will be held shortly," said the voice, young and unfamiliar to me. "He would have wanted you to at least know, I think." The voice did not say much more, only that I could call if I needed directions to the home in Huntsville, a sixteen-hour drive from New York. I was speechless except to ask if there was anything I was supposed to do. "No," the voice told me.

According to the digital numbers on the face of my microwave, this call lasted about 11 minutes. When I was finished with the conversation, I had to stand up slowly, so as not to get dizzy, and cross the room to hang up, watching the cord shrink back into place like the slinkies

of my childhood. I left my hand on the dormant phone a moment before I smelled the char. It turns out you are not supposed to cook your eggs for 12-13 minutes. I tossed them out, thinking they probably would have made me sick anyway.

My father was dead. I hadn't spoken to him in almost nineteen years. My father was dead, and though I had stopped counting him as any sort of factor in my life for quite sometime, I felt alone. Mom had passed away a couple of years back. Now I was an orphaned, only child. I was alone, except for my cat, who only appears like a phantom in the night to scrape clean the plates of food I leave for her. I was alone.

I felt alone, even though this man had not been a part of my life for nearly nineteen years. Back then, I received another phone call. It was my father's voice somewhere on the other side of my cell phone. Sometimes I imagine what his face must have looked like in that moment when he knew what he was going to say and I did not.

"You have a brother," he said, and for a moment, I didn't understand.

I thought aloud, "I'm an only child. Always have been. You and Mom have been divorced four years now." Why would he call to point this out? A brother. A joke. An attack. An outrageous attempt at a writing prompt. We were close, then. I was used to his way of surprising. Mostly.

"I have a wife," he continued. "I married her months ago. She gave birth to my son two weeks ago. You have a brother." That is when 0:33 began to flash across the screen that had been pressed against my ear. The seconds, minutes, hours, and several days that followed were a blur of harried breathing, heaving sobs, and racing thoughts. My father, *my* father, got engaged, married, and had a baby without telling me, without letting me know. I felt betrayed, and I remember throwing my cell phone across my little dorm room at the time. The plastic plate

covering the battery shattered, and I carried my phone that way for months. We grew apart. We didn't speak. I moved away. Then, he died.

So, after the phone call from the stranger, the one notifying me of his death, I went to my room, and sat down at my writing desk. I either wanted to write, or I wanted to look through old stories, stories that were seventeen, eighteen years old. These stories were the stories about my father and his lies, no matter how much I had denied it back then. I pulled them out from an old, thick file in the back of my desk drawer. I surveyed my emotional history. My father had always been involved in my writing.

A long time ago, twenty or twenty-two years, I used to ask him what to write next. I would be stuck, and the silly things he'd say would always help me somehow. Once he answered, "Tell the story of this guy who started playing with super glue in the school cafeteria, and his hands get stuck to the table forever, and he starves. To death."

My answer was, of course, "No." Because I refused to try to write it, it became the only idea he wanted to give me. I continued asking what to write, though I came to expect the answer. I wrote many stories, but I never wrote that one.

Nineteen years ago, I was not interested in mixing his "silliness" with my writing—I wanted to be serious. But maybe silliness can save you, because life will get serious with or without your assistance, and now I think I should have tried to write that story.

Nineteen years ago, I did not expect that unexpected phone calls could change your life in minutes, seconds actually, because I remember 0:33 flashing across the screen when I hung up. I did not expect that the stories I'd already written would not have been powerful enough to eradicate from the planet this kind of *wrongness*, aloneness, betrayal. I did not expect that my stories had not fixed the world.

Even though I learned my lesson, back then, to expect the unexpected, to accept what my philosophy professors called “the brokenness of humankind,” I *still* was not expecting it. The second phone call. The one about my father’s death. It was just a telephone conversation. Very much like the one I received nineteen years ago, but longer. I never thought about what to do with such news.

For nineteen years, I spoke to my father only in my stories. In some of those stories, I was angry.

“You liar,” says the character that somehow represents a part of me. “How dare you reproduce again? You already had one reasonable chance to be a dad. You had me, and you were doing fine, not perfect, but fine. You have screwed up. I never want to see you again,” the character says. “If you must be a father now, go spend time with your new son.” In these stories, the father figure cries, and the angry character coldly walks away, stonily aware that this is justice.

In other stories, I was sad. The character that is part of me, though on paper he is a 36-year-old business-man whose wife is a dog walker who sleeps with the man who pays her to walk his schnauzer every morning, says, “Why wasn’t I enough? Why did you feel the need to create a new place in your heart for another person who performs the role that I was meant to play? I feel inadequate now. You’ve made me useless.” In those stories, the wife (my father) scoffs and blames her husband for not fulfilling her. The husband cries. The wife leaves. It’s heart breaking, and I always end up shedding tears before the final sentence.

But then there were the stories in which I was neither angry nor heart-broken. In these stories, perhaps some mother whose children abandoned her at a time when she was utterly alone says to no one, “It’s okay. There is nothing you could do to put a stopper in the love I have for

you. It flows. I will love you from afar forever, even though the most recent lies you told were doozies, even though they weren't the first, even though they were unexpected. I will love you from afar, but if you ever choose to come to me, I will not scream at you, I will not cry, but I will hug you as if you never lied, as if you never left."

In some of those stories, the character dies alone, having accepted there are some things that never change no matter how hard we pray. But in other stories, one child, or the wife, or the friend, or the puppy-dog returns. Sometimes the character finds resolution, comfort in that restoration, and sometimes the story ends just as the character sees that this lifetime has not yet closed the door on the child, the wife, the dog. But always, always, always this story ends in relief.

Back then, I did not feel relieved. I felt grieved, betrayed, and driven to love more fiercely and completely than my father had ever loved. I would not be my father's daughter anymore. I would not say in words that I loved people while my actions said, "I hate you," "I feel indifferent toward you," "or "I've forgotten you."

"I vow to be your husband, and I love you," he said to my mother in June 1982. He proceeded to steal from her until she had no money. He left her alone with a daughter looking for answers and protection.

"You're my number one," he would say to me. He would forget to call the week after that; work became too busy for us to take the trip we planned. He once left me to wait at the airport for seven hours, but at least he sent "I love you" texts.

Back then, I imagined wrenching out of my father's hands a bottle of super glue like the one in his silly idea for a story. I took it from him, and I tore myself away. I broke the bond he'd claimed to make. I turned the bottle upside down and poured thick, clear glue onto my right

palm, and I pressed that hand to my heart. I wore my hand pressed to my heart from that moment on, and in my left hand, I forever carried with me the bottle. I planned to form very permanent attachments.

No one ever doubted whether I really loved. No one ever thought I was just saying so. No one ever missed the fact that I stuck around, determined to at least let them know I was there to be theirs if they wanted me. Other than my mother, though, only my cat stayed with me for long. When Mom died, it was only the cat. Sometimes the neighbors would invite me over, but between writing and travelling, it was usually just me and my non-committal cat.

I carried on from there, back then, with my hands full. And all that from a thirty-second phone call from my father.

The day I learned he died, the burnt eggs smelled so strongly I took the trash out. I could smell them from the next room, sitting at my desk. I looked at my calendar, appointments to be kept, a schedule to be followed, no time drawn in for a trip back to Alabama for a man I hadn't spoken to in years. No time to force myself to face what I had avoided for years. I decided not to go. No one would miss me.

A few weeks later, I got a call from a lawyer. "You're named in the will, of course. The family has asked that you be present for the division of assets. There's not much, but the siblings will need to work it out between them." The man coughed a little into the phone. His had to be an uncomfortable job.

"Siblings. Of course," I responded. "Can this be done by phone?" I hoped that, like the other aspects of my relationship with my father, this too could be wrapped up in the plastic, empty distance that the telephone provides. I had avoided my father, and I would like the opportunity to continue avoiding my brother, this person I'd never met.

“We would prefer that you make the trip. Having you for even just an afternoon would be a better use of everyone’s time.” He discussed scheduling, and we made arrangements. I had to go to Alabama. I avoided my father’s funeral, but even dead, he still would make me leave my comfort zone. I booked a flight. A few days later, I left out enough food for the cat for a couple of days, knowing she would appear to eat it in my absence. I locked up my apartment, and boarded a plane, getting off in Huntsville, Alabama. I got a cab to the Holiday Inn near the law firm. I had not communicated with anyone in the family. No one knew exactly how I’d get there. I successfully avoided the awkward, silent, courtesy airport pick-up.

In the morning, I gathered up my gumption and my brief case, empty of most things except a notebook in case I had time to write anything. The cab ride to the law firm was short. At home, I would have walked, but there were no crosswalks here, and I would have had to dart across six lanes of Huntsville traffic. The waiting room of Solomon & Hubbard Estate Planning and Trust Law was quiet. I took a seat in the waiting room. A very young man, an elderly couple, and couple of men in suits took up the other seats. I avoided eye contact, picking at my fingernails until I heard my father’s name called from the secretary’s desk.

“I need first of kin to verify his signature,” she said, and I bolted out of my chair. I froze, then, when I realized the very young man, only eighteen at most, also stood to answer her. We locked eyes; he looked away and walked to the desk. I sat down, determined to study the carpet fibers. Coming here was a mistake. My next of kin was only feet away.

“Right this way,” beckoned the man whose voice I recognized from the call about the will. He said his name was Mr. Solomon. I followed after him, behind the young man. We entered a room with a large, shiny wood table. I sat down in silence after struggling to pull a

chair out from the table in a dignified manner. I felt ill at ease, out of my comfort zone, vulnerable, and waiting for attack.

“Your father didn’t leave you much,” Mr. Solomon began. I shuffled in my seat. The young man nodded. I noticed he was wearing nice clothes, khaki pants and a light purple button down. The hems of the pants were frayed a little at the end, which I could see because of how he had one ankle crossed over his knee, looking authoritative despite his age. His shoes were worn, though.

“Mr. Solomon,” the boy interrupted. Mr. Solomon, in the middle of explaining the nuances of a will that wasn’t quite as specific as he’d like, stopped and arched an eyebrow, not in an offended way but a curious one. “Mr. Solomon,” the boy continued in an Alabama drawl I hadn’t heard in nineteen years. “If you’ll excuse us for just a minute before we get real deep into it, we haven’t really been introduced.” He fixed a look on me, and I couldn’t read whether he was mocking or genuinely interested.

“Introduced?” Mr. Solomon interjected. “You two haven’t... Well, of course. I’ll just... step outside to make copies of some of the paperwork, and... get coffee. Just come get me, I guess, when you need me.” He left, shutting the door behind him. I stared at that door. I longed to be on the other side of it. I knew what was coming. I could feel the stare through the back of my head.

“You’re much older looking than the pictures.” He said softly. I turned around and met his gaze, finally. I recognized the dark eyes, with strands of yellow weaving through the chocolate brown. “Guess I never saw a recent one.” He uncrossed his legs and leaned over the table toward me, chin in hand. He looked more like a child now, losing the posture of an authority figure, displaying his curiosity. “How old are you?” He asked.

“Thirty-nine. Beth.” I offered him my hand, trying to hide that it was shaking. There was nothing I could do about the sweat on my palms. As he came away from the damp handshake, he continued.

“Ray,” he said. “Ray Inverness. Eighteen. Well, nineteen come May, but that’s probably easier for you to figure.” He kept his steady gaze at me. I was aware of my graying hair, my loose, baggy black clothes.

“You look like him,” I ventured. It was true. He let out a puff of air that was supposed to be a laugh, complicated by emotion, I think. Ray, my half-brother, was trying to be strong, but he was not going to make it. I felt the instinct to comfort him, however inappropriate that would be. I decided to change the subject. “You can have everything,” I told him. “I came because Solomon said it would be better for you, but I don’t want anything. I don’t need it. You can have it all. If you want. I’m sure it means more to you.” I stopped because Ray had begun to shake his head.

“You’re like him that way,” he started. “You’re like him because you’re gonna skirt around the subject. You’re gonna talk in circles long as I’ll let ya. Don’t worry. Nice to meet ya, Sis. I’m not gonna make you talk about him or us or anything if you don’t want.” He got up and moved around the table. I cringed, shrinking back into my uncomfortable chair, but he moved around me like I was nothing. He passed me and opened the door, looking out.

“Ready for me?” Mr. Solomon called.

“Ready as ever,” Ray answered. “Let’s get this ball rollin’ since I don’t wanna keep Beth, here, longer than she needs to be.” The two of them sat. We began. The will left everything to the two of us, leaving the division up for debate. I wanted Ray to have all the money, not much, but enough to get him through a couple years of school somewhere. All that was left was his

belongings, which I asked Ray to take care of as well. I couldn't go to my father's house after nineteen years and go through stuff I didn't recognize or care about. Ray only asked that I look through the safe deposit box with him.

"I have it here," Mr. Solomon said. He left the room for a moment brief enough that Ray and I did not feel the need to break it with conversation. When he returned he had the small box and a key. He offered it to me, but I gestured toward Ray. Ray took it, and timidly fiddled with the lock until it clicked. Inside the box were mostly papers, a few notes, some passwords to old accounts, and a love note from Ray's mother, even an old letter from my mom. I took the letter, but I gave all the rest to Ray again. What would I want with it? There was a matchbox car with a note attached to it that read *For Ray*. Ray took it up and caressed it. He blew air out of his nose again in a half chuckle, half sob.

"He was sentimental," Ray whispered. "I poked fun at him for it. He tried to hide it sometimes. When it comes down to it, the old man was sentimental." Ray pulled the tape away from the car's wheels and let it roll gently across the table while Mr. Solomon checked the box one last time.

"One more thing here. For Beth," he said, handing me an envelope. I dreaded the contents, expecting some long letter, an exhortation for my behavior, a cry for forgiveness, a condemnation of my stubbornness. The lumpy envelope yielded a tiny tube of LocTite superglue, unopened. There was a note in his anciently familiar handwriting: *For Beth. For that story. Research*. I looked up, holding both the note and the tube in the air. Mr. Solomon and Ray stared, confused.

"A twenty-year-old inside joke," I choked. Mr. Solomon finished up the affairs quickly after that. Ray and I had to sign a few things. We agreed to be available for consult in case

anything new came up with the estate, but Mr. Solomon assured us we were done. The three of us stood, shook hands, and filed out of the room. I was eager to breathe air not heavy with my father's death.

Ray and I made it to the door at awkwardly the same moment. He headed me off so that he could open the door for a lady. I nodded my thanks. I stopped at the sidewalk, pulling out my phone to call a cab, but Ray continued into the parking lot. He saw me stop and turned.

"You got a ride?" He called.

"I'm fine," I answered. "Don't worry about it."

"Where you stayin'?" He asked. I pointed down the road where the tall sign for the Holiday Inn peeked up above the one for McDonald's and Wendy's. "No use calling a cab just for that. Hop in," he commanded. I couldn't ignore the bit of authority in his voice, and I didn't have the guts to argue. I followed him. He opened the passenger door of a black Ford pick-up and watched me climb in with my brief case.

"Nice car," I said when he climbed into the driver's seat next to me.

"It was Dad's," he replied. He cranked it, turned down the music he'd been listening to, and pulled out of the parking lot. He drove the few minutes it took to reach the hotel, and I thanked him for the ride.

"It was nice to finally meet you, Ray. I'm sorry it was so delayed," I said with one foot out of the truck already.

"I expected I'd meet you at the service. I called and told you where it was and when, but I guess you couldn't make it." His look was accusing for the first time all day. It was the look I'd been afraid of for years.

"That was you?" I remembered the voice on the phone, on that Thursday morning.

“Who else?” He snapped. I could tell he was trying to hold it in, but it came out anyway. Dad’s temper. I felt guilty. I knew I’d somehow done this boy wrong, and that it wasn’t his fault. I wondered if he’d been alone at the service, at the funeral, at the burial, too. I hadn’t asked about his mother or any family or why he was the only one besides me to be present at the meeting about the will.

“Is it far?” I asked. “Where he’s buried? Is it far from here? Is there time to go there?” I asked. He looked up at me, almost hopeful.

“You’re the one with the flight to catch,” he said. I didn’t answer. “Get in,” he said. I got back in my seat.

We drove back out of the hotel parking lot, turning onto the busy main street. Instead of turning in the direction of Solomon & Hubbard, he turned away from it. We followed the flow of traffic for a while, but then he turned again, onto a road that didn’t seem as popular. This road led us further away from the city and cars and people. We followed this road until in the distance I could see a country church, with white walls, black roof, and tall steeple. It would make for a perfect photograph, I thought.

We reached the church, and he coasted into the small, empty lot—no one is at church on a weekday afternoon. We got out of the car, and I followed him as he walked around the pretty church, disappearing behind it. When I turned around the corner of the church, I saw him waiting for me a few feet away from the black, iron gate of a graveyard very much out of the movies—beautiful in daylight but definitely haunted at night, too picturesque.

“Eerie,” he remarked. “Not quite as bad when there’s people around, but now it’s got that creepy feel.” He sidled up to the gate, still waiting for me.

“Is he in there?” I asked, not understanding completely, surprised that my father would be buried in such a beautiful place, not because he shouldn’t be, but because I’d never thought about it. Daughters were supposed to be involved in seeing to their father’s burial. I had not been part of this, though. I had never seen this church, this yard. The distance I had kept for years had kept me from this, too. I stopped short of the gate, not close enough for Ray to reach and drag me in. His stare would pull me in, anyway.

“Might as well,” he said, offering me his hand. I thought about it, nervously chewing the inside of my lip, practically digging through to the other side. I studied the ground around my feet as if it would yield some sort of answer. The scuffs developing in the toe of my black “business” shoes stared silently back at me, and the tiny particles of dirt that together made up the piece of earth I stood on offered me no advice. Ray waited. “He can’t fuss at you or anything,” Ray reminded me. “Six feet of dirt would block out the noise even if he could.” I was surprised by the almost joke. I remembered my father’s silliness.

I watched one shoe, the one with the biggest scuff in the toe, slide haltingly forward. I picked up that foot and took a step toward him. I tore my eyes away from my feet to look at my hand, forcing it to take his, letting him lead me into the graveyard, so perfect it seemed made up. It seemed strange to be touching him. I hadn’t held a hand, outside of a handshake, in years. I held my brother’s hand throughout the graveyard.

I followed him down rows of strangers’ graves, stone after stone with name after name of stranger after stranger. As we continued to walk deeper into the yard, the stones seemed to get older. First, they lost their shine, then they began to crumble, until finally they weren’t even stones anymore, they were pieces. I stopped. One of the stones was so broken the name once

carved into the face could no longer be read. It had weathered away. This grave belonged to no one. I felt it begging me to pay it some attention. I looked at it, and Ray squeezed my hand.

“That ain’t him,” I heard him whisper. I couldn’t see him. I could only see this gravestone, this blank and broken image of a life completely unknown to me. “The church protects the historical ones. The new ones are in the back, way back.” I felt a pull, and I kept walking, following behind Ray. The progression of graves gave my stomach a strange feel. We made it through the older graves. They started to look new again—fresh deaths made for markers with sharp corners and legible engravings. Ray wove through a couple of rows until we reached a plot with no grass growing on it yet. I squinted, trying to read the marker: *Riley Inverness—Father of Two*.

“That’s it,” Ray whispered. I looked up at him, expecting to see the strength in his face I’d seen at the law office. His eyes were soft now. He wasn’t crying, probably wouldn’t in front of his big sister, but he wanted to in a way. I remembered he still held my hand. I squeezed a little to acknowledge him.

Almost nineteen years ago, my father called me on the telephone and told me something that made me so angry, hurt me so deeply, that I never really spoke to him again. I lived my life strangely and defiantly apart from him. My mother forgave him and moved on with her life. I graduated. I got jobs. I built a career. I tried to build a life, but I had always felt a little alone despite the passion with which I loved. My father never knew, I think, how I had fared. My successes and failures were a mystery to him, as far as I knew. I stood here now, with my father’s son, with the only family I had, staring down at our dad’s grave. Father of two. Though it was only a rock, it was the first time I’d faced my father in the as many years as Ray had been alive.

“Am I supposed to kneel? What’s the protocol?” I shuffled my feet, starting to lightly kick at the corner of the marker. I realized that might be disrespectful. I stopped. “Am I supposed to cry?” I didn’t know why I was asking these questions aloud, as if Ray would be comfortable answering them. I felt the need to do this on my own, so I let go of his hand. I didn’t kneel, but I felt like I should get closer, so I crouched. It didn’t feel right. I stood back up, but that was too far away again. I tried sitting on the ground, crossing my legs Indian-style, picking at the bare dirt with my fingernails. I thought briefly about how all the dirt would look on my black clothes later, but it was too late. Ray cleared his throat and backed away a little. He didn’t leave. I got the sense he partly wanted to hear what I would say, and partly felt it was more his right to be there than mine. I was fine with both.

“I had all these things rehearsed from my stories. I imagined what I’d say to you. For some reason, I never thought about this one. This wasn’t a story I ever imagined, or needed to write. You died before I had the chance to think about... about never having the chance to tell you all about the past nineteen years.” I felt ridiculous, admitting all this to the dirt and to Ray.

“So maybe I should have thought about you even more.” My hands started to become sticky with nervous sweat. The stick reminded me of my oath to love, my super-glue lifestyle, how it had never actually worked. No one had really stuck with me. “I thought about you all the time.” I admitted. The bits of sand-like crumbs from the ground began to stick to my palms. I started to feel awkward, so I stood. I addressed Ray now, though I didn’t know how he would feel about it. I didn’t even know how much he knew about me except that I was the kid from before, the one who had never made an effort to find him.

“I always wished there’d been a way to take only the parts of him that weren’t so broken... no... hurtful, so I could love him then. I guess you might have known those parts. I

wondered how he treated you.” I told him. I waited for an answer, but Ray only stood with his arms crossed, somber and silent.

I imagined a small child sitting on my father’s lap. I imagined my father, graying, leaning over the hood of a car, teaching an older boy to wax it properly. I imagined my father sitting with a nearly grown man, Ray as he stood before me now. Maybe only weeks ago, our dad had handed him his first beer, nodding proudly.

“I was too busy writing all these convoluted stories about what I’d say to him to actually say *anything*. I was too busy trying to make up for all the love that he stole to remember *you*. I had my hands full. I was stuck.” I looked at my hands, covered in dirty grit. “You know what it was? It was super glue,” I said. “I was playing with super glue.” I rolled back onto my knees and reached forward with my dirty hands. I pressed my palms side-by-side into the face of that smooth gravestone. I pressed them hard until I felt as if they were stuck. I pushed all my weight into my knuckles until I felt the ground was actually pulling my hands into the stone. I stayed this way until Ray, whose approach I hadn’t even heard, gently took me by the shoulders and pried me away from the rock face. I thought he was surprisingly gentle for his age. I let him help me up.

“You’re weird,” he said. “You ready?” he questioned, really asking if I’d said the right things, made peace.

“I just never really thought he’d die,” I told him. I stood still, his hands cupping my sweating shoulders. “I thought he would always be around, waiting for me to come back. He was just supposed to exist.” The first sign of tears appeared on the scene. I fought them—It’s such a movies thing to cry in a graveyard about ancient baggage. But a few tears came. I felt sorry for this kid, my brother, who had never met me before today. Here he was, young as I was

when I felt my father had betrayed me. He was fatherless and supporting a crying woman he'd met only hours ago, a woman crying because she had ignored his father, ignored him, for nineteen years.

"Let's go," Ray said. He was getting uncomfortable, I thought. "I'm feelin' awkward now," he said. I laughed through the tears I was trying to hide. He let go of my shoulders and started to wade back through the rows of graves. I moved to follow him, but I stopped to brush the dirt off my clothes. As I patted myself down, I felt the bulk in my pocket I'd forgotten—the note, the tube of glue, the story.

"One minute," I called after Ray. He stopped, turning to face me, his hands in the pockets of his khakis.

"You a glutton for torture?" He called.

"No, I'm sentimental," I retorted, surprised at myself. He actually smiled. I reached into my pocket and waved the note so he would see. I turned back to the grave, my dad's grave. I pulled the tiny tube of glue. I surveyed it in my palm, thinking of all it had meant to him, all it had meant to me. It had been a joke between us. To me meant it had turned to more than that.

I never wrote the story my dad joked about because I lived it. I lived in a world where the potential for restoration existed, but I turned the other way. I busied myself with other things, became attached to other people. I missed out on the chance to love the only person I wanted to love when he was only a phone call away, like starving in the middle of a cafeteria. If I had only written that silly story, I might have learned.

I crouched again, and set the tube on top of the marker. It was better than flowers, I thought. I set it directly beneath the word *two*. I stood up, and I walked away. I would leave the tube with him forever and keep the note. I walked away from my father's grave and the

superglue, and I headed in Ray's direction. He waited, still smirking a little. I reached him and we started walking again, almost shoulder to shoulder.

"Ray," I started. "Do you think it's possible for someone to glue their own hands to a table? With superglue, I mean." Ray fixed me with a look like I was crazy. He slapped me lightly on the arm.

"You sure you're alright there, Beth?" He laughed. "What do you do up there in New York? Think up crazy questions?" He kept walking out of the graveyard, past the church, and we had almost reached his car.

"It's for a story I might write. I've had the idea a long time. It's kind of silly, but I like it." We climbed back into his truck, and he didn't answer me at first. He just fixed me with a funny look and winked at me with my father's eyes.

Dear Readers,

This has been a semester of revision. Revision is one of my favorite parts of the writing process because it is so freeing. I used to feel a pressure on my first drafts, in both creative and academic writing, because I felt in order to prove myself a writer there had to be something shining and beautiful in every piece from the start. This resulted in a lot of hours frozen before a half-empty word document.

So, this independent study was born out of my initial discovery and interest in the revision process for my fiction writing, having already experienced it in my playwriting. I talked to Professor Varallo about the idea of producing a body of work for the specific purpose of drastically revising it, and with his help, that is what I have done with these three stories.

“The Intimate Scenes” is a revision of my first story for the semester, which was originally titled “The Dog-eared pages.” In the first draft, I wrote from the third-person, and the main character began as strangely naïve and unaware of the obvious danger in her relationship with her director. In addition, her husband presented no obvious character flaws other than that he might have been too nice to a wife who was too passive. Furthermore, Eric’s intentions were seemingly driven by the desire to trick Alice into becoming a better actress without her knowledge. The question became: How dumb can Alice really be?

In the revision, I changed the point of view, writing in the first-person from Alice’s perspective, and this gave me the exciting opportunity to explore her character further. My attempt to write it from more of a distance in the first draft had something to do with an attempt at minimalism. With Prof Varallo, I studied Carver’s *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and the earlier version of the same text, *Beginners*, shortly before writing “The Dog-eared Pages.” I enjoyed the exercise of trying to say everything in as few words as possible, giving the reader as little emotional direction as possible, but in the rewrite I decided to pull Alice out just a bit more. I also used this rewrite to take Prof Varallo’s advice and face my fear of letting my characters be flawed. What resulted is “The Intimate Scenes,” in which a more aware and cynical Alice enters willingly into a confusing gray area with another man. In the next revision, I think I would seek to extend some scenes. Specifically, I would like to add something more concrete from Alice’s past with her husband, and some more detailed rehearsal scenes as well.

The second story I produced this semester was “Sugar Water,” which also originated in the third person. Again, under the influence of Carver I attempted to say as little as possible in order to show a relationship in disrepair. The male main character remained un-named, and he was also “The Bee’s” father instead of her uncle. The holes in this draft were obvious: where is the girl’s mother? Why is he so distressed about pleasing his daughter? Where’s the conflict if this father exists to please his kid?

So in the revision, I answered the most bothersome questions for myself by again switching to the first person, really trying to understand why this man was in the story at all. Then I realized he didn’t want to be father, so I created conflict by making him her uncle so that his occasionally fatherly behavior was outside of his perceived role in “The Bee’s” life. By creating more work/money conflict for him, I attempted to give him his own layer of trouble

outside of the little girl. However, that is what I want to work on in the next draft. Prof Varallo and I talked about how I have pushed Bee to her full potential, and it is time for me to push Noah, get more mileage out of him. There has also been considerable doubt about whether or not “The Bee” is a bearable name for a the girl character... so, I’ve been brainstorming about that as well.

Finally, “Mischief Night” came out of my Julie Orringer reading experience, as I tried to dig into my own feelings about childhood memories and cousins and mothers. In the original draft there were a great deal more children, this was just a routine visit to family, and Callie inexplicably sang hymns in italics. Iris was also nick-named Rissy, again inexplicably. This draft set up Callie’s distress about being with her cousin and about her mother’s negligence but without justifying what is wrong or why her mother behaves as she does. It essentially leaned primarily on an underdeveloped “Rissy” who really only served as a surface conflict when Callie is clearly dealing with something else.

In the revision, I cut three children and created a little more interaction between Callie and her mother in order to set up the loss she feels when her mom retreats into silence and solitude at Aunt Carla’s house. I also attempted to streamline the actual mischief night activities, giving it a clear timeline. What I am still not satisfied with in this draft is Callie. I want to find a way to engage with her in the story. What is she feeling? How do I show that? And is there a way I can try to work with that without defaulting to the first person unless completely necessary? I seem to really like the first person, which is fine with me, but I want to make sure I’m never just using it because it’s easier for me. If I can push myself to find Callie without the first person, I’d like to try. I would also like to push Corbin and Mom more in this story. They could give Callie a lot more to work with.

The three stories you have here are not finished, but they have come a long way from their beginnings and of that I am proud. It has been extremely worthwhile to spend my time on these pieces as well as reading with Prof Varallo. We began with Carver, and then went through Orringer, Z.Z. Packer, and Wolff. I loved seeing the difference between Carver’s *Beginners* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, not so that I could compare and judge which version of each story was “better,” although we talked about that, but mostly so that I could see quite substantially that revision is *real* and often radical.

It is so easy to read published short stories, hold my first drafts up to them, and simply say, “Well, I guess I’m just not good enough yet.” Prof Varallo, Raymond Carver, and Gordon Lish collaboratively taught me this semester that the first draft can just be raw material, and that my hands are never tied as a writer or an editor once that first draft is typed. I am still working on “Lishing,” as Prof Varallo calls it, but I think what this semester has really done for me is given me the confidence to revise, because revising is where the real writing happens.

I feel I could have spent an entire semester on any one of these stories alone, making it completely different every time, and perhaps coming out with something almost unrecognizable from the first draft by the end of the semester. However, I think it was more useful training to produce three separate first drafts, because it forced me to approach revision anew with each one. I had to learn about my habits, my “go-to’s.” I learned that I use exclamation points with

unsettling frequency, that I tend toward “—ing” phrases, and am over fond of having my characters *eat*.

It has been a productive semester, and I look forward to working on these stories in the future, as well as taking my new revision awareness into my next stories. Thank you for reading my portfolio, and I look forward to meeting with you.

Best,
Cara Beth

The Intimate Scenes

It was an obscure little production of a play called *Regret*. I was cast as Corinne, the single mother of a teenaged girl, who falls in love with her daughter's boyfriend, leading the child to commit suicide. I was gunning to be considered for the daughter. My height and my blonde hair kept me looking young enough to play beneath my age, but the director cast me as Corinne against two twenty-year-old students at DePaul. I settled for this woman named Corinne. At least she was someone I could throw myself into. I began the daily trek downtown for rehearsal.

I started to hate the train. On the first day, a woman and her little boy were talking about the boy's father. The kid couldn't have been more than six or seven. She held him in her lap. He looked up at her face. They both wore thick grey stocking caps, and from underneath hers cascaded two thick braids.

"Because we're in love," she said to the little boy, answering his question.

"Well, I think I never want that," said the boy. His mother laughed.

"Don't be silly. You'll change your mind," she replied, pulling his cap around his ears.

"It would be annoying to have to share my bed, though," he said thoughtfully. She held him tight. His head rested on her chest, and his nose disappeared behind her thick scarf.

"You'll change your mind," she repeated. I watched them, for I don't know how long, without breaking my gaze. They were both right, but I couldn't decide which side I was on. Then the mother caught me staring.

"Cute," I told her. She smiled, and I looked away, back down at my script. My train rides were supposed to be for learning lines, but this woman and her kid got on the same train, every afternoon. I squinted at the black and white text, row after row, words that were supposed to turn

me into Corinne, this other woman. I closed the script. I looked back up at that mother. Her kid was telling her some story now. I hated the way she wouldn't stop smiling.

I looked back at the script. This show was different somehow than the others. I didn't *want* to be this woman. I went to the rehearsals, and I said the words and went through the motions. I felt too much myself on the rehearsal floor. I didn't know what I was doing, playing this woman who cries, who hates herself for being happy.

A week into rehearsals, the director, Mr. Weaver kept me back for ten minutes after the rest were dismissed. I approached him, studying the gray in his sideburns, a trait I'd always liked. My husband Jeff's sideburns were dark brown. Mr. Weaver was a few years older than Jeff, but seemed younger. I'd been hoping he would speak to me ever since casting. I found him attractive, and I wanted him to pay me some attention.

"You have acted before," he said to me from behind his wooden table and hinged, metal lamp. I held my script, curving it in my hands. It bent easily.

"Yes, Mr. Weaver," I answered. I stood a few feet away.

"Eric. Call me Eric. We'll need to be more comfortable with each other over the next seven weeks," he said. I nodded, smiling a little, picking up my shoulders. "You've never played a role like this one," he finished. He looked up at me a minute, the lamplight casting a sheen on his forehead and teeth. He looked back down at his work.

"No," I said.

"Next week we'll begin rehearsing the intimate scenes," he said, still looking at his paper. "You're prepared to do that?" he asked. I waited to see if he would look up at me. I studied the curve of his shoulder, imagining muscle definition beneath his plaid, flannel.

"Yes, of course," I answered. "As long as my scene partner's prepared."

He nodded and waved. I waited. Nothing. And left. “He’s a funny man. I’ll learn a lot from him,” I told Jeff that night. Jeff glanced at me from the other side of our bed, folding down the duvet cover.

“That’s good, right?” He asked.

“I think so,” I answered. I thought about Mr. Weaver, about Eric and the small wrinkles in the corners of his eyes, as I nestled into Jeff’s chest in the dark. Jeff shifted under my weight for a moment, then sighed heavily. I rolled away from him, letting my cheek fall onto the cool pillow.

“It’s just uncomfortable, Alice. Too hot,” he said. He patted my shoulder roughly. I hugged the pillow tighter.

“There’s intimacy involved in this role,” I mentioned. I waited for his response. I imagined him staring at the back of my head, concerned about another man touching me, my lips. “We rehearse that part next week,” I added. He gave no response. “Jeff?” I asked, looking over my shoulder. He stared into the pages of his book, huddled close to the bedside lamp. I stared until he looked up.

“Light bothering you?” he asked, reaching for the switch.

“No, Jeff. Goodnight,” I answered. I studied the fibers in the pillowcase.

Jeff and I married after dating for four months. I’d known him a couple of years, but he had been with another woman during that time, someone I didn’t know well. I met him at work and always liked him. I was a part-time paper pusher, and he was a starting-up accountant.

As soon as I knew he was single, I began to speak to him in the break room more often, telling him about my aspirations and listening to him talk about how he missed her. He asked me to drink with him one evening after work. It was fun and became a habit until it became

romantic. He told me he liked me very much, and wanted to date, so we did. Then there was a ring and a wedding. I couldn't say no. I could never be sure I'd have another chance, and he was good to me.

Six years later, he's still in love with her, still holding me to that. Still saying some other name during his nightmares. I pursued my career as an actress. He remained an accountant. Every morning he looked at me like he wished I were someone else. Every afternoon, I went off to rehearsals or auditions and pretended to be exactly that.

In the next few rehearsals, Eric decided I didn't yet understand the range of Corinne's emotional landscape, and I thought that was the deepest, most beautiful crock of shit an attractive man had ever said to me. I pushed myself in the next rehearsal, and the next one, and the next one. I tried anger, despair, hysteria. The twenty-year-olds complained I was inconsistent. Eric ran me through exercise after exercise. He stretched me, running his hands along my spine as I tried to touch my toes. He forced me to massage the muscles in my face, my jaw, using his fingers to show me where to push out the tension. I closed my eyes when he came that close, and he smelled like new paper, good books.

One night, I followed everyone else as they left to go home, tucking the script into the pocket of my bag. I glanced back at Eric before leaving, hoping to see him looking at me. His back was turned toward me as he bent over his table, scribbling notes. I reached for the door.

"Wait, Alice. Sit down with me for a moment," he said from across the room. I stopped, but I didn't cross to him. Eric pulled the glasses that rested on top of his head down to the bridge of his nose and looked at me, squinted. "Alice, have you ever felt conflicted about something?" he asked. I laughed, quickly, one syllable. Eric did not. He tightened the corners of his mouth

into an artistic half-smile. I stared. I stood near the door, leaning on one foot. Eric sat behind the table, squinting and smiling. I shifted my weight onto both feet. Eric said nothing.

“I’m not sure what you want from me here, Eric,” I finally said. He let me go, and I left, even though I wanted to stay. I wanted him to tell me things, how to be this woman in his play, how to be *another* than I was.

From that point on, I decided to take an earlier train into the city, to get to the district a few minutes early, to warm up on my own and get into my space before Eric or anyone else arrived. My character demanded it, but I wasn’t sad to get away from the daily oozing joy of that mother and her stocking-capped son. I began to grip my script with both hands during the train ride, with my arm looped around the smelly metal support pole to keep me stable. There were no smiles or stories about family togetherness to distract me. I focused on my script, and the elderly man across from me bobbed his head to a beat only he could hear. I preferred him.

I kept him in my peripheral view as I studied my script. I read line after line, trying to grasp something new. I imagined I was falling into the book itself. I imagined raising another person alone. I imagined loving her and hoping for the best even though I had never felt quite together myself. I imagined watching her love, and trying to feel happy for her. I imagined jealousy. I imagined longing. I imagined all this was seeping into me through the pages of that script. I held it tight, smelling the mixture of paper and the sweat from my palms. I gripped the script that way, every day on the train, until it curled open naturally to the same two pages. I’d marked them. I knew I was missing something there. The pages yellowed, and the cover began to fade. I gripped the pliable paperback until my fingers were stiff and sore.

One month into rehearsal Eric was waiting for me when I arrived early. He was sitting in his usual place behind the table, not looking down at his notes or writing, but looking straight

ahead at the door, like he knew I would come in. I paused in the doorway, then entered the room and dropped my bag in a corner. I sat down on the floor with my head between my legs to stretch and focus. A routine by now. Quiet and dark. I liked that he was there to see me working.

“You’re early tonight,” he said.

Without leaving my stretch, I answered, “Same to you.”

“Needed to prepare for tonight. Important rehearsal,” he continued.

“What do you have to prepare?” I asked, carrying on conversation now, proud that he was chatting with me, that he acknowledged my existence.

“I had to learn your lover’s lines,” he replied. I looked up, lifting my head between my shoulders, leaving my hands on my ankles and my elbows on my knees. He was standing. He was holding his glasses in his hand.

“I let your scene partner have the night off tonight. Midterms or something,” he said.

“So, you’re standing in? Should I be intimidated?” I asked, still frozen in my stretch. Then I realized. “What scenes do you want to run?” I asked him.

He walked toward me. He looked down at me from one or two feet away from my position on the floor, and then he sat on the ground, mirroring me. “Tell me why you are here,” he said. He stared intensely, waited, resting his hands on his hip bones just above the edge of his slim fit denim pants.

“I’m trying to understand Corinne,” I replied haltingly. “I have to figure out what you want me to do. Why these monologues aren’t working and what she’s thinking. I just don’t understand what she’s thinking,” I rambled.

“Stand up,” Eric said after a pause. We both stood. He took me firmly by the upper arm and kissed me briefly. I pushed into it, afraid for it to end. My neck hurt afterward. By the time I

raised my hands to touch the gray in those sideburns, he had let go. He returned to his place behind the wooden table, returned his glasses to the top of his head, and then resumed his study. I planted my feet, but I imagined following him, lifting up his head with my hands, asking for more.

“You will get it, Alice. I promise,” he said. “We’re running scene three. Your first intimate encounter with the young man,” he continued. “You don’t understand what she thinks, because you do not feel what she feels. She is you, Alice,” he said, picking up the loose pages of the scene. I already had it memorized, every word, every move. We set the stage.

The scene began, and I pretended to play Corinne, cleaning up from dinner when she hears a knock at the door. Her daughter’s ex-boyfriend asks to come in. She says no, though she’s always liked him. Her daughter is out, she says, so he should really come another time. He asks to wait. She lets him in because he sounds so sad. She listens to him talk about loneliness. She makes him tea. She sits close to him. She tells him about her loneliness. He leans in. He kisses her. She kisses him back. It is soft. They kiss again, longer, touching hands. They hear a key in the door and leap away from one another. The daughter enters, and the scene ends.

We ran the scene again. We ran the fifth, seventh, eighth, and ninth scenes as well. Quickly, feverishly. I pretended Corinne was secretly meeting this boy in her house when her daughter was out. I pretended I loved him. I pretended to kiss him more and more each time, until it was finally more than kissing and we were discovered, but we weren’t discovered. Rehearsal, our scene work, ran its course uninterrupted. We gathered ourselves. Eric walked me to the door of the building. As I left, he pulled me into one more kiss. I left him watching me from the doorway.

I caught the regular train that night. No one on the train knew what I had done, what I had wanted. I smiled at the woman holding a box of leftovers, probably from a date, and I knew that she was going home alone. I laughed a little, out loud. She looked up, and I stopped.

“He kissed me,” I said to Jeff in bed that night. I stared at the blank wall in front of our bed, triumphant. I waited. The picture that hung there had fallen the week before, smashed, and neither of us had remembered to buy a new frame.

“Who, Alice?” Jeff said quietly, reading.

“Eric. Mr. Weaver,” I replied. I liked the empty wall. It seemed clean. It had been a picture of the island beach where we spent our honeymoon. It had been gorgeous, and I got the best tan of my life on the powdery beach. Jeff stayed in the hotel room mostly, sleeping, saying he had no interest in the heat of the sun.

“The boy who plays your love interest. Is that unusual?” he asked, only looking up for a moment from what must have been the most interesting book ever written. He kept reading. I waited. Nothing.

“Eric is the director. He doesn’t have a role in the play, Jeff,” I said. Jeff’s fingers turned white against the cover of that book. He swallowed, but he didn’t look up. He kept his voice low.

“That’s why you go early, why you take the late train home?” he asked. The book jacket began to slide down the spine of the hardback, revealing blue canvas and gold print, a boring title. I turned my head then. I wanted to see him realize this. I wanted to see the jealousy, see if he recognized it as the feeling I’d known for six years. The turn hurt my neck a little, and I smiled because it reminded me of pressing into Eric’s lips. I reached my hand over to Jeff’s.

“What’s the matter, Jeff? Are you worried?” I asked. Jeff put the book down and began to look at the wall now. “He was trying to push my character,” I told him. Jeff snorted. The book closed. He set it on the table. I looked back at the wall, trying to imitate Eric’s tight smile.

“Your character,” Jeff responded.

“Yes, Jeff,” I muttered. Jeff squeezed my hand. His fingers felt cold. I did not squeeze back. I pulled away after a moment. “Sorry, just a little uncomfortable,” I told him, rubbing my hand. I rolled over and pretended to sleep as I thought of Eric’s smell and the freckle I’d noticed for the first time tonight, up close, above his left eyebrow.

Jeff called me from the office the next day. Just to check on me. Wanted to hear my voice, he said. I asked him what was wrong. He had never called me from work before, not in six years. He asked if he could come to a rehearsal.

“I’ve never gotten to see you work. You only invite me to the performances,” he said. He offered to leave work early, come to the very next rehearsal in just a few hours. I agreed to it.

It should have been much easier to study the script from the passenger side seat than it was to do it on the train, but the words ran together on the pages. My fingers were white like Jeff’s had been, on the book the night before. I closed the script. Eric’s handwriting was there on the cover, where he’d written my name at casting. I thought of his hands. I turned the book over. The quiet of the car was different from the train.

“It’s nice,” Jeff said. He kept looking over toward me. I ignored him, pretending I didn’t notice. We were getting close. I opened the script once more. I read and re-read the monologues, the moments I didn’t understand. They were moments when Corinne was alone on stage, speaking to herself.

We arrived early because we planned extra time for Jeff to find reasonable parking. Jeff opened the door for me, and kept his hand on my lower back as I entered. Eric was there and the twenty-year-olds, but it was quiet. Jeff approached the table, holding out a hand to Eric.

“Weaver? Jeff. Alice’s Jeff. Sitting in tonight,” Jeff introduced. Eric looked up from his notes.

“Right. The husband. Be invisible,” he said. Jeff settled in the corner out of Eric’s view, and crossed his arms. I left my bag next to him and walked to join the others. Eric began rehearsal, and when it ended he called me to his desk. He had some line notes, he said. He pulled me in, over the desk, pointing at one of the scenes, talking about a line, practically whispering. I didn’t hear a word he said. I just smiled and felt his breath on my neck. I nodded every now and then.

Jeff cleared his throat. He waited a few feet behind us, holding my script and my bag. I turned around and looked at him.

“Just working, Jeff. All done,” I said. I looked back at Eric before walking back toward Jeff. We left together, and I looked back as the door was swinging shut behind us. Eric’s head was down, studying his notes.

“I bought a frame on my lunch today,” Jeff said in the car. When we got home, I gingerly placed the picture into the new one while Jeff discarded the broken pieces of the other. While we stood to judge if it was level, Jeff wrapped his arms around my waist, holding gently. I hugged his arms. His grip grew tighter, heavy. He turned me to face him and pulled me toward our bed. I let him touch me, kiss me, but no on the lips. After, he breathed loudly, tired, rolled away from me.

Before I fell asleep I whispered, “I kissed him back, Jeff.”

At the next rehearsal, Eric did not directly address me. He did not touch me. He did not even keep me afterward. He did not keep me late at any more rehearsals, and he addressed me only as Corinne, spoke to me only as her. Not as Alice. I spent my train rides running through what had happened, what I'd done wrong. Missing him. Trying to figure it out. I hated every couple, old and young, who rode on the train. I hated how happy they looked, or comfortable, touching hands.

Tech rehearsals and dress rehearsals went as smoothly as they can be expected to go, and I was neither called earlier nor kept later than the other cast members for any of them.

At home, for the next three weeks Jeff only kissed me on the cheek. He would lift my lips to his when I came home on time, and I would fake a smile, adjust, and his lips would miss. Just past the left corner of my mouth. Briefly enough to seem unintentional.

"Kiss me," he would say at night before switching off our bedside lamp. I'd smile, lean in, offering my cheek.

"Good night," we whispered. I stayed awake on cold sheets, tasting Eric.

Jeff drove me to opening night because he had a ticket, of course. He wore a jacket and tie. He kissed me, on the cheek, when I got out of the car. As I was dressing, I found hidden in my bag a postcard from the same island in the bedroom picture, where I'd spent my honeymoon alone on the beach. In Jeff's writing was a note:

Break a leg, beautiful. Can't wait to see you after the show. OoO, Jeff

I taped it to my corner of the mirror in the dressing room. The others called it sweet. I got dressed in a hurry, then left the room quickly. I had to warm up. I looked for Eric. Maybe he would help me rub the tension out of my face. Maybe he'd remember. I couldn't find him, and I felt empty.

I waited in the dark backstage for the show to begin. I looked at no one. I spoke to no one. I entered at my moment, and I comforted my daughter as she cried over the end of her first high school relationship. I wiped her tears. I befriended her mourning boyfriend. I kissed him. I fucked him. I fell in love with him because he made me feel whole. I broke my daughter's heart. I heard the gunshot in the middle of the night. I cradled her body. I mourned her death. I kept my secret.

I delivered my last line and exited, backing into the darkness of backstage dangerously close to the curtain. I heard a sniff. I turned. Eric stood in the corner beneath the blue-tinted light behind the stage manager. He held his glasses in his hand, chewing the tip of the frames.

We stood that way, looking, until we heard the clapping that meant the final scene had finished. The performance was over. Opening night. I returned to the stage to bow with the others, but when I ducked my head, I did not keep my eyes to the floor or to the audience. I turned my head. I peeked into that backstage corner, with the bit of blue light, where he stood. He did not break his gaze.

I exited with the others, but stopped for just a moment before I went back to the dressing room. I looked at him and thought of Jeff sitting in the audience, just a few feet away, holding flowers, proud of me. I met his eyes.

"Mr. Weaver," I said. And he nodded.

As I returned to the dressing room, I thought of Jeff giving me those flowers. I thought of riding home with him in the car. I thought of getting into the same bed with him again, for the thousandth time. I thought of that stocking-capped kid on the train, and I decided he was right.

Sugar Water

The knock came at my door around nightfall, just as I was suiting up for the night shift at the plant. Third cup of coffee in hand, I opened the door, and there stood my older sister with the kid slung over her shoulder, fast asleep.

“No way,” I said to her, trying to shut the door on her. “I’ve got work tonight.”

“Noah, please!” she whined. I opened the door again and squinted at her in the dusk. Thick, black make-up coated her eyelids, and her cheeks looked hollow, either from too much blush or she’d lost weight. Her dark hair hung in strings, falling over her face, and she kept tossing her head to move it—this made her look confident, though she was here to beg again. She wore a black mini-skirt and a shirt our dad would have shot her for wearing in public. She gave me a coy smile, and I felt sick, like she was trying to flirt me into being a good brother.

“I can’t play daddy tonight. I have work,” I said again. She stepped in closer, trying to hand me the kid’s backpack. I found myself reaching for the kid instead, since my sister looked about to drop her on the steps any second.

“Thanks, Noah. You’re the best little brother a girl could ask for. I’ll pick her up from school tomorrow,” she called over her shoulder as she trotted back to a running car in her cheap platform heels and got into the passenger side seat. I waved at the driver, invisible to me but they were all the same, probably some asshole that promised he loved her. I watched them drive away, and I felt The Bee twitch on my shoulder. I picked her backpack up off my steps and turned to go inside.

The Bee was my sister's kid, eight years old, and I called her The Bee because she had a hard time saying "Phoebe" when she was first learning to talk. It turned into The Bee, or just Bee sometimes. I walked her into my small bedroom, and with one arm swept a pile of dirty clothes off my bed. I put The Bee down, without waking her, and then I went back into the kitchen. I pulled out my cell phone and made the dreaded call to my boss at the plant.

"Will? Yeah, it's Noah. No, I'm not on my way. I have a bit of a situation... My sister just dropped her kid off at my house. I can't leave. I *know* this is the fourth shift I've missed in a month. I *know* I'm close to probation. I *know* you're fucking pissed. I can't come in tonight. Sorry, Will. I'll come in tomorrow night to make it up. Okay, bye." I hung up. I looked around the kitchen, dark. I could feel the coffee pulsing through me. It was meant to keep me alert for the night shift. I wondered if I could sleep anyway. I stripped down to my boxers and T-shirt, and went to the couch. I fell asleep thinking of how I'd like to strangle my sister, or at least write her a bill for how many paychecks she'd ruined for me.

Then, there she was in her ankle-length knit t-shirt, yanking on my foot, dragging me from the sofa to her window, and pointing.

"What is it, Bee?" I mumbled through the sleep in my throat.

"It's them, Uncle Noah," said The Bee. She stood on tiny toes and left smudges on the windows, trying to place her finger exactly where she saw them. First here, then there, then to the left, then right. "It's the fairies. They dance at night." Her eyes did not move from the window. I squinted, trying to focus, trying to stay standing.

"What in the—what are you talking about Bee?" I asked. I crouched down behind her, bringing my chin over her shoulder. I could see the tree, and I could see the streetlight shining throughout the silhouette of the branches and leaves. I could see the movement of the wind in the

branches, and how that little bit of motion made the light look as if it was moving. The black of the tree looked no different from the black of the night. The white-yellow bounced from here to there.

“It’s a fairy dance,” said The Bee. I wanted to tell her it was just two streetlights and to go to bed. Her dishwater blonde hair smelled like cigarettes, and there was dirt under her fingernails that tapped my windowpane. I could here the pads of her feet smacking lightly against the linoleum. I wrapped my arms around her, scooping her up like she weighed nothing. She weighed almost nothing, I felt.

“The fairies, Uncle Noah!” she protested. She kicked the air.

“If they are dancing tonight, they’ll dance another night, Bee,” I said. I let her fall a little bit. Inches in midair. Caught her. She squealed. I dropped her into the twin-sized bed.

She pulled my twenty-four-year-old baseball quilt up to her nose and said, “You suck,” through the faded fabric, like that would protect her from getting in trouble for saying something most kids’ moms probably wouldn’t let them say.

“So do you, Bee,” I answered, being no mom. I left her there, returned to my sofa to sleep. From where I lay, I could see the lights. I could see the fairy lights dancing. It made me feel sort of nice, happy in a dizzy way, even though I knew it was just streetlights and a tree blowing in the wind. It had made The Bee sort of happy, and I thought that was something. And the fairy lights kept dancing, dancing.

The next day, The Bee spent all morning before school talking about them. She used my computer to do research. With the spoon meant for her breakfast cereal in one hand, and typing with the other, she was determined to do it on her own.

“Noah,” she began. “How do you spell *fairy*?” She waited.

“Eat a bite of cereal and I’ll tell you,” I answered. I could see the store brand, cardboard breakfast soaking up the milk, getting soggy. She did not cooperate. So I yanked the computer away, almost immediately regretting the action. Milk sloshed, and my computer’s life flashed before my eyes. The Bee grunted in frustration and started eating. I inspected my computer. No damage.

“This is not a kid-safe house,” I said.

“Mom says you’re just a kid,” answered The Bee.

“Your mom’s confusing me with herself,” I snapped back. “Eat.”

“You look like her,” said The Bee with a mouthful of cereal. “Except for the beard,” she swallowed and lunged for the computer with one arm.

“Nice try,” I said, holding it high and out of her reach. She went back to her breakfast. I set the computer down and attempted to make her a lunch out of whatever I could find in my basically empty fridge. I wondered if it was okay to send an eight-year-old girl to school with three slices of provolone cheese and a piece of beef jerky.

The Bee reclaimed my computer as she chowed down on the stale cereal, leaning across the counter to drag it back toward her, the ends of her hair threatening to fall into the milk. A few bites later it was, “How do you spell *catching*?” I could see her trying to type and eat that cereal at the same time. I could see her trying to read whatever the search engines came up with, and I could see her eagerness.

“You eat that cereal, Bee. What do you want me to type?” I asked, trying to save my computer at all costs.

“Fairy catching,” said The Bee. I typed as she went to work on her cereal. She grasped the spoon with her fist instead of with her fingers, and I thought how my own mother would have

slapped the spoon right out of her hand. My sister probably never even thought to mention table manners to the kid.

The Bee ate on her knees, sitting tall in her chair, leaning toward me and the computer screen. I scrolled through pictures of winged women, and it made me uncomfortable.

“This is weird, Bee,” I protested.

“That kind,” said The Bee. She touched my arm, having pushed a bowl of milk to the side. She used her index finger to usurp my clicking power. She clicked on one of the prettier fairies, a cartoonish illustration, but real looking, too. The artist had given this one a glow, not glitter or sparkle, just sheen. Light seemed to radiate from her face and hair.

“That’s the kind I saw last night,” Bee assured me. I watched as she scrolled down all the words on the website, obviously a sketchy independent blog by some fanatic. The Bee only looked at the pictures. “Where does it say how to catch it? How can I get one of them to talk to me, Noah?”

Bee put her arms around my shoulders, only to get a better view of the computer screen, and I slouched under the pressure, annoyed. With one hand on her little fingers to keep them from smudging up my computer again, and one on the keyboard, I scrolled and clicked until I saw a tab for “Human Interaction.” I read, disregarding most of it, but I wanted to find something, too. Something to tell her. I wanted her to find out what she wanted to know—I play along a little bit.

“They like sweet things,” I read to her. “They’re shy and may never come to you, but they will hide from you if you approach them suddenly.”

“That’s not fair!” exclaimed The Bee. I kept reading.

“They are most confident at dusk, when they first begin to come out for the night. Most successful close encounters occur at this time, between creatures excited by their first emergence for the night and humans who were already there, a part of their environment.” I scrolled more, looking for bits that would please her, but then I saw the time in a small box in the corner of the screen. I shut the laptop. Holding tight to her arms, I stood up, letting her legs and feet dangle in the air.

“Hey!” she squealed, either in protest or surprise, and started kicking me from behind. “Put me down, jerk! I wasn’t done!” She whined.

“It’s time to leave for school,” I said. I grabbed her backpack with one arm and carried her outside with the other. We walked all the way to my truck that way. It was parked only a few feet from the fairy tree. I noticed that it looked like the lights were dancing even in the day. The sunlight made the leaves glow, too, instead of only escaping through the gaps between them.

“That’s their tree,” said The Bee. “I’m going to meet one of them tonight.”

I listened to her plan. She talked continuously and almost constantly, pausing only to buckle her seatbelt, which took too much strength and concentration for her to do both at once. When we got to her school only ten minutes away, I let the truck idle in the parking lot, listening to sentence after sentence fall from her tongue. Rapidly. Excitedly. Exhaustingly.

“Time to go, Bee. Here’s five bucks—I forgot you lunch on the counter,” I cut her off. I pressed the bill into her hand, and she looked at me, frustrated. I tapped the clock in the dashboard, and she sighed. She clicked the seatbelt open, and she let it roll back up into the truck at a slug-like pace. When it was out of her way, she leaned down toward the floor letting her hands touch her sneakered feet. Slowly she grabbed at her backpack and sat back up. She looked

at me, frowning. I reached across her and opened her door, knowing she would make that last as long as she possibly could, too.

“Your mom’s picking you up,” I said, trying to ignore the forced pucker in her lip. “See you later.”

Saying nothing, she hopped out of the truck. I watched her unhappy torso vanish then reappear in my rearview mirror. I followed her figure, in all its trudging, until she disappeared into those lonely glass doors. The only child in sight. The empty sidewalks and vacant carpool lane said she was late, probably for the hundredth time.

When I got home, I went to my computer, anxious to do some calculating on the month’s bills—I’d missed enough shifts to worry about rent, and HV/AC would probably have to go again this month, too. I carried my laptop to the couch. When I was settled, I opened it, ready to be productive. I typed the password in to unlock the screen, and a glowing fairy picture filled the frame.

“Damn,” I muttered, indignant that this had ever grazed my browser’s history. I intended to exit the window, but I indulged curiosity, returning to the original search engine results. I looked through the images, one after another. Gradually, I began to notice differences.

There were the fairies that seemed to reflect light, beauty, dreamy magic—the one The Bee had favorited. But others... There were dark ones, too. They were not “beautiful.” If they glowed, it was eerie, and their features were angular, their faces angry. Their wings looked like tattered, dirty feathers. They had long, sharp nails, and some even bore fangs.

As I continued the images grew more and more disfigured. Bird-like. Insect-like. No sign of the goodness in the being to which my niece had grown attached.

I clicked on one, following the link to a site with a deep purple background. *Faeries In True Form*, I read. It went on about them, and I saw more disturbing pictures. I grew bored and noticed the time. I moved my cursor to exit the window, but my eyes lingered on the countenance of one last fairy image. She wore a short black, tattered garment that reminded me of my sister's skirt from the night before. She stared through the screen, and I started to hate her. I decided I preferred The Bee's dancers. I didn't blame the kid for obsessing over their sparkle and their light.

In the afternoon, I went out to pick up whatever supplies for the week I could afford— toilet paper, Diet Coke, hand soap, saltine crackers, and peanut butter. In the checkout line, my cell phone rang.

"Hello," I answered, the cashier glaring at me over her gum chewing.

"Uncle Noah?" asked The Bee's voice. I handed the uniformed woman a wad of cash, letting her go through and count it out.

"What's up, kid? I'm a little busy," I nodded a thanks to the woman as she handed me my change and my bag of stuff. I started toward the exit and my truck, with just enough time to make it home and change before the night shift. Maybe even make a pot of coffee.

"I already called Mom. She didn't answer," said The Bee. "You have to come get me." I slammed the door of my truck as I got in and mouthed *fuck* so she wouldn't hear me say it.

"I can't, Bee. I have work," I answered.

"The after school program is over. They said it's time to go home," answered The Bee without emphasis. I could tell that some snooty office lady was feeding her lines.

"You called your mom?" I asked. She confirmed. My bitch sister was probably still sleeping off the night before, and I wondered how much of that this kid understood. "Alright,

I'm on my way." I started up the truck, already dialing Will's number to get out of tonight's shift, asking God to at least let me keep my job. I didn't even bother calling my sister. If she didn't pick up for her kid, she wasn't about to pick up for me.

When we got back to my place, Bee threw her bag onto the floor, next to the sofa, not even stopping to shut the door behind her. I walked over and latched it myself. She climbed onto the same chair she'd eaten her breakfast in and used it as a ladder, a stepping stool. She climbed up the chair and stepped onto the narrow counter, raising herself to eye level with the cabinets. She opened one, leaning back to give the door room to swing. I watched her search noisily, first through the hollow sound of plastic cups and containers. Then she closed that cabinet, leaning again, and opened the next, finding glass. She clinked and clattered.

"Careful, Bee," I said. I leaned on the counter next to her, ready to catch her if she toppled backward. She did not stop shuffling glass. I could see her feet on the counter, but that was it. Her shoes were filthy, and there was dirt in the creases behind her knees. The rest of her was invisible behind the cabinet door. I counted how many times she shifted her weight from her left foot to her right foot to her left. Right. Left.

The noise stopped, and one hand came around the side of the door, swinging it shut. The Bee stood there on the counter, facing me now. She held a large, empty glass jar.

"This is what I'm going to catch her in," she explained.

"Oh the fairy, of course," I remembered. "Still on that, I see." I lifted her, and lowered her to the floor. Almost before her feet had touched the ground she was walking again.

"When is dusk?" she asked. The Bee, without releasing her grip on the jar, began to slide the ceramic baking jars closer to the edge of the counter so she could see their labels, organization forced on my sorry kitchen by an ex-girlfriend. Bee twisted them until she found the

one marked *sugar*, and then she tried to lift it with her only free hand. It fell. Its weight made a hollow thunder against the floor. The Bee jumped back with panic in her face, and I reached her in the same instant as the sound of the impact, grabbing her shoulders.

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no!” The Bee cried. She fell onto her knees in a speckled flood of white. The jar had opened, spilling, but not broken.

“Dammit, Bee!” I yelled, picking her up again and setting her on the counter. I let her sit up there, howling, while I got the broom. “It’s everywhere!”

“Oh no, Noah, Noah,” she whimpered, catching her breath. “How will I make her come to me? Without a sweet thing? She’ll never get close. I’ll never catch her now, never. Oh no, no, no.” Her voice cracked a thousand times as she lamented her loss. I told myself she was being dramatic and kept sweeping, kept thinking how *this* was not my job, *this* was not my responsibility.

“You should have asked for help,” I said. She sniffed. I watched her energy disappear. It was gone.

I swept up the mess, just opening the door and pushing it outside over the steps. I pushed the other ceramic jars to the back of the counter, too. Then I lifted The Bee’s exhausted body and carried her to the sofa. I sat down with her; she stared at the blank TV, still holding that glass jar. I reached over and pried it from her sweaty fingers.

“Dusk won’t be for another hour or so, Bee,” I finally answered. The Bee didn’t respond. She just watched the TV like it was on.

I got up and opened the freezer, searching for dinner, which I would have bought at the store if I’d known my sister was going to land me with the kid again. I didn’t have anything good for an eight-year-old. The Bee liked macaroni and cheese, but I was out. I thought maybe the half

a box of month-old, dinosaur-shaped Tyson nuggets I'd bought on sale would drag her out of her stupor. I dumped it onto a plate, brushing off the bits of ice where I could. I started up the microwave.

I listened to the microwave, the sound of the air and the popping of the chicken, however old it was, thawing. I watched as The Bee picked up that glass jar again, and was rapping her dirty fingernails on its side, making an almost musical sound. She seemed to pick out a little rhythm, and I saw her shoulders relax, falling a bit at a time.

"Hungry, Bee?" I asked. I watched her from behind as she shrugged her shoulders. The clinking stopped. I turned around to watch the seconds count down on the microwave. I brought her a smaller plate, and I ate from the large one.

"I'm gonna eat you," I chanted. I picked up one of my nuggets, shaped like a T-Rex, and bounced it around in the air. It hopped along toward The Bee's nose. I tapped it against her puckered lower lip. Her eyes darted in my direction briefly, but she still sat motionless, her plate balancing in her lap. I roared like a dinosaur and devoured the nugget, laughing at myself, partly because she wouldn't acknowledge me and partly because I couldn't believe I was doing this—playing this game, getting on her level. The Bee only stared like a crazy person at the empty television. I ignored her.

I finished my food. The Bee mostly sat still, occasionally picking at the breading on a triceratops. Her nuggets must have been cold by then.

"Bee," I finally spoke. "Bee, you've got to eat now." I picked up her plate and offered her a single nugget. She reached up slowly and took it, but then she let her hand fall into her lap. So she sat there. With a stegosaurus leaving crumbs on her purple shorts, I wondered how many days in a row she'd worn this set of clothes. I watched as nothing happened.

“This is ridiculous, Bee. Fine. If you don’t want dinner, have it your way,” I picked up both plates, stood, and went to place them in the sink. I also picked up her backpack, set it on the counter, and began to look through it, finding her “Homework” folder. I got it out and set it on the counter, ready for when The Bee would have to do her worksheets or a spelling list, or whatever eight-year-olds do for homework. As I pulled out the folder, loose papers fell out of the bag, bright pink forms. I picked them up to stuff them back in the back, and I noticed they were all the same, and they all said “Behavior Report” at the top. I looked back at The Bee, still staring, still disturbingly motionless.

I looked back through the forms, went through them in chronological order. It had started months ago. First, a crying fit on the playground when another kid wouldn’t let her play some game. Another fit during lunch one day when some kid next to her had a dessert. Fit after fit. I came to a form from yesterday, scribbled on in bright red ink at the bottom: *Please call the school to schedule a parent-teacher conference, as Phoebe’s behavior is not improving.* Yesterday’s form said she’d thrown a fit on the floor in the middle of class, cried for an hour, so loud they took her to the nurse, all because she’d missed a spelling word.

I knew somehow that my sister hadn’t ever seen these forms. I knew my mother never would have let this happen to one of us. I looked back over at the kid, and I hated that she was here in my disgusting, small house. I hated her life, and I hated mine. I stuffed it all back into the kid’s backpack, so she wouldn’t know I’d seen them, and I saw, at the very bottom of bag, in the creases with dust and crumbs, was a five dollar bill, carefully folded and tucked underneath an empty crayon carton.

Rubbing my face, I looked up, but found my dirty, dust-covered ceiling uninspiring, so I looked down at my feet. I hoped. Beneath my shoes I could see grains of white sugar still in the small crevices on the floor. That sugar. I looked over toward the ceramic jars.

I pulled a pot from beneath the sink and fired up the electric stove as I filled the vessel with water. I let it boil, and then I emptied the ceramic jar into the pot and cut the heat. I stirred until I couldn't see the sugar anymore.

"Bee, I think those fairies are gonna like this," I called over my shoulder. I heard a stirring. I looked back to see her standing on the couch, facing me, her arms resting on the back of it. She was skeptical, but I could tell she wanted in on it.

"The fairies?" The Bee asked. She cocked her head a little, and her eyebrow twitched.

"Come see," I gestured toward the pot. "Don't touch, just smell. Still hot." I picked her up to bring her close, but not too close.

"Is it dusk, Uncle Noah?" The Bee asked. I put her down and looked out the window. The sun was setting. Daylight wouldn't last much longer. I nodded. "I'm going," she said. She ran back to the sofa, collecting the jar. Then she ran for the door, swinging it open. She charged down the steps and out to the tree. I watched. I left the sugar water to cool and went to lean in the doorway, watching her stand beneath the lowest branch of the tree.

She would reach and not quite touch. She jumped, with one hand in the air and the other holding the jar to her body. I watched her efforts go from enthusiastic and hopeful to slow and doubting. She stopped. She stared up at the tree, and then she looked back at me. I waved. She came sprinting back.

"You have to do it, Noah!" screamed The Bee. "You have to! I can't reach, and it's almost dusk!" I saw that her eyes were bright with panic.

“What am I supposed to do about it, Bee?” I asked, resisting her frantic tugging on my wrist.

“I don’t know, Noah. But we have to hurry. Hurry. Go!” she yelled in one monotone breath. I choked on a gut laugh and hid my smile, grabbing the whole pot of lukewarm sugar water. I had no idea what to do, but I knew I wanted to avoid an episode worthy of that pile of pink papers. I knew The Bee probably didn’t need another one of those, either.

I walked out to the tree, thinking on the go, and The Bee followed me with the jar. I took it from her and realized a problem. “I can’t climb with my hands full, Bee,” I said.

She looked worried, and I thought fast. “Here,” I said, and I handed her the empty glass jar. “Stand back,” I warned. I backed away from her and lifted up the pot, dumping it over my torso. It soaked me thoroughly—I felt it touch me everywhere, plastering my shirt to my chest, pouring down the backs of my legs, and dripping into my socks. I thought again about how this wasn’t my kid.

“Noah!” she screamed, and I saw her teeth, a smile.

“Quick. The jar,” I called, handing her the empty pot. She traded. I jumped into the tree and climbed, higher and higher until I found a branch that I could rest on. I looked down and waved at The Bee, not sure of the next step.

“So I just wait here, Bee, or what?” I called down, aware that I was asking advice from an eight-year-old, and looking for those teeth again. Just a flash.

“Wait and be quiet!” she stared up at me, stern. We looked at each other in the glow of the sunset for a moment. The Bee broke the silence.

“I have to watch from inside,” she announced, turning to go. I shifted my weight. The tree creaked, and I held still.

“Bee, you’re gonna leave me out here? Are you kidding me?” I called. She stopped and looked back at me.

“They’re shy, Noah. It’s better if it’s just you. I’m going to watch them dance from the window,” she explained. She began to walk again, but she stopped once more. “Be sweet to her, Noah. Tell her that she’s beautiful.”

I watched her disappear into my house and heard the door shut. I shifted my weight in the tree again, and I looked at the horizon. I could only see a little sliver of the sun now. It would be dark soon. I saw the light come on in my room, The Bee’s room. I looked at the empty jar in my hand and took a deep breath of the sweet smell radiating from my clothes and skin. I felt a little cold as the wind hit. I looked around me at the empty tree, at the streetlights behind me, which were coming on soon. I felt a little stupid and a little like a hero. I felt like a stupid hero, like an idiot who was saving people who didn’t deserve to be saved, like my sister, and people who shouldn’t need to be saved, like The Bee.

I thought about what I would tell The Bee, if I would catch her a bug or a tree frog instead. I thought maybe I’d just go tell her that fairies weren’t real, and the sooner she got used to reality the better. I thought maybe I would say I talked to one, one of the light dancers, but couldn’t catch her. I held still so The Bee would see me waiting, and I looked at the yellow light pouring from her window.

Mischief Night

“Drop your shoulders. Chest out,” Mom said when we walked up to the front door. She stared straight ahead at the ornate glass design in her sister’s entryway. She kept her hand on my shoulder, but she looked at the door, silently waiting. I wondered what happened to the woman who sang along to the radio with me just minutes ago. I stood next to her, waiting for my aunt to answer the door with Iris, and smiling because Mom’s thumb pressed my shoulder. From the front it only looked like she had her arm around my shoulder. I knew what I was supposed to, and I did it. I always did it.

This was fall break. Mom picked me up from school on Thursday with the car packed.

“Where’s Dad?” I asked as we pulled onto the interstate, headed north. She even plugged in her iPod—we’d be in the car for hours.

“He can’t come,” she answered. She drove away from the school, and I didn’t know what to say. We had never gone on a trip without him before. I watched the road, looking over at her every few minutes. Her face looked hard. Finally, she saw me looking. “Sing with me,” she said. She turned up the volume on her favorite songs. The same forty or so I had helped her load onto the device when she first got it. We both knew every word by now.

“Where are we going?” I asked eventually, over Steven Tyler’s voice.

“Aunt Carla’s,” she answered. I settled into my seat. Aunt Carla’s meant Iris.

This year fall break was late, and Halloween was on Saturday. Not only did I have to miss trick-or-treating with my actual friends, but I had to sleep in Iris’s room, in a frilly pink twin bed, even though there was an extra guest room. Aunt Carla called it bonding. This year

Mom and Aunt Carla wanted us to play outside all day on Friday. All day. Every time I tried to sneak inside to read in the bedroom, one of them saw me.

“Go back outside,” Aunt Carla said, standing from her seat in the kitchen and walking toward me. My mom turned her head away. I could only see the back of her head, her hair falling over her shoulder.

“Bathroom,” I said, and then I had to actually go up to the bathroom, wait a while, flush the toilet and run the water for a bit. I took my time. Being bored upstairs was way better than Iris’s games.

“Callie, what could you possibly be doing?” Mom called up the stairs, strained and hoarse. Maybe from the singing.

“Just making sure I get off all the bacteria, Mom,” I answered.

“Iris is probably waiting on you,” Aunt Carla said.

That stupid pink rug on Iris’s white tile bathroom floor never seemed more interesting than at the moment I knew they’d never believe I was still washing my hands. The carpet fibers that either waved or lay flat and fraying in the air seemed infinite when I squinted at them, leaning closer, filling my time with anything but leaving. Anything but going back outside. All I wanted to do was sit down, right there, behind that locked door, and wait for Mom to say we could go home.

The rest of the afternoon consisted of imaginary scenarios that Iris dictated. I went back outside to Iris standing with her hip popped out, waiting for me at the end of the aggregate walkway in her pink jacket.

“You disappeared,” she spat. Iris uncrossed her arms to flatten greasy bangs onto her forehead, tight and sleek. Her friend Audra stood next to her, bored, inspecting the split-ends of an identical haircut.

“I had to pee,” I answered. Iris huffed. I just stood. I knew she would tell me what was wrong with what I did. Then, she’d tell me what to do to make up for it. Then she’d just tell me what to do.

“There is no peeing in Peter Pan,” Iris assured me. We had been playing Peter Pan, and I was Peter Pan. I was always the boy because I was tall. Iris was always the best girl. This game involved a lot of holding Iris’s hand. I snuck away when Iris said Peter had to go find Tinkerbell to bring her back to the lost boys’ cabin, a tree Audra hid behind.

“Now you have to crow,” Iris said. Audra giggled. I shot my eyes in her direction. She tried to impress Iris every day—I could tell. She stopped giggling when I looked at her.

“What’s crowing, Iris?” I asked, even though I knew.

She raised her eyebrows and looked at Audra, then back at me. “Peter Pan crows. It’s what he does.” She shifted her weight to pop her other hip.

“Er, er, er,” I crowed.

“Not good enough,” Iris said.

“That was pitiful,” Audra chimed in. I let out a half-hearted crow, twice as loud as the first, but not any more enthusiastic.

“You’re really terrible at this,” Iris sighed. “Now you have to teach me to fly.” Iris put her hands around my arm, tight, and dragged me toward the back of the house, where a swing set always acted as our flying mechanism. For twelve years it had acted as the flying mechanism. It made horrible noises now when we used the swings, and Iris still wanted Peter and Wendy to fly.

Audra followed us, and all I could think about was reading a book, any book, even *Peter Pan*, by the lamp next to my bed.

One flying lesson later, Iris finally said we could go inside. She was getting cold. She sent Audra home and pulled me along with her toward the house.

“What do you want?” Aunt Carla asked when we filed into the kitchen, Iris first. I knew to stay back and be quiet. The more I spoke up, the more a chance there was of Iris punishing me later. “Aunt Sam and I are talking. Make it quick,” Aunt Carla said, even though she and Mom had barely seen us since lunch.

“We want dinner,” Iris said. “Hot dogs,” she specified, looking back at me. I hated hot dogs. At our last family reunion, Iris made me eat them until I threw up.

“I’ll make spaghetti,” Aunt Carla said.

“Hot dogs,” Iris said. She popped her hip out. I looked at my mom, hoping for support, but she was spaced out, staring into a glass of wine, sitting on a barstool. Aunt Carla leaned down, closer to Iris’s face.

“Iris Anna Taylor, don’t speak to me that way,” she whispered, glancing behind her, toward Mom. I waited for Mom to look up. She didn’t even hear it. She swirled her glass a little.

“We want hot dogs, Mom,” Iris continued. Aunt Carla stood back up, crossed her arms, and drew in a sharp breath. She turned to my mother and said, “Hot dogs, Sam?” She waited. Mom looked up slightly.

“Sure,” she answered, and went back to her glass. Iris looked back at me, pretending she was just so excited about hot dogs for dinner. I only ate the buns, two of them, dipped in ketchup, and Mom didn’t say anything like she would have at home. She didn’t even see that I only cut up the hot dog into pieces and moved them around. Eventually, it looked like I’d eaten

most of two hot dogs. Her glass of wine was almost empty, and she traced the purple line inside the glass.

I sat in front of cold hot dog meat and watched my mother watch a wine glass. When the doorbell rang, I was still hungry. It was Audra. She wanted to keep playing, in the dark, in the cold.

“Oh my God, Mom, of course I’m going,” Iris said when Aunt Carla tried to say it was too late. “It’s Friday night,” Iris railed, pulling herself down from the kitchen barstool next to mine, and going for her jacket. I started to inch toward the stairs, envisioning the quiet bedroom.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Iris asked. She looked to Aunt Carla for back up.

“Where are you going, Callie?” asked Aunt Carla without looking up from pulling a bag of trash from the can.

“I’m tired,” I said. I continued moving toward the stairs.

“It’s still early,” Iris said.

“It’s still early,” Aunt Carla repeated, preoccupied.

“Mom?” I asked. I looked at the back of her head. Her back leaned away from me over the counter where she hadn’t touched her own hot dog, but she’d refilled her wine glass. I waited, and she turned slightly, looking at me from the corner of her eye.

“Why don’t you go play? Have some fun,” she said. I stared back at her. She turned back to her wine glass.

“Mom, can’t I go upstairs?” I asked again.

“Play upstairs with Callie, Iris,” Aunt Carla said.

“No,” said Iris.

“Callie, it’s just a little cold air. Go,” said my mother.

“Mom, why?” I asked.

“Your mom’s relaxing. Don’t bother her,” said Aunt Carla over the sound of running water. She rinsed a plate from dinner, and she didn’t hear it when Iris gave me an “ahem” to signify how she was not yet playing because I wasn’t moving quickly enough. Through the glass in the front door, I saw Audra standing, waiting, tapping her foot.

“I think I’ll read. Y’all have fun,” I said without looking at Iris. I turned on my heels and went for the stairs. I didn’t even get to the second step. I stood there with my sneaker on the carpet of step one, my hand on the ball of the banister. Iris caught up with me and grabbed my other hand.

“Why don’t you want to play with us?” she asked. It was a show. I looked at Aunt Carla. She was done now, turning to watch.

“Honey, Iris only wants you to meet her friends. She never gets to see you,” she said.

“Aunt Carla,” I started. I felt Iris’s hand squeeze mine tighter. “I’ll just go to the bathroom first.” Iris let go and ran to the door. I watched her tell Audra. I watched them turn and look at me. I watched them leave the front porch.

“Corbin is out tonight,” Audra said when I finally arrived outside. The bite in the air went through my hat, and I could feel my cold ponytail on my neck. I pulled my jean jacket closer to me.

“Who’s Corbin?” I asked.

“Only the cutest guy in the neighborhood *or* the school,” recited Audra.

“Duh, Callie,” said Iris.

I tried to speak up. I said, “I don’t live here—” Iris turned away from me, facing Audra. I stepped back to let them plot. I knew I’d be given instructions when Iris was ready. I looked back at the house. The light in my mom’s room had come on. I imagined shouting for her or throwing rocks and sticks until she came out to rescue me. I could sleep next to her in the big bed instead of in the frilly pink one. We could just fall asleep without Iris’s stupid sleep machine making rain forest noises in the background. Then I imagined her asleep at the kitchen counter instead, with her hair in her mouth and her forehead on her arm. I imagined her fist wrapped around the neck of the glass.

“Callie,” Iris yanked my jean jacket, pulling me back toward the group. She looked at me with raised eyebrows and continued with, “I said we’re going.” With that, she and Audra were taking off at a fast clip, across the cul-de-sac and in between two houses to cut over to the next street. I followed.

I followed the pink cloud floating through the dark, Iris’s coat, darting left and right. I watched for tree branches and holes at the same time. Ahead of Iris, I could see a still figure and a small orange light, flickering, faint. The closer we got the brighter the light became. Eventually I could see. Corbin was waiting for us underneath a tree in the woods behind one of the older neighborhood houses. The light was the burning end of his cigarette. Now I could never crawl in bed with my mother when we got home. We would smell like it when we left.

“What took you so long?” he asked.

“Can I have one?” asked Audra, pointing to Corbin’s cigarette.

“No way,” Corbin said, and I could tell from the sound of his voice that he thought he was older. Old enough to have a deeper voice. Old enough to know where to get cigarettes.

“What are you? Thirteen?” I asked him.

“Who’s this?” asked Corbin, pointing in my direction.

“My cousin, Callie,” answered Iris. “She has to play with us.” Iris rolled her eyes and waited for Corbin to laugh at me. He didn’t, so she added, “Callie always wants to play the boy in our games.”

“You still play pretend?” he asked. I watched the orange end of his cigarette fall from his hand to the ground, where he tapped the end of it with the toe of his shoe. He tapped, then stopped to check if it was out, then tapped it again. It stayed lit, and I wondered if he’d done this before. He seemed afraid to hurt his shoe.

Audra and Iris looked at each other and started to giggle. I waited to hear what role I’d have to play this time. Since there was an actual boy, I hoped they’d forget me and I could go home.

“We’re ready,” said Iris, stepping up closer to Corbin. She looked back at me and nodded. I stepped closer with her. Three girls in a line stood before a boy awaiting his bidding.

“It’s mischief night,” said Corbin.

“What’s mischief night?” I asked. Iris pinched my arm through my jacket.

“We know what mischief night is,” she retorted. She looked at me with her mouth open. “What do *you* think it is? What if you’re not even right?” Iris went on. She was clever. She didn’t know what it was any more than I did, but she could find out without anyone knowing that. My cousin was mean, but smart.

“Mischief night is the night before Halloween,” started Corbin. “One of us has to do a prank that the rest of us will decide,” he finished. He waited. He was being dramatic, I thought. Iris waited, hip popped, until she was sure he was done, and Audra followed her lead.

“That’s what we thought. Just making sure,” Iris announced. I sighed. She hadn’t known. I knew she hadn’t known. I wondered if my mom was asleep yet.

“So, what do we have to do?” asked Audra. Iris shot her a look, too, but she didn’t say anything.

Corbin looked down at the ground, then up. We made eye contact for just a second. I wondered if he was just as bad as Iris. I wondered if everyone in this neighborhood was like Iris.

“Well?” Iris asked impatiently. “We don’t have all night,” she warned.

“You know that old lady? The one who always wears pajamas?” Corbin continued.

“Oh my God, she’s crazy,” said Audra.

“Who’s she?” I asked. It was a mistake. They just looked at me. Iris put her hand on her forehead like I was giving her a headache.

“Just ignore her,” she told the others. They began to hatch a plan. We would go to this poor woman’s house. We would send one of us up onto her roof with a bucket of water from Corbin’s garage. The others would ring her doorbell to get her to come out of the house. The one of us would dump the water, and then we’d all run or climb or do whatever it takes to make an escape. It would be great. It would be fun. I turned around and started to walk toward home, toward Mom, even toward that pink frilly bed.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Iris raced after me.

“Home,” I said. “I’m going to bed.”

“You are such a baby,” Iris said. I walked. “You’re just scared,” Iris added. Still I walked. “Your mom doesn’t even want you there.” I stopped. I thought of my mother sending me out in the cold. I thought of her staring into her wine glass, letting Aunt Carla feed me hot

dogs. I remembered Aunt Carla said I shouldn't bother her. I turned to face the group. I looked at Iris. Corbin watched me from behind her, and Audra played with her hair again. I followed them.

We trudged down the next street toward Corbin's house. He found a pail, and he filled it with water from the hose his father used for landscaping. I hung back from the rest of the group. I pulled my jacket closer, and I sniffed the collar, searching for the smell of cigarettes. I heard the sloshing water in Corbin's bucket, and I could tell it was heavy from the way he kept switching it from hand to hand, the wire leaving impression on each palm.

Iris and Audra followed him in perfect triangle formation. Iris prattled on in a whisper, trying not to let Corbin forget she was there. After a few minutes, when my fingers felt icy, Corbin stopped in front of a house I'd seen before. Iris always made us pretend this was the evil witch's house in our games. The woman who lived here wore the same thing every day, had a gross outdoor cat, and always seemed to be peering through her window blinds.

"She's gone to bed," whispered Corbin. He set down the bucket and rubbed his fingers together. I thought it made him look evil, but I knew he was only sore from the weight of the bucket.

"How do you know for sure?" I asked. He stood with his arms crossed. I imagined his older brain thinking through the plan in a better way than Iris or Janine ever could, but he wasn't thinking about it the way I would. I knew better than to mention how impossible it was going to be for someone to climb onto the roof and carry the bucket at the same time.

"The lights are all out," whispered Iris. "Even the fake candles in the windows." The windows were dark. She was right. I looked hard to see if any of the blinds were uneven. Maybe she sensed us coming. Maybe she knew this was mischief night. Maybe she was watching without any light at all. I wondered if my mom's window would be dark yet when Iris finally let

us go back. I hoped there would be a light in at least one of the windows when we got back to the house, but I knew there wouldn't be.

I studied the laces of my shoes, and how they were white against my jeans, which looked black in the dark. I waited to hear what the plan would be, but no one was speaking. I waited another moment, and then I looked up to check what was going on. The three of them stared at me. They each had an index finger stuck to the tip of their nose. Corbin, finger on nose, looked down at the bucket, avoiding my face. Iris, though, stared right over her finger at me, with a smile on her face.

"Not it," Iris chanted quietly. It hit me. I was too late. I'd volunteered to carry out mischief night. I knew there was nothing to be done. I thought about turning around. I thought about just walking back to the house. I thought about what Iris said. I thought about how Mom had just stared into her glass before dinner.

"Come on, Iris," I pleaded half-heartedly. I knew she wanted me to anyway. I knew she loved this. "Make the boy. It was his idea," I said. I put up the smallest fight I could. The bigger the fight, the worse this would get. I knew that.

"I can do it," Corbin interrupted. Iris's eyes shot from my face to Corbin's.

"No way! She's it. She lost," Iris declared.

"Well, hurry up," he said. Audra snickered and moved behind Iris. I wondered if they ever had separate thoughts.

"You're the tallest anyway, Callie," Iris said, as if that made sense of this, as if she didn't know I hated being taller than the boys. She knew. I fixed her with a look, a long one. She didn't break my gaze. She just popped that hip out so far that I hoped she'd fall over one day, and that

made me laugh a little. She didn't get it. I walked over to Corbin without looking away from Iris, smiling. I picked up that bucket with both hands. The wire handle was cold and wet.

"I can do it, Callie," Corbin whispered, reaching to take the bucket back. I stepped away from him. He looked at me. "If you want. I will," he said. I looked back at him, stared until he looked away.

I started walking, around the house, looking for the lowest part of the roof. I found one place, where the ground was higher, and an air conditioning unit made for a perfect step. I hoisted the bucket onto the huge, gray metal box. Then I hoisted myself onto it. I picked up the bucket, lifting it over my head, and pushed it over the edge of the roof until it felt steady. I let it rest there, waiting to see if it would stay. I waited for the sound of water lapping gently against the wall of the bucket to slow. I grabbed the edge of the roof with both hands and pushed. When my feet no longer touched the ground beneath me, I swung my long right leg over the edge of the roof. When it was secure, I rolled over onto the roof.

I let myself lay there like that for a second, on this lady's roof, on mischief night. The stars were out tonight because there wasn't much light on in the neighborhood. Philadelphia stars weren't as bad as Philadelphia kids.

A rock came flying over me and landed with a thud somewhere behind the bucket. It rolled down the slant of the roof and fell off into the yard near where I'd climbed. Whoever threw it, I knew Iris was telling me to get a move on. I sat up and grabbed for the bucket. I knew I could never walk across with the weight of the water rocking my balance back and forth. I slid on my butt, one foot away from the bucket. Then I reached over and dragged the bucket toward me so that I could do it all again. The water sloshed out onto the shingles, and my hand got wet. I felt cold, but I kept going.

The back pocket of my jeans caught on a loose shingle, that floppy rough square coming undone in one place but holding tight in another. I tried to wiggle loose from it. I tried to reach behind me to feel the catch. Slowly I picked up one hand from my side and moved it behind me, but I wobbled. My hand came back down next to me with a slap. I tried standing up. I couldn't see over the edge of the roof, so I didn't know how far I could fall. One inch at a time, I straightened my knees until I felt my pants resist. I pulled. I pulled again. I jumped. The shingle came loose, but so did my balance. I came down hard on the roof and started to slide. I kicked and dug my heels into the friction of the shingles. I heard a crash. I felt wet.

I was face flat on the side of the roof. Not so bad. I took a deep breath and thought about home, how I'd be there the day after tomorrow. I'd be back in school on Monday morning, surrounded by my own friends, with my own teacher telling us to take out our pencils. The rough grit of the roof felt wrong on my cheek. I pushed up, and the cold air stung my face. I looked for the bucket. It was gone. There was only a dark trail of water, trickling down the angle of the roof. One leg of my pants was dark too. I could already feel the chill in my feet.

"Great," I said aloud. Iris would kill me anyway. After all this. I crawled, inched, toward the edge of the roof where the prank was supposed to take place. Maybe I could signal to them, call it off. I reached the edge of the roof and saw the pillar of light stretching across the front lawn. I saw the motion in that shadow. She must have heard the crash. I looked for the others, for more orange lights maybe, but I knew they were gone. I knew they'd heard it. I knew Iris was probably in her pink frilly bed by now, or else pestering Corbin to give her more attention.

I felt a hand enclose around my ankle. I almost lost my balance again. I pulled back from peering over the front edge of the house, and I turned slowly to see who was behind me.

“What did you do? The girls ran,” whispered Corbin. He tugged a little on my ankle, and when he saw me look at him, he gave a small wave. He looked terrified, like he could fall at any moment.

“She’s awake,” I told him. He nodded his head and started crawling backward, releasing my ankle. We hugged the roof, looking at each other with panic. He mouthed to me *what do we do?* I shook my head as much as I could without moving my cheek from the side of the roof. His eyes widened. He reached for me. He grabbed my hand, and I jerked back, slapping his arm loudly.

His eyes darted toward the light that bled over the sharp edge of the roof. We froze and listened. Nothing. He mouthed, *Hold my hand*. I rolled my eyes. *No way*, I answered. He didn’t get it. He reached for me again, and I pulled away. He reached again. I tucked my hands underneath me where he couldn’t get to them. He gave up.

After a while, I hadn’t heard anything, and Corbin had been still. “We’ll have to wait until the light turns off,” I whispered. He picked his head up a bit to look over me, checking to see if it was on.

“That could be forever,” he whispered back. I shrugged and settled into the side of the roof. We waited in the quiet. It was cold, and the still wet leg of my pants clung to my skin. I heard him sigh, but I refused to look at him. He was just as guilty as the others. I waited. The light, yellow and faint, still floated up from the front of the house. It cast a strange glow on us. I thought about my mother, how she would pack me up put me in the car right now if she could see me. I wanted to tell her. Maybe she wouldn’t do anything. Maybe she would barely look up from her wine glass. Maybe we *should* get caught. Let the police take us home. Maybe then she’d have to stand up, look at me, say something. Suddenly the light was out.

“Move it,” whispered Corbin, sitting up. I waved him onward. I got onto my butt again and slid, inch by inch, until we got to the spot where I had climbed up. Corbin slid down until his legs dangled over the edge. Then he jumped. I heard the loud bang of his shoes against the metal of the unit. I froze. I waited. I looked back to see if the light was back. Darkness.

“Come on!” I heard Corbin call quietly. I inched, turning over onto my stomach, sliding down until I hung on the roof by my arms. I lowered myself down slowly, waiting to feel my toes hit the top of the air conditioning unit. Instead I felt Corbin’s arms wrap around my waist and lift. I lost my grip on the roof and leaned back. He couldn’t hold me, and we fell with a bang onto the metal top of the unit.

“I’m taller. Why did you do that?” I whispered. Gasping to pull cold air back into my tired lungs, hard with him on top of me. If I could have screamed I would have, but all I wanted was to get away from this place. I wriggled away from Corbin and rolled over the edge of the AC unit. My feet touched grass, finally. I took off running as soon as I felt stable, stumbling at first.

“Wait,” whispered Corbin. I kept running. I hated running. I ran away from the house, away from that bucket and away from Corbin. I ran slowly because I didn’t know where I was. “Slow down,” Corbin whispered, catching up to me.

“Go home,” I said, without looking back at him. I kept walking, weaving through trees, trying to get to the next street, the next house, anywhere.

“I went up there to save you,” Corbin whispered. “How about a thank you?”

“Thank you?” I stopped. I turned to look at him. “It was your idea. It was your bucket. It’s your neighborhood. I’m going home.” I turned, and kept walking.

“Don’t you do mischief night where you’re from?” I heard Corbin whisper after me. I kept walking, and even though my leg was still wet and my hands were still cold. I found my way back to the house. When I went around back, Iris was waited for me right inside the door.

“You’re so in for it,” Iris whispered in the dark of the kitchen. “You could have gotten us all in so much trouble. I don’t even know why you were there.” She popped that hip again, and crossed her arms over her pink jacket. She smelled like cigarettes.

“Shut up, Iris,” I said, and I tried to push past her to get to the stairs.

“Just wait ‘til tomorrow. Your mom won’t even look at you,” she threatened. I stopped. I looked at her and realized she was so short, so little, so mean. I had been looking down on her all weekend, and I didn’t even realize how great that was.

“I’ll tell *your* mother you were smoking cigarettes,” I said. I pushed her out of my way. I heard her make an angry “ahem” sound. I felt her tugging at my jacket, trying to stop me from climbing the stairs. I let it slide off my arms as I walked up step after step, and I looked back to see Iris on her butt at the foot of the stairs, clinging to my jacket. I ran up the rest of them.

I didn’t go to Iris’s stupid pink room. I went down the hall to my mother’s bedroom, and I slipped in quietly. I peeled off my wet jeans and socks, leaving them on the floor. I climbed into the giant bed next to my mom’s sleeping figure.

“Mom, let’s go home tomorrow,” I whispered. But she was asleep and didn’t hear me. I hummed Aerosmith to myself until I fell asleep.