

Junctions

by

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ABSTRACT

Junctions is a story collection about people at a crossroads, people who crave guidance from an absent parent or partner, people who don't know how to make their next move. Many of the stories are set in and around Charleston where characters push back against having Southern traditions dictate the way they live. Ghosts and spirits roam the pages, helping or trapping the loved ones they are haunting. Elaborate meals, simple comfort food, and even the ceremonial sacrifice of a pelican carry the burden of bringing characters back from the brink of self-inflicted madness and isolation. The complexities of mother-daughter relationships are picked apart and cobbled back together over and over. In *Junctions* the only way for the characters to reach the next step is to wade through the toughest parts of being themselves.

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CHAPTER 1

THE LAST BITE

Karl was consumed by two thoughts: he wanted to eat pelican meat and he wanted to get back together with his ex-wife. It was because of these goals he found himself in a shell pink hotel looking out his balcony window as the sun rose over Folly Beach, the Atlantic crashing gently against the sand four floors beneath him. Binoculars raised to his eyes, glasses perched on his forehead, Karl watched for pelicans. The Folly Pier jutted off into the sea just to his left. His magnified vision afforded him the sight of fishermen setting up around the oversized gazebo two hundred yards out into the water. Water that stretched eventually to Africa. To Egypt.

He only had to wait ten minutes before he saw them. They swooped in from his right in a perfect “V” formation. As if performing just for Karl a few broke away from the group and dropped into a dive. Fast, barely creating ripples, the birds broke the ocean’s surface, disappearing and reappearing seconds later, the tailfin of a fish flipping around their bills.

Satisfied for the first time in what felt like months, Karl retreated to take a shower. As the hot water hit his slightly balding head he thought about Lindsay. Their reunion didn’t feel impossible to him though they hadn’t been married for seven years. He imagined them going to yoga together, making an effort to do something important to her. He could conjure the image of her lithe body easily, toned and cared for with fifteen years of practice. He felt himself getting excited. He thought of her stretched across the mat in pigeon pose, then recalled her complaining of her leg falling asleep underneath her. He imagined her body weight stretching further and further forward over her shin, the blood flow cut off at

the hip. Would her muscles numb and rip? Picturing torn and snapped tendons Karl turned off the shower and toweled away his desire.

He wasn't even supposed to be in South Carolina. He was supposed to be in Egypt. His research grant application to the head of the History Department had been laid out clearly. He wanted to taste Great White Pelican meat from the Nile, to inhabit the lives of Ancient Egyptians through food, and to write a book about it. *Despite the fact that pelicans are currently protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty of 1918, the current Great White Pelican population holds 75,000 pairs capable of breeding. For this reason, I believe the value of the research would be worth the death of one of these magnificent birds.* As he turned the packet in he imagined standing next to Lindsay at the book launch, placing a bracelet of bejeweled pelicans around her wrist.

Only three days after he turned in his application he was called into the department head's office. He was told—not gently—that it had been ten years since his last book and four years since his last scholarly article had been published and why would anyone read a book about eating penguin meat? “I don't want PETA on our asses,” he said.

Karl didn't correct him. He looked at a pile of paper on the department head's desk: student evaluations. The department head touched the edge of the pile. “We've been thinking, Karl. We've gotten quite a few complaints about your classes, the meandering lectures, the cancellations...”

The silence in the stuffy office seemed to get thicker as Karl realized he was being fired. *Fired.* The air wouldn't enter his lungs. The department head knitted his eyebrows together in faux concern. “You'll bounce back,” he said. “Take some time off. Get some rest.”

Back in his office Karl stared at the crowded the walls: keys to hieroglyphs, maps of

archeological sites, a framed papyrus scroll, his Masters degree, an old picture of Lindsay. He half-heartedly flung some books in a crate. As he packed Karl slipped into thinking about the first time he saw a pelican. It was on a family vacation to Charleston when he was twelve. There were Brown Pelicans all around Folly Pier. He recalled them taking turns diving into the ocean at sunrise. Sometimes when the angle was just right he could see the silhouette of a fish flapping in the basin-like mouth of the pelican as it flew away. They were skilled and precise hunters, perfectly capable of getting *exactly* what they wanted.

Karl could afford to drive to Charleston. He could pull from savings to stay at the beach. He could come back tan, an adventurous slayer and devourer of pelican. A quick web search told him that the Brown Pelican had been downgraded from “Endangered” to “Least Concern” by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. He could eat Brown Pelican instead of Great White. *The Egyptians were innovators*, he thought to himself. *I'd fit right in.*

After his shower Karl ate breakfast at the Starfish Grill. He sat outside so he had a view straight down the wooden planks of the pier. He watched the birds and took notes. He took notes on how they flew, the way they tucked their wings and plunged beneath the surface. He made lists of possible places to find them at night, maybe the maritime forest? A sandbar? The lighthouse? Could he lure them into a trap with fish? But he had never fished before and it seemed unlikely he could out-fish a pelican. He poked at his greasy eggs benedict and thought about the stuffed grape leaves and coriander sauce he could be eating instead.

When he had been so sure of his trip to Egypt he had researched prayers to Sobek,

god of the Nile River. His hieroglyph, a sunning crocodile, represented pharaonic power, fertility, masculinity. Some of the prayers invoked the Nile, its flooding banks that brought irrigation and life to the Valley. Some asked for protection against the Nile, the predators, the flooding that could sweep away homes. He liked that duality—ferocity to attack or protect—a crocodile god that was governed only by his own impulses. He prayed to Sobek over his breakfast for some of that aggression, some of those wild urges that would pull him out of the world of academia and into the wanton world of a hunter.

He wandered on the beach when the sun was too high for the pelicans. He dug his hairy toes into the sand, threw shells into the water. The humidity made him feel grimy and the salt made his skin feel stretched too tight. He headed back to the hotel room and allowed himself a mini or two from the fridge. Two turned into too many and he called Lindsay, who wasn't at home. He left her a confusing message giving hints about where he was and what he was doing. He hoped he sounded coy. He hoped she was hooked.

Deep in his booze-addled subconscious he dreamed he was Sobek. His eyes regarded the desert around him down a long, green, tooth-filled snout. Isis looked at him coolly out of kohl-lined eyes from her place on the bank. He was hungry and felt how easy it would be to move through the water towards her. The water around him was penetrated by sunlight. He lowered his body so that only his eyes were sticking out above the muddy, warm river. As he moved towards Isis a Great White Pelican prepared to dive above him. The huge yellow bill was aimed at his head and he wanted to dive to protect his walnut-sized crocodile brain but the Nile seemed to peel away from him like the parting of the Red Sea. He was left exposed. The bird tucked its wings—a nine and a half foot span when fully expanded—into its body and plummeted.

The next day was unproductive, as well. Karl couldn't collect his thoughts, tributaries breaking off and running away from him. He wandered around feeling an increasing pain and disappointment in simply being himself. His pale arms and legs seemed useless in this land of tan surfers and women in bikinis. He spent two hours underneath the pier sitting in the cooler sand and shade, staring into the repeated pattern of slats and angles and screws and legs that held the whole thing up. Two hundred yards of it laid out in front of him. The pier seemed to mock him with its order and precision; even as it aged and fought hurricanes it held itself up, marched out into the chaos of the ocean.

His dinner that night consisted solely of drinks from the hotel bar. He blabbered bits of his story to an off duty concierge whose face held the tension of wanting to make a guest happy and the exhaustion of already having done so for eight hours. The concierge didn't quite follow all of what Karl was saying but in an effort to get Karl to leave him alone he told him about Laird, a retired shrimper who hung out by the Circle K. "For a small fee he'll probably help you out," the concierge said. What the concierge did not say was that he often sent tourists Laird's way. Anyone looking for a bit of *local flavor* as they all called it, people who wanted to see the unruly side of the beach town. Usually Laird just took them to some dive bars and drank on their dollar. He thought it might make Laird happy to have someone who was actually looking for something a little more involved.

Karl teetered back to his room, happy enough from the rum and conversation. He hadn't really spoken to anyone in three days. He fell asleep into the same dream as the night before. The water curled around his snout. The razor sharp bill hovered above him.

A piercing sensation in his temples woke him up and an immediate need to take action had him on his feet with stars shooting behind his eyelids. He might be a crocodilian

hunter by night but by day he was out of his element, a man not of the water but of the office.

Laird was easy to find. He leaned against the door of the Circle K so people had to ask him to move to go in, loitering at its finest. Everything he wore looked sun-faded to the point of nearly crumbling. His tan legs ended in gnarled toes nested in weathered leather flip-flops.

“Laird?”

“Yup,” he threw back the last of whatever was in his brown bag and said, “I feel like walking. You want to walk?”

Karl trailed behind him as Laird headed off towards the beach. Laird seemed happier once they hit sand. He told Karl all kinds of things about Folly: that in the 70s he bought his beach house for only \$17,000, that the beachfront kept falling into the ocean, that the Charleston Harbor was dredged and new sand dumped, and that the wind and tide and storms dragged the sand away again and again. “That’s how I want to go,” Laird said, “in my little shack as it gets sucked out to sea in the swirling, roiling, boiling, angry Atlantic.” After a pause he squinted out to sea and said, “So that’s my thing. Tell me yours.”

So Karl told him about his mission to eat a Brown Pelican. “For research, of course,” he made clear. “I’m writing a book on it.” He didn’t mention Lindsay. He thought of Isis’ eyes in his dream, her crimson lips pursed. Anyway, Laird didn’t care about the reasons; he only wanted an adventure. And money.

“I’m thinking three hundo...and a taste of that bird, yeah? We can go out in my boat. I’ve got plenty of net. Bring coffee and whiskey, will you?” His nicked nails dragged

across the dry skin on his arm. “This ain’t exactly legal. Why don’t we take off from the Lighthouse end? Less traffic, no police...you know this place is crawling with them ever since they made it illegal to drink on the beach. Damn tourists ruined it for everyone.”

They walked out to the Lighthouse and Karl slipped easily into the role of student as Laird told him about his home. They walked through the maritime forest that grew down into the water—skeletal trees, dead from a salt overdose. The Lighthouse was just offshore and only accessible by boat, though rocks and disintegrating jetties made the trip dangerous. Sharks were often spotted in the choppy water. The current was strong and an old, weathered sign twisted by strong winds warned against swimming. “People have died,” Laird said. Then, “Meet me down here at 4:30 tomorrow morning.” He walked off.

Sober and focused in his room that night, Karl set up his notebook for the next day. He could only find a red pen, a good sign perhaps since ink mixed with a kind of gum and red oxide was usually reserved for hieroglyphs pertaining to special titles, headings, and magical events. He set up sections: *The Catch*, *The Kill*, *The Preparation*, *The Feast*, *Conclusions and Analysis*. He watched the moon over the water from his balcony. The moon, though not full, was close and bright. Another good sign. Khonsu, the Egyptian moon god was known to help the pharaoh vanquish his enemies and remove their innards so the pharaoh could use them for various healing and fertility rituals. How nice if eating a pelican offered similar curative traits. Hopefully the sight of blood and guts wouldn’t make him ill. He squeezed in another heading next to *The Preparation* adding *The Debris*. Khonsu also protected travellers in the night and perhaps, since the sun would not be up by 4:30 the next morning, he would protect Karl, a weary and heart-sore traveller. With these dramatic and

self-satisfied thoughts in his mind Karl fell asleep easily and did not dream.

The next morning Karl stumbled through deep, soft sand in the barely graying light of dawn. He could just make out Laird's form waving from the deck of a small shrimp boat whose motor gurgled, woeful, in the surf.

"Got the coffee and hooch?" Laird asked by way of greeting. He pulled Karl up the last few rungs of the ladder. Karl handed him a paper cup of coffee and a couple Jim Beam minis. He checked the sky. The moon was still there though not as bright as it had been. Khonsu was usually depicted wearing the moon on his head and Karl looked just beneath the moon where Khonsu's body might be and nodded, grateful. "Money?" Laird asked. Karl handed him a fistful of ATM twenties. "I'm not going to count it," Laird said. "You seem alright." Karl gave him the same kind of nod he had just given Khonsu.

It was humid and the air clung close as they set out for a sand bar half a mile from shore. Karl flipped open his notebook and took note of the conditions. The pelicans slept standing up and as the boat pattered up to the sand bar many were just beginning to stir, shaking out their wings, and shifting their weight from one leg to the other. Karl thought it was a disturbingly human action.

The waves tilted the boat back and forth with increasing insistence the closer to the sandbar they got. Karl closed his eyes trying to imagine the relative calm of the Nile, the smooth motion of rowing out into the wide river's center. He pictured palm fronds casting shadows from high above him. He might even be lucky enough to see a hippo yawning big, showing its pink mouth and huge teeth. The slight burn of briny ocean water splashing his

face brought him back to this side of the Atlantic.

As the sky lightened to blue, then orange, then pink, the pelicans took to the air. They swooped lazily at first as if warming up: stretch, pull, release. Karl was reminded of Lindsay practicing yoga. Then the formations tightened to straight lines and they began fishing in earnest. Plummeting birds splashed around the boat. If they were successful in their catch they shot back up into the sky, gleeful, powering through the thick air with the flopping fish in the basin of their mouths. If they came up empty the birds spent a few seconds bobbing on the water, riding the current, preparing for another attempt.

“Those are the ones to go after,” Laird said, unfurling a net. “We’ll throw together. Grab this side.” Karl was surprised at the shift in Laird’s demeanor, business-like, unaffected by the two minis he had already consumed. “Swing wide...count of three.” With precision and purpose they cast the net, Karl letting Laird’s practiced throw guide his own. A pelican was trapped underneath. They hauled the bird up onto the deck and it sat still, wings tucked, unused to being hunted. Its eyes, dark brown with golden yellow flecks, caught the light of the sun as it broke fully over the horizon. The bird, baleful and frank, tilted its head here and there flashing the reflection of the bright orange sphere that had chased away the misty dawn.

The eyes and their unending symbolic possibilities ran through Karl with dizzying speed, too fast to process. He was interrupted by Laird proffering up the bone handle of his knife saying, “Your kill if you want it.” The Eye of Providence on top of the Great Pyramid of Giza fell to him. As did the eyes of Isis. As did the blood-shot eyes of Laird. As did the eyes of the pelican.

Karl found himself angry at Lindsay. He blamed her for the whole situation, his

decline at work, the deadlines he missed because they were fighting, and now this: to have to kill this beautiful damn bird because, after everything, he still had to have her back. Even with the worst parts of marriage—sexual frustration, boredom, out of hand emotions that led them both to want to destroy or be destroyed. A craving for the eruption of status quo so deep he would think *let me get a DUI, let me get cancer, let me murder the next person who bothers me, let me set the house on fire*. But she always made him act, pushed him forward. He feared the inert quality of a life without love.

Karl grabbed the pelican's head and swept the blade of Laird's knife through its flesh. That was it. Its head flopped heavy on its useless neck and the smell of salt and iron bloomed around them. Blood mixed with puddles of seawater on the deck then swirled away. Karl watched the feathers becoming heavy with blood, sticking to the deck, no longer capable of fighting gravity. He wondered if its hollow bones were filling with blood too.

“Can't wait to taste it,” Laird said. “Can't imagine it'll be good.”

They decided to prepare and eat the bird at Laird's house. “I can go at it kind of like a chicken,” Laird said. “No problem.” But when Karl saw the backyard with its sandy fire pit, camp grill, and picnic table he was struck by the sacred feel of the place, its sense of rituals come and gone.

“Let me dress the pelican,” Karl said.

“You've done birds before?”

“Nope.”

“Okay. I'll build a fire, make us a little spit to roast him on.”

Karl started with what he felt to be the obvious: the feathers. The quills were thicker

than he expected, the barbs clotted and wide. Little bits of down and fluff stuck to his clothes and glasses. It took him half an hour to pluck them all from the bird which weighed around eight pounds. The bill looked huge against the nubbed brown skin. With Laird's knife he sawed against the wings, first stretching them out fully to their four-foot span. The Brown Pelican was smaller than the Great White and for this he was thankful. He chopped at the head, moving the bill out of the way again and again as the natural tilt of its neck bowed forward as if trying to maintain *any* dignity. The feet were easy after that. He slit the body open and cut down the back to remove the entrails, the lungs, the stomach, the liver—in Ancient Egypt these would have gone into canopic jars after they dried. Karl always remembered the first definition of a canopic jar he had read. It said the jars were made to “preserve the viscera” of the dead. *Viscera*, a simple word for entrails but so much more intense: the heart, the pith, the soul, the very essence and substance of the person. The heart would be dried and placed back in the body. As if to season for taste the Egyptians packed the dead bodies of their loved ones with wine and spices and salt. Miming these movements, thinking about them in the context of thousands of years made Karl's hands tingle with excitement as he slid the bird onto the spit and stoked the fire.

By noon Laird and Karl sat at the picnic table watching each other to see who would take the first bite. Laird popped open cans of Miler Lite for both of them. “We may need a chaser,” he said.

Karl approached the plate of pelican meat before him with the solemnity of a man tasting the poisoned food of a king. With effort and great seriousness he pushed all thought aside and took a bite of the oily dark meat in front of him. It tasted nothing like chicken as he expected, as research suggested; he had to work hard not to spit out the fishy, slick piece

of meat. It did not have the subtle hint of sea like a scallop or the pleasant texture of white fish. The brine seared in his sinuses. He saw immediately it must have been a food eaten out of desperation and necessity while royalty in palaces had their fill of pig and cow and goat meat. This was a food eaten by peasants and slaves—a tired man, worked to the bone brought this bird home to his family, to children who were too skinny. They would clamor for the meat and even though the Great White Pelican could weigh up to thirty pounds there would never be enough.

White-hot shame tore through Karl. There was nothing here that would get Lindsay back. He craved the comfort of reading a book on the couch with her, the way she pushed her toes under his legs to keep the warm, the way she sighed when she read something she loved. The torment of memory dazed him.

Laird pushed the meat around his plate, quiet for the first time since they had met. He had only managed a nibble. Karl took the meat from both plates and piled it onto his own. While Laird drank down beer after beer with practice Karl forced himself to eat every bit of the bird before him. And last, the heart, which he popped into his mouth in one bite and swallowed without chewing.

Laird stared. “Well, shit, dude.” His eyes were bleary. “That was crazy. We’ll do it again sometime, yeah?”

Karl just waved over his shoulder and walked off towards the pier feeling the pelican heavy in his stomach. He was exhausted. He sat down with his back against a sand dune. He listened to the breeze play through the marsh grass above his head and watched a surfer paddling out against the incoming waves. Even watching the man felt like an exertion and Karl closed his eyes, face tilted to the sun.

CHAPTER 2
REGARDING YOUR WORK

Los Angeles, April 14th, 1949

Dear Mrs. Eames,

I'm going to call you Ray because after seeing your paintings in New York I feel like I know you. I've had plenty of time to think about the contents of this letter since I saw your pieces ten years ago when I was on my honeymoon and newly in love and in your paintings I saw hope. Women swirling through blocks of colors at ease in their naked skin. One even seemed not to have shaved her legs. My sexual experience had been so limited up until that trip that the women blooming on the canvas, I was certain, were for me and me alone. Can I tell you I liked your work better than the Picassos?

But the point is I'm upset with you, Ray. The way a beautiful, spoiled, little girl is upset when something doesn't go her way. Which is to say I know how lucky I am to have seen those paintings but I'm not willing to accept the reality of an adult world that does not contain more of them. You stopped painting. And just as your paintings were a personal caress the absence of new work is a personal affront. Did you let Charles change you? It seems to me his interests consumed yours. Not that your furniture is not wonderful because it is. I've asked for your DCW chairs for Christmas three years in a row to no avail. My husband thinks they are ugly, the molded plywood. I think they would look lovely around my dining room table. The curves remind me of your naked ladies. But this goes to the point I was trying to make—my husband has changed me in more ways than I can count. It's not that he's so strict. We go out for drinks, we belong to a bowling league. It's that I can't identify with the women in your paintings anymore. I realized it when I saw pictures of them in an article about the MOMA. I

couldn't feel it anymore. I even took my clothes off, slip and all and looked at them again. I was sprawled on the couch and I wanted to feel the lithe joy of your ladies, the textural contentment of upholstery against bare skin, a sunbeam to warm my back. It didn't work. Still in my core I felt ordinary and I worried about the mailman coming to the door or a neighbor stopping by. I was wary of so much skin and I thought my husband might be upset if he knew this is what I did with my days.

I heard the Eames Office hires housewives. A friend of mine told me about it at lunch. Of course she, like my husband, was not excited about it. He doesn't want me to work and she thinks you're destroying the home by taking women out of it. She's not like us. At least, she's not like I want to be. I'm probably much more like her than I realize but I've been waking up mornings thinking about walking into the office and seeing you in person. And what would I say? And what would I wear? And I dream of talking you into painting again. And I dream that you ask me to model for you.

But I'm too skittish to come to the office. Nervous of the certainty you'll be there. Ray, will you meet me on May 1st at two in the afternoon at the Polo Lounge? You may have been there before. In the Beverly Hills Hotel? Illicit liaisons, potential celebrity sightings, high tea, women in jewels before dark—I hope to see you from across the room. I'll be wearing a peacock colored hat.

Sincerely,

Anna Kline

CHAPTER 3

AT THE JUNCTION OF LOVEBIRDS AND ALFA ROMEOS

Chase fancied himself a Southern gentleman as his father, Alan, before him, his grandfather before him, etc. He wore pastel colors, seersucker when appropriate; he had many bowties. He had on every level *inheritance*. He had on every level *boredom*. He also had his real estate license.

Despite these ingrained allegiances Chase was wary when, after another break up with another woman with a perfect tan and plenty of pearls who chased him not necessarily for his money but for his surname, his father had said, “We’re having the governor’s family over for brunch on Saturday. You should be there. His daughter is your age.”

The word “arranged” seemed to swirl around them. His father wouldn’t say something so trite as “It’s time you settled down,” but there it was. He and this woman whose name was not even mentioned would be the newest power couple in South Carolina. He’d be pushed to run for local office, for governor, and on; they would be a dynasty political and powerful, expected to carry on familial traditions and policies, expected to bear children blonde and sharp-witted and dressed in bright suits and Lily Pulitzer.

His parent’s house on the Battery was exactly as he expected on Saturday morning. The doors and windows were thrown open, delicate white curtains waving in the sea breeze. The Charleston harbor looked like lapis and the far-off growl of jet ski motors lazed in like the buzz of a fly. His mother floated around in a Chanel skirt suit sipping on a mimosa and straightening pictures. His father was probably still upstairs; he would wait until the guests had arrived to come down, looking harried as if he had better things to do with his morning than brunch with the governor. Leapfrogging from one power play to the next, his father

wouldn't bow to anyone.

Chase kissed his mom on the cheek and poured himself a drink while she tugged on his bowtie. "My handsome boy," she said and floated off again to check on the table settings. He was alone by the window when he saw the town car pull up. The driver got out, opened the back door. The governor heaved himself out, followed by his wife dressed in the same suit as his mom but in a different color. Last, the daughter. She was beautiful, tall, wearing a red dress with a neckline too low for daylight. It reached down to the middle of her calves but a side slit reached all the way back up her thigh. He still didn't know her name.

"Pretty isn't she?" his mom appeared by his side.

"What's her name again?" Chase asked.

"Hmm. I want to say Claire? Or maybe Amanda? You know, hon, I can't quite remember."

"Alright. That's going to do it for me, Mom."

"So you like her then?" She had just noticed the governor's wife's suit and her eyes narrowed a bit. She took an unladylike gulp from her mimosa.

"How would I know? I mean that I'm leaving. This is so archaic. Did no one think to ask her name?"

Chase heard the doorbell echoing through the house just as he slammed the back door.

Sophie was already awake in her sheets that smelled like sun-warmed marsh grass when the hens started clucking around in the yard. Sliding out of her bed, Sophie began her

morning rituals, focusing on the quiet. Her feet only whispered against the hardwood floor and she tiptoed around boards she knew would creak. She didn't slam the skillet of eggs and bacon; she didn't percolate coffee but instead used a French press, sending the sieve into the muddy brew after exactly four and a half minutes. She left her boots at the bottom of the porch steps so the first sounds they made were only the sigh of damp earth receiving her body weight. All this so she could listen through the open windows to the breeze in the trees, the hens, the mourning doves, the red-wing blackbirds whose wings flashed ruby and gold, and the variegated lovebirds, her favorite anomaly. The lovebirds were a population of detritus, of pets released into the wild, of defunct zoos. In her little corner of the world they thrived.

If she walked out past the gardens towards the creek she could listen to the subtle sounds of a changing tide. What does a sunrise sound like? For years she'd tried to write it down; now she just listened.

Twenty minutes later she would turn around and face her house. She thought it agreeable. It was painted pale yellow and the porch was white with delicate green vines running up the posts. These were morning glories with large periwinkle petals opening to the dew and closing again as soon as the sun hit them. An antique boot brush in the shape of a hedgehog sat beside the door. In her front yard was an old car, which hadn't run for thirty years.

On graduating from college Sophie and her brother, Alan, had both been given Alfa Romeos. She didn't feel pride, couldn't access the desire she saw in Alan's open face or the jealousy in her friends'. Instead she moved out to the country and turned that fancy car into a planter, the hood and trunk permanently popped and full of topsoil, her first vegetable

garden. When the black-eyed peas grew to nearly strangle the car she transplanted them into a freshly tilled patch of dirt and filled the hood with red cabbage seeds and her little farm began.

Sophie lived an hour outside of Charleston, close to the family, the money, the privilege, the house on the Battery—all neutralized by the black soil that clung to her hands, her knees, her hair. Physical toil, dirt under her nails, the way the shell of a greasy bean broke between her teeth, the mice her dog left on the porch, she basked. Alan ebbed away. Alan who took perfect care of his Romeo, who took over the practice, who took the family name even further into Charleston social circles, who took and took and took. If she did think of him, their childhood, she could deflect: maybe he had just been curious not malevolent. Maybe he couldn't help it. In college she thought he was the reason she wasn't attracted to men so she tried women but she wasn't attracted to them either.

Chase had not expected to run having never ignored his father so flagrantly. It put him on edge and he retreated to his favorite restaurant to eat comfort food and sip bourbon. The waiter, young and excited, set a plate of hoppin' johns down in front of him and talked about the importance of the rice coming from local, heritage seeds. "We only use Carolina Golden rice. If we did it right the dish before you will taste just like it did one hundred years ago."

"Is that right?" he asked and looked hard into the dish of black-eyed peas and slender grains of rice, a little bit of green onion, some garlic? A stiff bay leaf. He strained to glean the shapes of the waiter's history lesson from the steam. Wisps and vapors,

suggestions and spirits. He thought of ancestors, took another sip of bourbon, and hoped they had not all been bullies.

“Carolina Golden was nearly extinct if you can imagine,” the waiter said. Allowing a beat of silence for Chase to think about such a horrible thing the waiter then asked, “Another Dickel Rye?”

Chase nodded and took a bite. It wasn’t New Years but he needed the luck, not collards for prosperity but certainly hoppin’ johns for good fortune. He needed something new. Texture. Chase chewed each bite slowly, respectfully. People care about things, he thought to himself, feeling deliciously morose. What had he ever done of his own volition? He thought about his place in his father’s structured world and stared out the window at the greenhouse behind the kitchen. It was probably full of rare seeds, plants nearly wiped out from the world, tiny green tufts popping out of black soil, survival, history, preservation, inheritance not financial but cultural.

His cell phone buzzed against the polished wood tabletop. DAD flashed across the screen. He watched until the voicemail icon appeared. Then a text from MOM. *Where are you, hon?* He imagined their lies, explaining away his absence. He knew his dad could lie and lie well. He knew the governor’s daughter would walk away from that brunch feeling she had done something wrong, feeling she was somehow the reason Chase hadn’t shown.

He took another bite of the hoppin’ johns and closed his eyes, willing the luck to take hold, feeling the warmth of the simple dish join the warmth of the bourbon and nestle inside him. For the first time in years he thought of his Aunt Soph, the little paper packets of seeds she used to send on his birthday, her neat writing in pencil across the front with the name of the plant and a simple, “Have a happy day.”

Sophie was watching an afternoon thunderstorm from her porch when she was startled by an Alfa Romeo, same make and model as her own, pulling into the front yard. Though it was only around three in the afternoon it felt like twilight. A young man with Alan's full, dark eyebrows and furrowed forehead hopped out and ran through the rain, high-stepping, trying to keep his feet out of puddles. Sophie rocked on her porch swing sipping iced tea.

"Hey, Aunt Soph," the man said as if they'd spoken the day before. She hadn't seen her nephew since he was eight though he must be somewhere around thirty now. Same cheeks, boyish.

"Chase," she said. She did not get up off the swing, let him stand in front of her dripping. "Driving your dad's car, I see."

"He gave it to me after I graduated college." He shifted foot to foot, tossed his dripping hair out of his eyes.

She rattled the ice in her empty glass.

"I need to stay awhile," Chase said. His voice boomed on the little porch, trapped around them by the rain and humidity. It was a demand and it embarrassed him. He should have asked.

Sophie stared. She noted his Italian leather shoes spattered with mud, the coral polo shirt with its Ralph Lauren insignia. Wouldn't he miss his posh apartment and nights out downtown? It could be a punishment, proof of what life looked like without the money, without Alan's approval. That seemed likely though she didn't like the idea of popping into

Alan's mind even for that. She thought possessively of her plants and hens and birds and dirt, all at risk after so many years of security. She needed a few minutes, a little space to think. She got up and walked inside letting the screen door slam though she left the big door open.

Chase hesitated in the doorway, her actions, to a Southerner, a sure way of telling him to fuck off. She didn't think of family like most Southerners did. It was something his mother never failed to mention if Sophie came up in conversation, an unforgivable trait. "She must feel so alone, bless her heart" his mother would say, shaking her coiffed hair. His father didn't say much about her at all, which is why Chase had to be there. By disliking his father Sophie had already proved her character to him, proved that she would not be bullied. She was his chance to have folks—not just the people related to him by blood, not just the relatives who gave him his name—but folks. He clomped into the house feeling like an interloper, nervous and wanting.

The radio reported the day's tide table: *Today the sun rose at 6:54 am and sunset will be at 6:12 pm. The moon rose at 10:03 am and will set at 11:39 pm. The first low tide was at 5:17am and the next low tide will be at 5:35 pm. The first high tide was at 11:28 am and the next high tide will be at 11:52 pm...*

"What do you want to drink?" Sophie asked popping her head around the kitchen corner. "We're not doing whatever this is sober. Your mama got you drinking sherry? That woman and her sherry." Sophie's eyebrows, noticeably unwaxed, were raised close to her hairline, her forehead an ocean of wrinkles.

“Whiskey?” Chase asked. Two tumblers full of silky amber appeared on the coffee table. He took a sip. “What brand is this?” It was unfamiliar, caramel but burning.

“I trade a man down the road veggies for it.” She threw back the whiskey looked him right in the eyes and said, “Tell me what this visit is about. No bullshitting.”

Chase choked, a fire in his throat, and sputtered out, “I’m running away.” And Sophie laughed because her nephew looked ridiculous dripping wet and scared and because she was lonely and because she hadn’t spoken to anyone she was blood to in far too long. She reminded herself again that this was Alan’s son, that Alan could show up anytime to snatch him back. She shouldn’t get attached or expect Chase to be loyal to her.

“Can’t stay without working,” she said and Chase was relieved. Quid pro quo, an integral part of how he was raised.

“Greasy beans and corn are going in this week,” she said. “Okra and radishes are coming out.” It was late April and Chase tried to sear the date and plants into his memory, eager as he was to begin learning. He imagined casually quoting the planting calendar at home, a farmer’s almanac in the flesh. Sophie poured them another round of shots and asked Chase easy questions about his favorite foods and books and music. She didn’t recognize much of what he said but in the lull of unstrained conversation and whiskey they passed their first night together. The closer he felt to her, she thought, the easier it would be to find out what Alan’s role in all this was.

Last season’s greasy bean seeds had been stored in the cool, dry darkness of her pantry for the last year. Kneeling in a dirt patch tilled and weeded a few days before, she reached into a sack and pulled out a handful turning them back and forth, letting the

morning sun glint off the milky latte color of the speckled surfaces; she babied them. She was sweating though it wasn't too hot out. Probably last night's whiskey. Only silence from the guest room when she ate breakfast and the house remained quiet now. She allowed herself a small smile, pride for not being as hungover as Chase. She'd thought about waking him up but couldn't bear the idea of all the noise he would make while she snuck around her own house. She didn't consider that he might not be on farm time, that eight in the morning wasn't late.

Chase jerked himself awake and looked at the clock on his phone, ignoring the missed calls from DAD. His head pounded. It was already 9:30 and when he rolled over to look out of the window he could see the bouncing rim of Sophie's hat working in the garden. "Shit." He changed into some jeans and a t-shirt he'd brought in his overnight bag, left in the car until late last night. He stumbled down to the kitchen, found coffee in the French press and slurped it, grateful, too queasy to eat.

Sophie looked up as the screen door banged open and shut. He could stay for months and she wouldn't be used to the glimpses of Alan's face. Chase's was a little softer but had the same structure. Maybe the softness was youth. She tried not to compare Chase's squinting, knotted look to the look on Alan's face as he touched her, his focus, his sour breath.

"Morning," she said.

"What are we doing?" he answered and she showed him.

The soil was damp from the rain the day before and the seeds looked like jellybeans

nestled in their holes. He covered them, careful not to pack the dirt on top too tight. They worked the patch, which had had broccoli in it the year before, until noon. She told him about crop rotation, about the beans refreshing the nitrogen content of the soil. He had mostly forgotten his hangover until she asked, “Lunch?” and a deep hunger tackled his intestines, made him light-headed. His stomach growled audibly and she said, “Guess so.”

“Is that a fucking parrot?” Chase asked his surprise and exhaustion summoning a vulgarity he regretted, hearing his dad’s voice in his own. They were on the porch steps eating chicken, lettuce and mayonnaise sandwiches. Each bite was crisp and moist, the simple white bread a comfort.

“Rosy-faced Lovebird,” Sophie said. She explained the birds were native to South Africa, brought to the U.S. as a pet. They were unlikely survivors, some even managing to grow back their clipped wings. “And now look at them,” she said. “They’re unstoppable.”

He watched the peachy-pink face dart in and out of the bars on the birdfeeder. Under the flutter of the green wings shocks of neon blue flashed. His phone rang. Sophie fed her crust to the dog that had come to lie at her feet, and went inside. Chase knew it was time to pick up.

“Where the fuck have you been?” the first question out of his dad’s mouth.

“I’m out at Aunt Soph’s,” Chase said breezily as if his father had just forgotten a long held plan.

“Funny,” his dad said. “You made your mother cry, you know. Leaving us with the governor and his daughter, bare asses to the breeze like that.”

“Well, I’m sorry everyone had to see your bare ass but I’m staying out here just the

same.”

“Out where?” his dad asked.

“I told you,” Chase said. “Did you ever find out the girl’s name?”

“You little shit. Google it if you want to know so badly.” Chase hung up.

That afternoon when he saw an Alfa Romeo just like his rusting out in the yard, he laughed. It was completely ruined and if he hadn’t just gotten off the phone with his dad, he might have wondered why anyone would do such a thing to a car like that. Surreal to see his exact car in this condition. He thought about when his dad had passed it on to him. Plenty of man speak and calling him “son.” His dad hated the country, dirt, anything that wasn’t starched or upholstered. Chase brushed lightly at the grime embedded in the threads of his jeans. His disobedience was thrilling.

It got late and neither of them got tired so Sophie and Chase took a bottle out to the porch and played a game. “We’ll say one true thing and one lie,” she said. She poured a little hooch, as she called it, from the bottle into two glasses. The amber liquid glowed under the bare bulb of the porch light.

“I’m scared of spiders and I don’t like collard greens,” Chase said. Sophie pushed her chair back on two legs and looked into the night. “So, what’s your guess?” he asked.

“I’m not playing if you’re not going to give me some heavy-hitters. It’s too late for that.” She flicked away a moth that landed on her sleeve and said, “Turn off the porch light, will you?” He did and for a minute they were quiet while their eyes adjusted. Cicadas began

to chirrup.

“I told my dad where I am.”

Sophie tilted more until the back of her head touched the wall of the house. Her neck muscles engaged, holding the weight of her body. “That’s only one thing,” she said. He thought he heard a little waver, something like fear. He shifted, reached for his glass, saw a moth had drowned in it, withdrew his hand, looked all the way out to the creek where the moon’s reflection flickered on the water. The air smelled salty.

The legs of her chair thumped back to the porch. “You hate him,” Sophie said. She didn’t wait for him to confirm or deny. “That’s something we have in common.” She flicked the moth out of his glass and said, “Drink up.”

Chase nodded, feeling the hooch sear down his throat and balloon in his stomach like a mushroom cloud. He poured them both another shot and they both knocked them back right away. This was what he had been waiting for.

“Why do you hate him?” he asked her.

“Why do you?” They listened to the dog snuffling around in the grass, searching for bugs.

“He’s a bully,” Chase said. Sophie didn’t say anything. “To my mom especially but to me too. And to everyone, really. You should hear the way he talks to strangers.”

“I’ve heard it,” Sophie said.

Chase picked at a loose thread in the hem of his shirt. “So?” he asked.

A whirring sound filled Sophie’s ears and the night didn’t seem to want to hold still in front of her. “He molested me when I was little,” she said. “A lot.”

Chase felt the hooch curdle in his stomach and thought he might puke. *No way. He’s*

a dick but no way. Yet he knew it had to be true. He poured another shot this time just for her and handing it to her said, “I don’t know what to say. In a twisted way it makes everything make more sense.” Sophie was slumped in her chair. She looked smaller. Again Chase thought of ancestry, of the blood in his veins, itched to be someone else. “He never talks about you.”

Sophie’s eyes dazed with booze and near-sleep sharpened and filled with fear. “I can’t believe you told him you were here.” She felt her suspicions materializing into reality. All the men in that family were against her. He was bringing Alan right to her.

“I just wanted to get a rise out of him, you know?”

“You’re selfish,” she said. “And you have to leave in the morning.” She kicked her chair over and went inside.

Chase simmered. He walked out to the creek, kicking at the dewy ground and muttering. “Can you believe she thinks I’m the dick in all this?” he demanded of the water. It was low tide and the scent of pluff mud was inescapable. Even as he said it out loud he knew it wasn’t fair, but it was all getting to be too much. Too much. Ghost crabs skittered in and out of their tunnels mirroring the movement of his own anxious thoughts.

Morning did nothing to remedy the situation. “I meant what I said. It’s not worth Alan coming back. I’ve got nothing against you, not really, but it’s just not worth it.”

Chase’s head was pounding. He was on his third cup of French press after only getting three hours of sleep. He felt like ghost crabs were crawling all over him. “I want to put an electric fence up around the new plantings so the deer don’t get them. Can I do that? Then I’m gone.”

“I can see his face. That’s what I see when I get stressed or anxious. I can see him over me and it’s just been worse with you here. I don’t want to see him.”

“I get it,” he said. “I hate it but I get it.”

The fence took him two full days and some careful wiring before he got the charge just right. It was delicate, well-constructed. His dad did not care for things like this. His dad would be embarrassed he was doing the work of a handyman. His dad would ruin beauty and fail to appreciate anything that didn’t glitter. He felt the urge to go hug Sophie but picked a bell pepper with work-blackened fingers and ate it slowly. He relished the grit between his teeth, the cool, bold taste of the fresh vegetable. He sat in the dirt and let himself be delighted as his time at Sophie’s ran out.

Sophie was watching Chase snack on a pepper as she gulped water on the porch, tired and dehydrated. A gunshot, one of the first of hunting season startled the lovebirds from the feeder and they took flight. One tried to dip between lines in the fencing and got stuck. Though just enough of a buzz to make a deer back away, the charge was too much for the small bird and it fell, zapped, to the ground. Sophie ran over feeling too dramatic and scared and old. The lovebird’s rose-colored head was vibrant against the soil. Its blue tail was spread out like a paper fan on a hot day and the neon green wings hugged close to the oval body. Sophie pumped softly with two fingers on the small chest but nothing happened.

Chase watched standing a few feet behind her. He watched the humid frizz of Sophie’s hair get stuck on her wet cheeks and realized she was crying. He wanted to back away from the moment, back to the house or out to the creek but he couldn’t leave her in

the field crying as if for the first time, feeling this pain so acutely. He was jealous she could cry like that.

Her eyes were fierce and bright when she turned from the dead bird. She wanted to blame Chase. He had come here uninvited, brought Alan to the forefront of her thoughts day after day, forced her out of her solitude, and built this damn fence.

“We could have it stuffed. Dad knows a great taxonomist he uses for when he hunts.” Chase hoped it came across as helpful, a consolation. Though he shouldn’t have brought up Alan. He chattered on, feeling sweat crawling down his ribs despite the cooling air. “The bodies look so natural. I haven’t seen...”

The hit, hard and precise and rife with the confusion and bitterness of thirty years, broke Chase’s nose. He did not have time to flinch before and after he just tilted his head back and looked up at the twilight sky. It reminded him of his mother’s chiffon dresses, a rich blue pulled demurely across the glitter of the stars. Blood dripped into his mouth and he spit a few times, speckling the pepper plants with red drops, like the dew of the apocalypse.

Sophie did not apologize. While he looked up she looked down at her hand. Her expression shifted from pride, a twitch of a smile at the corners of her mouth, to surprise, a slight raise of the left brow, to despair, brows dipping down, eyes tearing again. When does the healing begin? When does the pain stop? It felt so good to hit her brother’s son, innocent as he was.

“What the hell is going on back here?” The voice made them both tense up. Chase brought his gaze down to meet his father’s, pinching his nose and blinking against the pain.

“What are you doing here?” Chase asked.

“Don’t talk to me like that.” Alan nodded at Sophie then, open derision on his face. She didn’t look at him but picked up the lovebird and walked towards the house.

“I’m getting a shoebox,” she said to Chase.

“This is ridiculous, son.”

“Let’s go then,” Chase said. He wanted him away from Sophie, wanted Alan anywhere but here in his Armani suit and shining leather shoes, his easy control over them.

The two men walked around the side of the house to the driveway. Alan’s car, a white 2013 Ferrari 458 Italia, was parked behind the old Alfa Romeo. “Dinged the shit out of the bottom of my car coming up this gravel driveway,” Alan said. “You want to just follow me back in your car? Did you bring any stuff with you?”

Chase felt the air around him stir and heard Alan shout, “You crazy bitch!” just before he heard the crunch of glass. Sophie had run out the front door wielding a crow bar. She smashed in the windshield of the Ferrari with two hits. Alan moved towards her raising his fist.

“Touch her at all and I’ll use that crow bar on you,” Chase said. Alan froze. Any shred of control he had had vanished as realized what Chase must know. What no one but the three of them knew.

Chase grabbed a shovel that leaned against the porch. Alan winced and ducked aside as Chase slammed the flat side into the taillights and watched the red plastic fly out into darkening evening. Sophie grinned and broke off the side mirror. Chase jumped up onto the roof and drove the shovel through the back window. She ran around to the other side mirror and knocked it off, too, causing spider web fractures to spread across the driver’s side window. Alan just watched. Chase’s nose bled wildly. He and Sophie stopped to catch

their breath leaning into each other just slightly.

“If you think you’re getting anything from me ever again...” Alan said sputtering at Chase.

Chase shrugged. “Do you get service out here? It’ll be a pricey cab ride but I don’t think your car is in any condition to be on the road.”

That night Sophie patched up Chase’s nose. They sipped hooch and talked about what to plant in the Ferrari, claimed now for the wild, the green. “It’s a good time for cucumbers to go in,” Sophie said. Chase wondered if they could sell Ferrari cukes for a higher price at the farmer’s market than regular old ground cukes. After a few drinks they buried the lovebird in its shoebox under the feeder, deep enough so the dog wouldn’t try to dig it up. Memory being the beast it is they both knew Alan would haunt them in moments of happiness, in moments of pride, in moments of sadness, in moments of nothing at all, but this was something. In the morning they would make coffee and go out to work.

CHAPTER 4
INTO THE IBERIAN

The Olympian is on the TV in the hotel bar. He's won something again, goggles on his forehead, splashing everyone around him in his excitement, white teeth sparkling for the camera. His body is lithe and tan and from this angle she can't tell that it's been twenty years. Twenty years since they were together, twenty years since Nadia got pregnant with Andre, twenty years since he left her. When the camera zooms in on his face she notes the wrinkles, runs her fingers against her own face where years of hanging out on catamarans and diving in sun-drenched, salt water have left their mark.

"Hey, Mom." Andre walks in, same body type as the Olympian, made to be an athlete. She swivels her stool away from the TV, over-enthusiastic, she grabs him into a hug, buries his face in her shoulder so he doesn't see the swimmer on the screen. He doesn't know who his father is, quit asking by the time he was thirteen. A funny thing to see a resigned thirteen year-old, *there's no point* practically written on his smooth skin. He was lucky with skin, not like her when she was younger, broken out all over, constantly trying to hide her face behind her hair.

"We're all set up for tomorrow," he tells her. "Most of the crew is checked in, equipment made it in one piece. The Iberian awaits."

"Sit." She pats the seat to her left so Andre will not face the TV.

"What'd you do today? I love Barcelona."

"Mmm," non-committal. She's trying not to look at the swim meet. Her mind is on a loop, *Your father is an Olympian*. "Talk to me about the schedule," she says instead.

"Lobby at 7am, ocean by 8. Everyone will let you dive first. They love you, you

know, your form. You're like a seal." Andre is so proud of her.

"I prefer mermaid," she says. A hallucination, 90 meters below the surface, nitrogen narcosis crawling into her blood, drunk on deprivation. She had stopped trying to kick to the surface, the monofin connected to her feet became glittery and green before her eyes; she believed to her very core that she was a mermaid. She was yanked to the surface by her crew where she remained unconscious for three minutes. Practicing for her world record dive had resulted in her top three scares but she had made it: 101 meters straight down into the sea on one breath. No air tank. Just her slow and steady heartbeat, her burning lungs, her muscles engaged and languid at the same time. She is the best female free diver in the world.

"Tomorrow'll be fun," Andre says. "Nice and easy. 40 meters or so."

"I like it," she says. She checks to make sure The Olympian is no longer on then says, "I'm headed up to my room to get some sleep. A little jet-lagged." She flips her hair over her shoulder, an old habit from school when she didn't want to get it caught in her backpack. As it flashes in her periphery she notices it has turned green like her tail, her fin, her scales. No.

"I'm going to stick around and have a drink," he says. "Just one," he adds.

"Tomorrow'll be great."

She knows he'll have more than one but he'll still be tip-top in the morning. He's young, at his peak, on track to break records of his own.

She's getting together everything for the dive: her favorite purple wetsuit, the two pound weight she'll put around her neck to push her further beneath the ocean's surface. She pulls out her monofin, holds it for a bit, decides against bringing it. She just wants to

relax tomorrow. The dive will be only 40 meters and she really only needs the fin if she's going 60 or deeper. She'll need her passport to rent the catamaran. As she digs through her bag her fingers begin to tingle. She pulls them out of the bag to find webbing growing between them. She shakes her hands hard. The webbing disappears. She can't find her passport.

The last thing Nadia sees just before she folds herself neatly in half and free dives into the Iberian Sea is her son Andre's face. He is bent over the side of the catamaran speaking to another diver. Reflections of sun and water play across his jawline and under his chin. Unbidden, the face of a man she cared for thirty years ago, shimmering as he heaves himself out of a pool. *Your father was an Olympian*, she thinks. But Andre doesn't know his father, hasn't asked about him in eighteen years, a boy looking for a hero. Andre, rueful, "David's dad is a cop," or "Did you know about Navy SEALs?" or "Sarah's mom and dad own their own amusement park!" Though he could have beat them all with tales of his father she told him nothing, still bitter at her forced hiatus from swimming. The absent Olympian deserved nothing from his son. She could have been breaking records too.

But then there was little Andre splashing in the pool pretending to beat her to the wall in his floaties, eventually beating her easily to the wall with his new, hardening adolescent muscles. Then they took to the sea together, trained together, managed each

other's dives. Today she sees Andre's face, his focus. She feels the warm sea, 71 degrees he reported, feels the tight embrace of her favorite purple wetsuit. She has broken the world record for women's free diving, 101 meters in one breath. She can't wait to get down there, underwater where her brain stops buzzing and she becomes weightless, the walls of quiet around her, bright blue insulation that fades navy and down even farther below her, black.

She inhales two counts, exhales four lengthening the count, slowing down her heartbeat. *One...two...one...two...three...four*. Her lowest recorded heart rate is 12 beats per minute, slower than that of a coma patient. When she is ready she signals to Andre and as he signals back, stopwatch in hand, her perfectly even breath snags for just a second. Unusual. A small spike from the nearly dormant heart.

It's dangerous to be afraid in this sport though she has certainly has been. When Andre did a seventy-meter dive and did not come back up. The safety divers dragged him from the water after he had been in for five minutes. With her head under she had watched him being pulled up, watched his limbs trail his torso as they worked against the weight of the sea, his eyes rolled back in his head, his face a ghastly pale blue. She knows that every time she goes in the water she might not come out. So does Andre. The thing she can't say out loud: that she loves diving more than she loves her son. The euphoria of becoming one with the maritime world, the rapture of completing a hard dive, of beating her competitors, of knowing she should not have physically been able to do what she has done. There is no better pay off, no better way to spend the few years allotted to her on this Earth. In an interview after she broke the world record she said, "Free diving is not only sport, it's a way of understanding who we are." Yes, she was a little bit delirious, yes, she felt abashedly

dramatic, but yes, she believed it to her core.

But fear is sneaky. Fear finds its way in when she can't focus her eyes after a dive, when she blacks out at the bottom, even for a second, when the giddiness of nitrogen narcosis hits and she believes she no longer needs air, that she could stay down there forever, that she is a mermaid. But what scares her most she has already experienced. The fear of being abandoned eight months pregnant, the fear of leading a normal life, of accomplishing nothing and being no one. For twenty years she was only a mother and no matter how many people told her that was enough she never believed it. If being a parent were enough the Olympian wouldn't have left. The Olympian would have held her hand during the thirty hours of labor. He would have helped build a crib next to their bed in their tiny apartment. And if he knew all along that having a child would ruin them why didn't he say it sooner? Why leave her at the last minute? For years she saw him as vindictive, competitive, mad that she might be as good as he was. Now her obsession matches his and if it had back then she would have given Andre up. But then she would also be a swimmer, a pool jock. She wouldn't know the crisp execution of a perfect dive or the taste of salt spray as the catamaran cuts across the waves, she wouldn't know the sandpaper texture of the back of a stingray or the pinching excitement of going deeper than any woman has ever gone before.

The Icarus myth was Andre's favorite story as a boy, read over and over, a kind of training for breaking boundaries, of being unafraid, of being bold in the face of Mother Nature. He never dwelled on the fact that Icarus died at the end. Neither did she. "The wings are fins," he always said. And later he would say, "Let's try to touch the sun," before a dive. She pictured the center of the Earth, solid, surrounded by layers of fire and lava, and

she was calm.

So Nadia does not back away from this stutter in her breath, the slight racing of her heart. She buries her fear as she is trained to do. She does one more round of breathing. *One...two...one...two...three...four.* Andre cocks his right eyebrow. All good? She signals again, takes her last breath and dives.

Blue water closes over her head. No fin today. No line today. She doesn't want to be hooked in. She's only going down forty meters. The two pound weight around her neck nudges her forward and as she heads straight down into the ocean she can feel its slight pressure against her collar bone. The depth counter on her wrist hits ten meters, fifteen, twenty. The pressure increases around her and she feels the tingle of depth in her bones, her brain, her muscles. She feels a chill against her fingertips. More than a chill. The water is cold. It shouldn't be so cold. *I'm not deep enough.* Then the pull of a rogue current. She checks her wrist: thirty meters. A rare moment of indecision. Head up? Up to Andre? He wants to dive too. He's waiting on her. Another tug, this one she has to push against, trying to shoot across it, trying to keep track of the silhouette of the catamaran at the surface, the sunburst behind it. She ditches the weight around her neck. She is squarely caught in the riptide. She is pushing, pushing. Her lungs are burning. Too much exertion. Her heart rate is up. Her hands are reaching up towards the warmer water, towards the safer water, towards Andre, when she is somersaulted by the sea, tumbling, water too dark, acrid salt on her tongue. Like Icarus, drowned. *Your father was an Olympian.*

The first thing I notice is that I'm surrounded by darkness, too deep for the water to be blue. The second is a heart-wrenching thought of Andre. How it must have been for him at the surface, waiting, knowing by minute seven, nine, eleven, that he has witnessed my last dive. When finally my lungs could hold out no longer and I opened my body to the sea I was surrounded by bubbles. Now there are occasional tiny ones caused by the crabs and fish. I watch their little jaws work to break open my skin and think, *Ocean, my love, I am yours; I have died.*

My skin looks dyed. All that time in the sun and now I'm pale and pruned and tinged with blue. It's freezing down here and reminds me of a blustery day, too choppy to go out but a good day to fish. We sat on the dock, casting lines, a rare moment to speak of something besides the sport with Andre. He caught a big one, a grouper, and we cheered and whopped together as it thrashed, leaving behind a trail of bubbles. In the end though we were antsy, both wanting to get back in the water, needing to dive.

Here I am breaking records again, deeper now than the deepest dive. I am the complete and total victor now that I've died. But of course, I am not alone down here where the complete and total victor cannot possibly be human and as I think it I am surrounded by more bubbles. I feel a tug, something big swishes away, tiny shrimp make their way into my leg and I watch my foot float away, toenails painted neon blue. I didn't expect guilt to linger after death; I should have told Andre. I should have told him about his father so he would have someone now and I picture him as a boy asking questions, any detail, any hint, fishing.

A mako swims by, curious—as am I, wondering what would it feel like to be eaten

by a shark—but it goes on its way and I'm left to my little fish. I must be closer to shore: visible silhouettes of swimmers and boats at the surface, comforting like they were when I was on a dive. The Coast Guard must have been called, helicopters, speedboats, more divers—a flotilla—his favorite word as a boy and still now that he is the famous diver, Andre. His quest for a hero never seemed to end and I heard him tell people in increasingly elaborate tales how his father had died. I listened to him lie and lie and though I knew it was my fault, all the things he didn't know, I wanted to be enough for him and I finally blew. He had seen me frustrated before, exhausted, failing to hit depth, even pissy, but never that rage that has spent decades under this very punctured and water-logged skin burning, bubbling.

The day he broke his first record he kept his arm around me as his safety divers showered him in champagne bubbles. We feasted on course after course, allowing even a decadent dessert, silky chocolate ganache, though Andre's favorite was a simple citrusy grilled fish. At the long table out on the patio we laughed and spoke of a dynasty as a salty sea breeze blew. "To Andre," we toasted and he answered "To the dive." Before the night was over I could see on Andre's face that the excitement of the win had died. Obsession, drive, passion, perhaps mania: the things I didn't have to teach Andre.

A cliché to insist there's so much left I wanted to say to Andre. But now I am only bones, abandoned even by my little critters and their bubbles. The current is sweet and lapping, the water warm; the choppy, churning of the sea has died. A monk seal, endangered, graceful in the water chases a school of fish. I imagine Andre in this same sea with me on a dive. He is tethered, weighted, focused as he kicks his monofin deeper into the blue.

Andre, your father was an Olympian. He didn't dive or fish but he loved water, the

blue, chlorinated pool. He was fast and playful and blew bubbles as he passed me in his lane; he dyed his hair green because he said the chlorine would do it anyway and what can a mere human do in the face of the inevitable?

Little crabs and fish crawl into my flesh. “You look blue,” they say and giggle. “What’s got you down?” More giggles. Drowned and disintegrating.

“I should have told Andre who his dad is,” I tell them. “It’s my biggest regret.” They nod and munch up and down my shinbones.

“You want to be careful with regret,” they say. “It’ll eat you from the inside out.”

“Good one,” Nadia says.

CHAPTER 5

THIS IS NOT A STORY ABOUT YOUR GUILT

You'd like to think you did more in your early twenties than steal from a Payless Shoes and smoke weed. You'd like to think you had more friends than your little brother and his buddies, a rowdy group of line chefs and shrimp boat workers who indulged you, maybe enjoyed you. You'd like to think you didn't go through a bottle of tequila a week or talk shit about your roommate, Mia, when you were at work with Nicole.

You'd like to think you didn't notice how thin Mia got while you were busy partying with the guys. You didn't have nightmares of her slithering under your bedroom door while you were sleeping to dress up in your clothes, a grim copy of you as a child in your mom's blouses. You didn't pretend not to notice her 5'9" frame disintegrating into a mere 84 pounds. You didn't drive two hours to your parents' house to sleep on the couch, away from her, though still you dreamt of her. This time dismembered limbs searching through kitchen cabinets.

You told her she was beautiful when it was still true, you must have. But if you didn't then you couldn't now.

Before this she had been yet another girl who didn't want to hear, "I love you." Another girl who suspected nothing but friendliness in your embrace. Another girl with Southern blood in her veins that pranced around the house in panties or kissed you on the dance floor, living out the male fantasy of herself, going home to get fucked by boys who went to military school.

You started stealing shoes from work, stuffing stiff, garish pleather with glue showing at the seams and BOGO stickers peeling off into your bag. The manager trusted

you. After all, you were the only white girl who worked there. She gave you the key, had you count down the drawer.

You closed most nights with Nicole who was over six feet tall and had a daughter your age. She told you about a girl she once knew who was too thin too. You were both comfortable, removed from these women. Her boyfriend, Al, worked construction and brought you both chocolate Frostys when he came to pick her up. You set the alarm, waved them out, watched them leave, turned off the alarm.

Maybe you got carried away. Maybe your closet was filled with tacky heels, already falling apart flip-flops, sensible loafers. Maybe there was a duffel bag full of children's shoes with Pixar characters and glitter and lights in the heels. Maybe you tripped over men's size twelve No-Slip work boots when you got up to pee at night. Maybe you tried to give Mia a pair of lime green pumps because her shoe size was the only thing that had stayed the same and maybe she had to waste some of her precious energy smiling and pretending she liked them. Maybe her hair was thinning and you made eye contact with the hideous heels while she spoke.

When your boss asked if you knew who was stealing you became indignant. How could someone do this to us? One of our own? She fired Nicole who suspected it was you and every day at work you wondered what she was doing now.

Then came the night you had dreaded. The night when you found Mia passed out on the living room floor in front of the TV. The Food Network spilled high-def pictures of a brunch with Ina Garten and friends across her sprawled body.

When the paramedics arrived (at least you called them) you were in your room, frantic, hiding shoes. The stretcher was too big, her body too small.

You couldn't possibly have moved out after she got back from the hospital, after she was set up with the nutritionist, when the hard work was just beginning. You didn't tell her the peace and quiet would be good for her when you knew phantom smells of meals would haunt her, scream at her to run off the calories.

Settled into your new apartment you don't still make the drive home to sleep on your parents' couch. You don't throw out half your food or watch Top Chef marathons, ignoring the gurgling protestations of your stomach. You haven't lost fifteen pounds in the last few weeks and your car isn't packed full of shoes you keep meaning to drop off at Goodwill.

CHAPTER 6

BOTTLE TREE

I had Mama's addiction to living a dramatic life. Maybe that's why I finally called Liz. Maybe I was being nostalgic, remembering staying up until midnight to walk to the fire tower, pretending to cook dinner for Mama with different types of seaweed served in plastic buckets, drying shells out on the porch and cleaning them with toothbrushes.

My sister didn't recognize my voice on the phone.

"Hey, Liz."

"Who is this?"

"How would you like a vacay at the beach?"

"What?"

"It's Etta. Bring Dan too!"

"His name's Dave."

In the end Liz agreed to come though I couldn't quite trace how I'd managed to convince her. I chalked it up to the island. Of course Liz would miss the bright summer mornings and stormy afternoons, the electric smell of brine, the sound of breeze through the tough palmetto fronds, and the food. Of course the food. This very moment Liz could be lying in her bed feeling the pulse of the waves crash against her in the surf, tasting the fresh explosion of shrimp and lemon. Hopefully she was thinking of those things and not picturing Mama's body under the tree in the front yard, bare crepe myrtle branches capped by blue and green glass bottles. I let myself imagine Liz moving back home. Around me, Mama's spirit warmed the room, happy with the idea, too.

Mama had been scared of haints and spirits. Her nanny taught her when she was

young that the bottles hung in the tree branches would protect her. She believed her nanny when she said, “Evil is out there and it’s coming for you.” Easy to believe when you’ve got all that sadness and self-hatred churning under your skin. She believed she was a bad mother. The kind of mother whose daughters knew she was a free spirit who didn’t like being tied to them. The kind of mother who didn’t worry about teaching them to swim before tossing them in the ocean to learn to fight the currents. So Mama sat under the bottle tree on certain nights, the solstice, full moons; she kept watch because that was something she knew she could do for us. She wanted to see one of those bright blue glass bottles catch a spirit. In the last few months before she died she was out there every night, wanting to know for sure she and her daughters were safe. When the sun rose, the evil spirits trapped in the bottles would be burned up and if you listened carefully you could hear a small, wistful squeal. Liz said it was just the breeze playing across the lips of the bottles but Mama and I knew that for one more day, we were all fine.

I began planning for Liz and Dave’s arrival right away. First, a menu, an extensive grocery list. Then cleaning the house, leaving little mementos of our childhood scattered around her old room. The sweetgrass basket of mine she had always been jealous of I left perched on her nightstand. The biggest project was fixing the bottle tree whose branches had been bare since the tropical storm just before Mama died. The last bit of life she could handle, we’d had to drag her inside when the wind started screeching and lightning lit up the night like a campy horror movie. She didn’t want to leave the tree. In the morning she ran out front, her bare feet sliced by the blue glass shards. “They haven’t burned up,” she kept saying, picking up the blue daggers. “They got away.”

Liz and I both worked as lifeguards at the beach that summer. I came home from

the morning shift after she had already left for the afternoon shift. Two days after the storm I found Mama lying underneath the bare branches of the crepe myrtle, forearms slit, bleeding on the broken glass. We closed the house up for awhile after that. I went to college in Charleston, only thirty minutes away, and Liz moved clear across the country.

At school I dreamed of trapped spirits shrieking and exploding out of their glass prisons just as the sun rose. In my dreams it rained blue and green shards of glass and when I looked down I could see them sticking in my skin though I did not bleed. The debris became a part of me like armor.

I didn't stay away from the house for long. But in all that time, fifteen years now, I hadn't fixed the tree. For the next two months I drank wine every night and every morning climbed up into the tree to put the empty bottle on a branch. The night before Liz and Dave were to arrive I gave the tree a hard look from the porch: good, not great.

They stepped out of their rental car and into the heavy humidity of a South Carolina summer the next afternoon. I had made coffee, something to offer like a good Southern hostess but I had had too much myself and was jittery. Liz was looking at the bottle tree almost in disbelief.

"I didn't know you remade it." Her first words to me.

"Hi, honey!" I ignored her and slung my arms around her. She smelled familiar and fresh and I thought I might smell like coffee sweats so I ended the hug before she could return it. I watched a small skirmish of emotions pass across her face before she settled into a smile and decided to play along.

"You remember Dave?" she said, matching my enthusiasm. He was already hauling

a large suitcase out of the trunk. He gave a huff either as greeting or in response to the weight of the suitcase I wasn't sure. We all needed to relax, get used to each other again. I could feel Mama inside me, around me, impatient. We omitted coffee and went straight to cocktails.

Sipping strong mojitos I asked them inane questions about their trip. Dave answered most of them. A little turbulence, a short wait on the runway because a woman left her sweater at the gate. Liz was quiet and looked around the room, maybe noticing how little had changed.

I refilled drinks when the small talk lulled and asked, "Liz, want to go to the fire tower tonight?"

She looked down at her drink and said, "A few more of these and I'll be ready."

I asked Dave what he did for work and with his answer the afternoon passed, the gentle success I hoped it would be though I hadn't anticipated being jealous of Dave and Liz's intimacy. The way he let his arm rest behind her head on the couch then played with the tendrils of hair, curled from humidity, at the nape of her neck. The way she held her glass out to him, wordless, for more ice cubes. Even that they had packed for the trip in a single suitcase, something I had not shared with anyone except Liz when we were younger.

"Let's go," Liz finally said. "Can we bike? We do a lot of biking at home. I think it'll feel good after that flight." Dave nodded, enthusiastic about biking, but declining to come with us.

Biking would negate the secret feel of wandering through the nighttime paths, whispering together and giggling into the dark. Instead, as we hopped on the beach cruisers stored underneath the porch, their headlights blasted into the dark as if we were executing a

raid on the forest.

With breeze in our ears we couldn't talk much as we biked. I thought of a time when I was eight and Liz was four that Mama took us out in a little motorboat past the breakers and we spent the morning fishing just on the other side of a sandbar. Mama squealed with us when we finally caught one, a flounder. We were triumphant reeling it in until Liz realized the fish was going to die.

With big eyes staring at us in horror she said, "Let's throw it back." The flounder must have weighed around twelve pounds, enough that Mama was helping me pull it into the boat, enough for dinner for a few nights.

"Put it back," Liz said.

Mama and I stared at it, transfixed, while it flapped hard against the little boat, gills opening and shutting desperately. We wanted to watch it die. Liz snapped the back of Mama's bathing suit leaving a stinging red mark on her pale skin. When we still did not move to save the fish Liz lay down and pushed it up the wall of the boat with her feet, pretty little legs straining, until it flopped into the water. "Y'all are mean," she said leaning over the side of the boat to watch the fish. It did not swim away. It floated just below the surface and a few fish came up from the bottom to nibble at it.

"Look. It's fine," I said when the bites jerked the fish around, false animation. Mama turned the boat back towards the shore and Liz pouted. It was typical, the alliance between me and Mama, and always slightly apart, Liz struggling to understand it.

By the time we parked our bikes at the bottom of the fire tower I was nervous. I wanted Liz here with me but she had so few reasons to want to move back. It might be too soon to ask.

The cicadas were loud around us as we puffed our way up the steep stairs. We used to jump on them, held up by thick cables, to make the tower sway. Liz jumped hard ahead of me and turned back to grin. A good sign. I pretended to hold on for dear life. She giggled.

With the night sky spread out above us and the darkened marshes below the top of the tower was as beautiful as ever. Liz took a deep breath, “Can’t believe I forgot that pluff mud smell.”

“The sweet smell of decay,” I joked. She smiled but the giggle from the stairs was gone.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” she said sitting on the bench scarred by decades of carved initials and hearts. I sat down too and imagined her asking to move back home on her own. Problem solved. “Have you ever thought of selling Mama’s house?” she asked.

“Ha. Ha.”

“Seriously. It’s like your living in her tomb. You haven’t even changed the decorations.”

“No, I haven’t,” I said. Then, “Think you can still find the Big Dipper, city girl?” Again, Liz indulged me like you might indulge a petulant toddler.

We left a few minutes later, both actually as tired as we claimed to be.

So that’s why she agreed to come, I thought half an hour later, in my bed at last. I hadn’t even considered having to protect this place from them. How could they do that to Mama? I thought that if enough time passed she could fall back in love with the house. Just

like that I had to shift my goal from selling them on Lowcountry living to simply getting them to go back west and leave me alone.

I realized I was listening for the sound of them having sex and turned off my clicking, whirring ceiling fan; I slid down into the sheets and held perfectly still. I couldn't hear anything. Were they so dispassionate after a few years of marriage that their sex wouldn't even be audible? Or better yet, were they so bored with each other that they didn't even have sex anymore? I imagined them getting a divorce. I hoped they would. Then maybe Liz would move back.

Breakfast the next morning was hell. Dave and Liz met my sullen wariness with excitement and smiles.

"Mimosa?" Liz offered when I stumbled down the stairs. She was already showered and wearing a bright sun dress while I was in sweats and a swim club tee.

"Okay."

I had just taken the first sip when Dave started. "I've got a friend in real estate, you know." Liz's look of encouragement made the orange juice burn in my stomach.

"It's just not good for you to be here alone."

"Frankly, I don't know how you could stand to stay this long."

"You could start out living in the city with us."

"Sure, you'll love it. So much to do."

They didn't need me for their performance. They fed off each other. When it was over Liz said, "Well?"

"How can you not love it here?" My voice was high, agitated.

“You sound like Mama,” she said, an accusation. I said I didn’t feel well and went back upstairs.

The different results of a similar childhood baffled me but if I looked beyond my experience to hers, I knew Liz had never liked it here. I had forgotten things on purpose and hoped she would too like the time Liz, only seven or eight, got stuck up in the branches of the bottle tree. She was crying. A heavy rain had knocked most of the bottles askew and Mama had wanted them straightened. She’d said, “Just shimmy up real quick, honey. You’ll be up and down in no time.” When Liz wouldn’t start climbing she’d added, “I’d do it myself if I weren’t grown-up sized. You’re lucky to still be a little girl.”

Standing next to Mama, already as tall as her, I said nothing but willed Liz to start climbing. Mama had been on edge with the bottles like that, precarious, tilting towards the ground. I wanted her to feel better but when Liz did make it up into the tree she got stuck and couldn’t reach any of the crooked bottles.

“Get me down!”

“You haven’t fixed the bottles yet!”

I pulled the ladder out from under the porch, clanked it up against the tree and helped Liz down. Several bottles were broken in the process and Mama didn’t talk to Liz for three days. Any number of these kinds of events I had forgotten for Mama. Liz had not and she saw them as proof that she was smarter, stronger, saner than both of us. Maybe she was.

Back downstairs I was greeted with the impossible evidence that they were planning on moving forward with their idea to sell. Liz was hanging new curtains in the living room.

“Don’t be mad,” she said, smiling and pulling the heavy curtains into place. The fabric was obscene: a mix of khaki and green covered in oversized monkeys climbing too-small palm trees.

“Like them?” she asked. “They were a little pricey but I think worth it. They really set the tone for a new room.”

I said nothing, imagining the room as she would want it. Our things trashed and replaced with glass bowls filled with shells, tacky paintings of lighthouses or seagulls hanging everywhere. The walls would be in pastels, the wicker chairs on the deck would lose their place to something iron with tropical flower cushions. And the bottle tree. That would have to go too. But oh think how fast it would sell. Inside me, around me, Mama bristled.

“Anyone hungry?” Dave had been sitting on the couch with the old curtain rod across his lap. “I’m certainly getting there.”

“Great.” I said and escaped to the kitchen. The dinner I had planned for that night, the clincher for my argument on why they should move back became more of a “screw you” affair, my only goal to show them what they were missing, maybe make them feel bad for trying to get me to move.

The ingredients from my grocery list came together into a large stew pot: quartered ears of corn, halved red potatoes, Andouille sausage links, and later, shrimp which I deveined and peeled except for the tails. As it cooked down I added nearly an entire box of Old Bay seasoning and left it to steam. In the pressure cooker I put collard greens prepped two mornings ago. Salt and pepper, lemon juice. I whipped together drop biscuit dough made with Lily’s flour, buttermilk, a little yoghurt and plenty of butter. Into the oven at 500 degrees. Blackberry jelly would go on top, dessert the way Mama liked it, not too sweet.

An hour and a half later, dinner on the table, everyone cradling a beer Liz said, “Frogmore stew! I haven’t had this in ages,” and I allowed myself to feel hopeful until I realized she was picking around the shrimp and sausage.

“Liz is a vegetarian,” Dave said when he saw me watching. Liz smiled and shrugged and took another helping of collard greens. I reached across and stabbed her sausage and shrimp, plopping them onto my plate. The meat was Mama’s favorite part.

“We know the sweetest guy in the city. I think you’ll love him. We haven’t even set him up with any of our friends yet because we really think he’ll be great for you,” Liz said. A pause as she put down her drink to look me in the eyes. “You know, we worry about you out here on your own.”

I had no motivation to fight her. Every single moment of the last days piled on top of me and I just said, “That sounds nice.” Mama, on guard, tense, stalking the room.

After Liz and Dave fell asleep I took the curtains down. I dragged them out the back door, down the steps into the sand of the fire pit. They were heavy and I wore the rod across my shoulders so the monkeys dragged behind me like a cape. Heat and humidity clung to my skin and the fabric around me was suffocating. They didn’t light easily, inflammability being a quality that comes with a high price tag, but I poured lighter fluid on top and that did the job. I sat next to the blaze and waited for the hideous things to disappear.

The roar, sizzle, pop, and glow woke Dave. I could see his face looking out the bedroom window. He must have woken Liz because a minute later she was out on the back porch in a little nightie that told me they definitely still had sex. “What the hell are you

doing?”

Poking a stick into the fire I said, “Y’all are going to need to leave.”

“Honey, you’re overreacting. You’re so emotional. Just like -.”

“Just like Mama, just like Mama, just like Mama,” I chanted. I stomped around the fire in close circles. I raised my arms above my head and twirled. Mama danced with me, wild. The shock and fear in their faces made me dance faster, waving my arms. Dave threw his arm around Liz as if to keep her from running towards the fire though she made no indication she wanted to come closer. After a few minutes she turned and walked back into the house. I kept spinning and stomping until the curtains turned to embers and I heard Liz and Dave slamming the doors of the rental car, turning the engine, backing out over the gravel driveway. Until the only sound left in the dark were the cicadas and my out of breath panting. Until the moon began setting behind the house. Until it was just me and Mama again.

CHAPTER 7

THE HISTORIAN

He calls himself the Historian and at night he speaks to his followers. He does not have a mount from which to deliver a sermon, he does not have an altar or a prayer mat or a classroom. He does have a garage where he sleeps on a bare mattress and plays video games. He sits on the edge of his bed, his disciples on the floor around him, legs crossed. His dog, a pit, is asleep behind him. His clothes smell like fryer oil; he has put in a twelve-hour shift and it is late. To begin the service he will light the bowl and pass the greens to his favored disciple.

As the favored one breathes deep and takes his thumb off the carb the lecture begins. “The Pyramids at Giza were built with technology so advanced we could not copy them even today.” The kaleidoscope glass bowl is passed. “Their tips align perfectly with the stars in Orion’s belt. They were built not as tombs but as a place where the half-alien, half-human pharaohs could contact their other-worldly families.” The bare bulb of the garage light catches the tops of nodding heads. “The pharaohs sacrificed their happy homes among the stars to be on Earth with man.” The pit bull sighs, rearranges, pushes his paw against the Historian’s back. The Historian shifts his weight forward and the dog’s paw drops. He continues, “Legends of gods mating with humans are in every culture. They tried to help man understand how to lead better lives. Think of all the things they knew then, the amount of knowledge lost.” The Historian stands. There is little room to pace. He wants to open the garage door, look at the night sky, feel the cool air on his skin, but a cop lives next door and the garage has turned into a hotbox. “They’ve been trying to get us to live peacefully for centuries!” He kicks at a pillow on the floor. “Only those who live peacefully

will be allowed to contact them, to receive their knowledge.”

He is never more convincing than when he is an angry, indignant, enlightened man facing a world of ignorant doubters. An ugly and obvious repair on a middle panel of the garage door is proof of his anger, kicked in on a night when no one would listen. Tonight, the disciples are nodding. Tonight, the disciples are watching the Historian’s eyes find a hole in the universe to look through as if he has found his own words written in another dimension and is only reading them back. His eyes focus back suddenly on a member of the circle. He glares at the disciple until the disciple, still sporting a black eye from a bar fight a couple days ago, looks down at the garage floor, traces the outline of a stain with his gnarled fingers. Here anger and aggression must lead to remorse and the Historian was not exempt from his own rule. He had to pay for everyone’s Hardee’s Thickburgers for a whole week after he kicked in the garage door.

Some nights the Historian is distracted and slips into everyday conspiracy theory: Kennedy, Area 51, Nine-Eleven. The disciples try not to look bored but they have come here knowing all of this; they have come here to keep pushing because in the morning when the sun’s light douses the suburbs again they will have to return to their normal lives. They will have to go to work. They will have to worry about getting custody of their kids or paying their bills or fixing their cars. When the sun rises there will be no magic left; they will be sober and sorely conscious of wanting it to be dark again of wanting to slip into the Historian’s world again.

When the disciples are bored they get giggly. It’s to be expected given the ritual of these nights but they all stay put and try not to break the Historian’s trance, taking turns

shushing each other and nodding to the Historian.

They listen because the Historian will eventually say the thing they came to hear. He will say the thing that makes the room full of college students, chefs, lawn care workers, and sporting goods salesmen feel better. He will stare through the walls of the garage, past the other rooms of the house where his parents are sleeping, he will stare past the stars of this galaxy and into the next and he will say, “God is gravity.”

As always someone says, “How do you know?”

Some nights the Historian speaks about meeting an extraterrestrial being, the one who told him this precious gem of knowledge, the one who changed his life. But tonight the Historian simply says, “Think about it.” The group goes quiet and the dog begins to snore and the Historian dares his disciples to deny what he knows to be true. He allows moments for meditation as he and his disciples picture the universe, the formation of this Earth, the different phases of the moon, the rise and fall of the water cycle, the rings around Saturn, all pulled and pushed into creation by—“What’s the one thing the universe couldn’t exist without?” he asks them.

“Gravity,” they answer. They imagine themselves liting through blackness for eons until they find themselves on a planet more beautiful and perfect than this one. A place populated by quiet seas and peaceful beings that don’t need language to speak. A place without capitalism and therefore without poverty where they may spend their days not in a hot kitchen or on their feet but as the Zac Brown Band says with “toes in the water, ass in the sand, not a worry in the world, a cold beer in my hand.”

The Historian gives a knowing nod to the beings out there swirling and twirling through their own atmosphere, appreciating his lone voice of truth.

Soon there is a shift, an emptying *whoosh* of the mental landscape. Someone turns on the Play Station and a few open beers and the Historian starts to argue with someone about the best soccer team in the Premier League. They talk about the best movies that are coming out and whether or not Tarantino should even still be making movies.

As the Historian falls asleep after his disciples are gone he remembers that he didn't take out the trash and he owes his mom a car insurance payment. In the dark he texts a girl whom he loves but who won't love him back while he lives in his parent's garage. *You have to move out*, she writes. *Your life is on hold*. He loves her because she is not afraid of him when he yells, because she understands he *had* to drop out of school, because she is honest with him, and because she has beat him at Halo so many times. He wishes that gravity were enough to keep them together, that she would come and sit with the disciples and listen—if she would just *listen*.

He puts his head on the pillow next to the pit's and falls asleep thinking of the next night, the next moment of peace when he and his disciples again let their minds travel the universe while their bodies are bound to the stained cement floor by that inevitable force of nature he will wait until tomorrow to name again.

CHAPTER 8

THE LUNGERS OF SUNNY SLOPE, ARIZONA

December 22nd, 1903

In Boston it is Christmas-time. It's snowing and David writes that Horticulture Hall is open to the public again and filled with flowers. *A smaller display than the grand opening but still a comfort*, he writes. Reading the letter in a thick canvas tent in the middle of the desert makes me queasy and sad. The grand opening was something from a dream: amaryllises, azaleas, geraniums, jasmine, trumpet lilies, palm trees, wisteria, and best of all the orchids, a thousand species all together. David and I walked through, holding hands, dressed in our Sunday best, nervous to even breathe too deeply for fear we would ruin the moment, dispel the illusion.

I suppose it is Christmas-time here too but Sunny Slope is a cheerless place. There is no snow, only sandy dirt. There are no flowers, only prickly, angry plants fighting as hard as any of us to keep living. The memory of the humidity in the Hall does little to ease my chapped lips and hands.

We were cozied up in a booth at our favorite pub when I told David my family was leaving. "But it's *our* time," he said. He meant us, in love, but also the Irish. Patrick Collins was mayor, an actual born in Ireland immigrant. "The things he can do for us," David would say.

"You know how sick Braden is," I said. The same arguments my mother had used on my father in the weeks leading up to his decision. Public health posters plastered around the city spoke of maintaining the health of the community. We all knew that meant forfeiting the individual. *We are prepared to enforce measures that would seem radical if they weren't*

designed for the public good, the pamphlets said. The idea of leaving Boston had sent Father on his first bender in years, gone for two days with Mother calm, making broth for Braden same as ever.

“Let them go without you,” David said.

“And if he dies out there?”

David touched the sleeve of my dress. The White Plague had claimed both of his parents and death no longer scared him. Perhaps he wondered why I thought my family should be allowed to escape the disease. Why, when everyone else mourned, should we be free to chase the Cure?

When Father came home hungover and contrite Mother simply said, “Can we go now?”

December 23rd, 1903

We had in mind only to get to this sun-scorched sand pit for so long, we didn’t think of what we’d do once we were here. Maybe we just assumed the bright colors on the posters meant happiness, a cure no matter what: “Sunshine and Ozone, the Hope of the Consumptive!”

In Boston the public health officials were making house calls. “Are there any consumptives here?” They were separating families that had already been decimated by death. Quarantine—now that we understand tuberculosis is not hereditary—a word both ominous and aggressive. The infected were ostracized. Some snuck away from their families in the middle of the night to avoid a heart-wrenching goodbye. Some hid their symptoms, selfishly and desperately hoarding moments with their loved ones, knowing it

would soon be too late. Parents who knew they were ill spoke openly of death to their children, hastily taught them as best they could to take care of themselves. Tomorrow they could be orphans. We had to go West.

December 24th, 1903

Braden coughed up blood last night, the first time since we've been in Arizona. He has gained some weight back, the empty hollows of his cheeks filling in, but today he won't eat. He is listless. We make sure he has plenty of time in the sun. Mother covers his head with a floppy, straw hat to avoid heat rash and sunburn. Every morning she wakes up, steps outside, and says, "This weather is a blessing." Given that we arrived in August when the desert sun scorched everything within minutes of rising and even the nights were thick and close, we always say, "Amen." Father says nothing much at all these days. He glares out at the desert and bothers Mother while she is cooking and cleaning.

At the train station grim faced men greeted our arrival with cloths over their mouths and noses. They corralled anyone who could not afford the sanitoriums and health resorts and pushed us out of the city to Sunny Slope. There were to be no tents built inside city limits, a new ordinance passed when city officials realized the poor were paying attention to their advertising campaigns. They hadn't considered any but the well-off would make it across the country, hadn't considered that the poor care about their families just as much as the rich, hadn't considered the desperation born of watching a ten year old boy become so emaciated he seems translucent. He shivered in the middle of summer. His eyes seemed to take up his whole head. So we became lungers, unwelcome, desperate, and sweating under an unspeakably hot sun—all for the promise of a cure.

We stayed the first night in a generous family's tent. The mother was sick and two of the children. Their skin was burned near to blistering from being out in the sun during the day, anything to get out of the stuffy canvas tent. The entire tent was about two hundred square feet with a hole in the top to let out smoke if they made a fire, which they never did. They hadn't expected the heat; we hadn't expected the heat. Our eyes were bloodshot and dry, our skin itched and burrs stuck us and caught in our clothes every time we went outside. By the second day when our own tent was slung up, heavy canvas suffocating in the one hundred and ten degree heat, we were all so dehydrated that we could only lay on the sandy floor and wait for dark so we could walk the mile to the Canal. Father growled about wanting whiskey. Mother stroked Braden's hair and said, "Hush. You're just worn out." He didn't fight with her on it. I could have gone for a cold pint myself.

December 25th, 1903

Women from the Presbyterian Church visited our tent city. They brought oranges and canned food. Braden smiled as he sucked the flesh of the fruit from the rind and for this my sternly Catholic parents said nothing but "God bless" to the full-skirted Yuletide angels. Later, I overheard Mother saying a prayer for the women, apologizing for them for not going to confession or honoring the Pope. I know she misses mass in Boston but I am relieved to not have a church to go to. I haven't seen prayer change anything.

Father somehow managed to kill a quail and between that and the angels, Christmas felt real for a few precious moments. Braden saw light and hope on the faces of our parents despite his near constant haze of pain. For them he even forced down three bites of quail.

Later he coughed so hard he threw it back up. At least there was the orange this morning.

I miss David greatly but it feels crass to mourn for someone who is still attainable, who walks in this world and not the next.

Something I have not mentioned to my family: that one of the women saw me scribbling in this journal. “You can read and write?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Can you do your figures? Simple ones, addition and subtraction?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I was guarded. I didn’t like the surprise in her voice.

“You know you could work at one of the sanitoriums. They are always looking for help these days.” What she was not saying was that the nurses and doctors who are qualified for the work don’t want it. They don’t want to work around the sick because when it finally comes down to it, TB is just as contagious from the rich as from us. She gave me an address. Told me to go tomorrow. The idea of earning wages excites me. I could buy David a ticket join us out here. I let myself imagine Braden in those white mansions, a clean bed and his own space, three big meals a day. With me and David both working we might be able to afford it. I’ll write to him and ask.

Mother would love it if he were here. She’s said over and over how sorry she is I was dragged away from him. I tell her over and over Braden is my flesh and blood and it was my choice. She would like another man around taking care of things but I just want to lay my head on David’s shoulder. The work I can take care of myself.

January 1st, 1904

I began work today. It was quite easy to get the job once they understood I was living out in Sunny Slope and must have no fear of the disease if I were willing to stay in these tents. They have not seen me try not to breathe while Braden hacks and coughs into the blackness of our tent at night. They haven't seen me walk to the Canal for water as slowly as possible to avoid being in the tent city where there is a toxic bonfire of burning dead. My skin crawls when the smoke changes direction and seeps through our canvas walls. But death is an everyday part of life in Sunny Slope and it will be no different here.

The sanitorium has grass—green, silky grass that makes me want to take off my shoes and have a picnic. The Arizona Canal allows irrigation on that side of the city and large, emerald lawns surround the facility. I think of the dry dirt floor of our tent and Braden choking on the dust that constantly whirls around Sunny Slope. A wave of anger, a near constant companion, makes my stomach pitch.

My first task was to pull the patients lying on their beds out onto the wide porches. The beds are on runners and have small wheels and no great energy was expended. Many of them, so used to the ritual, did not even wake up as I threw open their doors and dragged them out into the sun.

Next, we served breakfast. “How do we get them to eat?” I asked the nurse I was assisting. Her name is Helen. She lost her husband to tuberculosis when they first came out to Phoenix five years ago. I like her; nothing seems to bother her and she told me right off she didn't want to see me cry.

“The patients must finish their entire plate of food,” she said not really answering my question. “A balanced diet is crucial to gaining weight and allowing the body to store strength.”

The heaping plates of cheesy eggs and bacon made my stomach growl. I'd only had a piece of bread before I walked the two miles from Sunny Slope. I expected them to behave like Braden, shoving food around until it got cold, forcing down only a bite or two before he went back to sleep. Few did. The patients seemed to have good appetites. Later when I saw the tonics used to soothe their raw throats I understood why Braden doesn't eat. It hurts. I said as much to Helen and she gave me a small bottle of syrup and told me not to tell anyone where I got it.

All pulled out in a row the beds were only about three feet apart and the patients chatted and laughed with each other over the meal like they were at a weekend social. Only a third or so have Braden's sunken cheeks. Some can even be mistaken for perfectly healthy but tuberculosis is sneaky and cunning. Helen tells me these near-vigorous bodies house the plague that will continue bringing them to the brink of death for decades to come before they actually succumb to the thing.

"The healthier ones will ask to leave," Helen told me. "They will tell you they've been fine for weeks. You mustn't encourage their illusions. They'll relapse; they all do."

"So it is not really a cure, this desert air and sun?" I asked, thinking, of course, of Braden.

"It's only a different place to die." She stalked off to other duties. The patient in the bed we had been standing next to was awake. She looked at me straight on with eyes that seemed too large and black, a doll's eyes.

"I'm sorry," I told the patient. "You shouldn't have to hear things like that."

She just shrugged and continued to stare.

January 5th, 1904

Mother is dead. She became ill three nights ago, coughing and coughing. She gripped her chest and cried out with every breath, she sweated with fever and spat blood onto the dirt floor of our tent. I watched it get trampled into mud by my frantic father who forced water down her throat. Galloping consumption—a disease strong and swift enough to be given the attributes of a horse, an animal larger and heavier and faster than its master. TB has no master; no doctor or scientist alive has figured how to make the thing obey, how to even make it trot instead of gallop.

Back at work this morning, Helen told me it goes so quickly because the disease gets into the patient's bloodstream. The tuberculosis can attack the whole body at once. "It is a fast and violent death," she said as if I didn't already know. As if I hadn't cleaned blood out of the tent all night.

I struggled with her rule against crying all day though now that I am home with Father and Braden crying seems even more impossible. Braden refuses food. Father stares at nothing. Funerals are a luxury reserved for the people at the sanitoriums. In Sunny Slope the bodies are burned to prevent further contagion. There is nothing left of her now but her Bible and the straw hat that Braden wears.

Of the three of us only I went with the men who dragged her body out to the fire. There was still blood on her lips and I wiped it away with my skirt. "Careful," one of the men said, "or you'll have to burn that too."

If ever there were a picture of hell on earth, that bonfire is it. The fuel, bodies that only hours ago were loved ones, smells acrid and sharp. Public safety, the good of the many is at stake. I covered my mouth with the collar of my shirt and tried not to breathe. I

watched Mother's body swing twice between the men before they heaved her onto the flames. Her hair moved as if she were alive, the deep brunette strands catching the light of the fire.

Even mothers burn easily in the desert. I walked for miles as night fell. The thought of going back into the tent, packed with the thick air of grief and the decaying smell of illness, was impossible.

I am surprised at Braden's dignity in the face of this sudden grief. Perhaps he is simply baffled that it was not him that died first. Perhaps he knows that he will see Mother again sooner than the rest of us. I hope the idea brings him a measure of calm. I haven't believed in God for years, not since the poor started dying off in droves in Boston, not since women who threw themselves onto their knees and prayed again and again were so thoroughly ignored. I see no reason to believe that heaven is anything more than a colorful poster promising a fake cure. And if by some stretch of the imagination we make it there? Even in my wildest fantasies I cannot believe our poor and sick souls would not also be quarantined.

January 8th, 1904

Some of the patients were singing after lunch today. I asked how they had come to sing together and they said proper breathing from the diaphragm strengthened their lungs.

"You can measure your condition by how many bars you can sing without taking a breath," a woman with round cheeks and a slight sunburn told me. She belted out the first few lines of "Morning Has Broken" and some of the patients in the circle clapped for her.

Others stared at her, perhaps affronted by her showmanship. One took a deep breath to join in and coughed through the lines.

“Join us,” one said. “You can be the lungs we measure up to.”

“I don’t like hymns,” I told them, despite the tickle in the back of my throat, a yearning for comradeship. “What else do you sing?”

To this they had no answer.

January 10th, 1904

Life goes on without Mother. I work hard during the day. I cook what meager rations of food we can afford for Braden and Father. The syrup Helen gave me is helping a bit. His cough is less harsh and he eats a whole meal a day. Father can’t work, can’t leave Braden and the close, canvas walls of our tent are making him into a feral, angry man. I half expect him to run off into the night to join the coyotes, to howl out his loss.

He’s drinking.

I give him money to buy supplies while I’m away and he buys a few things and spends the rest on whiskey. Braden told me since I’ve been too exhausted to notice much of anything. Mother kept him close to sober. She allowed him a drink on Sundays and holidays, even had a sip for herself to celebrate God’s presence among us. He was never belligerent but I suppose now we know that was just because of her. Braden says he talks of going back to Boston. Braden says he thinks it’s Braden’s fault she is dead.

“I’m sure he didn’t say that,” I said patting the sweat from Braden’s forehead and feeling the anger boiling in my stomach.

But he said it again at dinner and for this I told him to get out, to go sleep it off. I

fastened the buttons and ties that face the inside of the tent. I swallowed down the tears rising in my throat and tried to chase the image of Mother's hair in the firelight from my mind. Father fumbled for a bit from the outside. He gave up and yelled until the family in the tent next door came out and spoke to him. I couldn't hear what they said.

In Sunny Slope it is unseemly to react to death this way—behavior that assumes your grief is greater than the grief of those around you.

January 15th, 1904

Haven't seen Father in days. I'm paying the neighbors too much of my salary to watch Braden while I work.

January 19th, 1904

Still nothing from Father.

Going mad is easy here where nothing and no one is on your side. When I think about him during the day, I think about him being dead and it keeps me from being angry. When I hear the coyotes at night I think about him being alive and shouting his grievances to the stars and it makes me feel sorry for all of us.

I did hear back from David. *I can't see how I could be true to myself and my people out West. How can you bear it? Especially now. I heard about your mother and my heart aches for you. Boston misses you. I miss you.* I balled the thing up and fed it to the fire.

January 20th, 1904

I woke up with David's words pestering me. I *do* miss Boston. I miss the things my

mother and father never knew about, namely, the pubs. David liked that I went out for a pint with him, liked that I was a woman unafraid of the realm of men. But I suppose that was a novelty, something charming, while making a living in the desert hundreds of miles away makes me unruly.

I know that letter will be the last I hear of him.

He'll marry a sweet girl like my mother who takes nips from the whiskey now and then, who will go with him to political rallies until she has his children. She'll then stay home and bake loaves of brown bread and he'll say they taste just like the old country though he was born, like me, in Boston.

I believe there will be days when I am jealous of this woman of his. I believe there will be days when I look into Braden's eyes and cannot appreciate the life in them, when all I will be able to muster is resentment.

January 21st, 1904

I woke up this morning wondering, *if Braden dies will I go back home?* The answer: I don't know, but I don't think so. Leaving the people I'm taking care of would be like leaving Braden—and if his body is here and mother's ashes are here and father's body is here in some form, breathing or not—how can I leave? And at best, if Braden lives for years, how will we afford to go back to Boston when my pay goes to feeding us and having someone watch him during the day?

When I heard the patients singing today I interrupted. "I'm going to teach you a new song," I told them. I sang:

Well it's all for me grog, me jolly, jolly grog,

It's all for me beer and tobacco.

For I spent all me tin on the lassies drinking gin,

Far across the western ocean I must wander.

Most of the women gaped; the men regarded me sternly. One of the Presbyterian women visiting from the church called for me to *stop that this instant*, but my voice, once released was unconcerned with what I *should* be doing. I *wanted* the song to push out into the ears and hearts of everyone there.

I had gone through the whole first verse when I felt a warm arm around my waist. Helen was tugging me first to the left then the right. We swayed and sang:

Where are me boots, me noggin', noggin' boots,

They're all gone for beer and tobacco.

For the heels they are worn out and the toes are kicked about

And the soles are looking out for better weather.

We both broke her rule about crying at work. The doctor told us to go home for the day. To come back in the morning with our minds right and our heads on straight. We walked out the door not into snow flurries and raw cold, but into the bright sun, a temperate day that would have us sweating in a mile or so nonetheless. We parted ways, squeezing hands quickly and in that brief contact was an accord between peers. I feel the role of caretaker, mother to many. I am no longer a daughter.

I walked back to Sunny Slope off the road where the sand is deeper. I trudged through as if it were a bank of snow while I shielded my eyes from the sun and the double glare from the orange sand so similar to the glare that causes snow blindness at home.

CHAPTER 9

LOVE APPLE

He called me Tommy, short for Tomato because I was his Love Apple. It was the only pet name I'd ever liked. No *honey* or *sweetie* or *babe*. Tommy was a masculine nickname that made me feel strong and fun and a little punk. I had asked my mom, gone now, gone since I was eleven, why she hadn't named me something like that. When I was twenty-one a man gave me the gift my mother never did: *Tommy*.

Graham, forty-three, married, had to explain the name to me. That the French called them *pommes d'amour*. When tomatoes were first brought to Europe they had never seen anything like it. They were exotically Western and smelled of lush, green summers, heat, a plant that shared soil with chili peppers and maize. After briefly declaring tomatoes poisonous, great French minds of the sixteenth century decided they were a gift, an aphrodisiac. The name stuck. He kissed me in between words and I liked the sharp stubble on his face and the light smattering of grey hair around his temples that I could put my fingers in. His ears were a little too big. I thought him wise and worldly but he didn't stick around.

The car accident went like this: I was driving his car, a sweet little Porsche Cayman, bright red. He indulged me like that. I was just okay at driving stick but that wasn't what caused the wreck. We were pulling up to an intersection and the light was yellow. "Blow through it! You've got the horsepower," he said. So instead of downshifting I hit the gas on that bad boy and that's when the car in front of me decided at the last minute that it would stop at the light and I plowed right into the back of it. The airbag broke my jaw, the windshield spidered, steam rendered the car in front of us invisible. Graham was yelling at

me and my ears were just ringing and ringing. His voice sounded far away and he had a cut above one eye that made him look roguish, like James Bond. He was yelling about insurance premiums like I would care how much it would all cost when I couldn't even move my mouth to talk. I passed out but right before I did I noticed paint from the Cayman embedded in the boring, taupey, champagne of the Camry in front of us. It made me proud.

At the hospital I got a box of chocolates with a note attached to it:

Lindsay,

I think we should just call this what it is. I'm sure your older man phase will be over soon anyway.

Best,

Graham

He didn't call me Tommy in the note, the first affront. He never seemed to be worried about his wife finding out about us. He claimed they had something like an open relationship though who knows if that was true. And "best"? Best what?

The nurse was reading over my shoulder without shame and the look on her face made it clear she thought my life pathetic. She was all, "Sorry, honey. He sounds like an ass." She might feel differently if she knew I was a home-wrecker. She fluffed the pillow behind my head and put tissues on the bedside table. I couldn't say anything and I couldn't eat the chocolates but I liked looking at the box, heart-shaped with an inlaid pattern of vines and flowers. I wondered if Graham had gotten the car fixed and how much it cost him. I hoped it was expensive. I liked the idea of continuing to impact his life like maybe the air vent would always whistle or the left headlight would waver when he went around corners or

his radio would never tune into the station we were listening to when we crashed. I was willing to cling to relevancy.

My dad and my brother, Dylan, came to visit me. I indicated with a slight nod and a wave that they should eat the chocolates. They did but they also read the note, which I had not indicated. “Linds, you’re such a mess,” my dad said. He ignored my sex life as best he could.

It was hard to look miffed with scaffolding around my face. Miffed came across most in the mouth, I thought. I needed that thinning of the lips, the tightness that forced pink to white. I cut my eyes at him to show I was strong and scrappy but he leaned over and tucked my hair behind my ear and missed the point entirely.

Dylan slid down in his chair. “I feel sick,” he said gripping his stomach. The chocolates were gone. The least they could have done was describe them to me. Were they truffles? Chocolate covered cherries? Those were most romantic. Something with salted caramel or rose water? But they just dug in, smacking their lips and licking their fingers as I tried to remember what Graham’s kisses felt like. I was more than ready for them to leave when the nurse came back to say visiting hours were over.

The hospital was boring after the initial excitement. The morphine was nice. The bags of liquid vitamin food were not. I had way too much time for reflection. Like always, I thought about sex. I wondered for the millionth time if sex was what got me in trouble or if it was just me or if I wasn’t even in trouble and car wrecks and men were just part of life. One thing for sure: if there was anything more comforting and life affirming than an orgasm, I couldn’t think of it. I didn’t know then how natural it is to think about sex, to crave sex, to fantasize, to masturbate, how empowering all of it can be.

Losing my virginity went like this: I was fourteen, a freshman in high school and I was at a varsity football game. I was doing my version of slutting it up, wearing a white t-shirt that my two best friends and I had written school spirit crap all over with paint pens and glitter, purple Sofie shorts rolled not once, not twice, but three times, and black and purple striped knee socks. I was feeling pretty hot. The stadium was packed. Friday night meant students, faculty, and parents alike were ready to cut loose. The concession stand was really where it was at; people hung around and checked each other out, got flirty. I ordered a Styrofoam cup of Cajun boiled peanuts and leaned all jaunty against the fence behind the bright orange Timbo's Peanuts truck. I was sucking the soft peanuts out of their spicy shells without using my fingers, just my tongue and teeth like the girls and I had practiced.

Marion Jones, junior year hurdles champ caught my eye. I had spotted him the spring before when I skipped eighth grade Global Studies to watch high school track practice. He was gorgeous, actually looked like a man instead of a stick figure, dark skin, leg muscles like you wouldn't believe – the definition in his calves, goddamn. His lips were dry and cool like the fall night around us and the juice of the peanuts on my lips wetted his and warmed the kiss. Sex under the bleachers is a cliché but as they say, whatever, whatever, I don't care. That was how it happened. And maybe I liked that I had seen it in a movie. And maybe I liked that my dad didn't come to the games. And maybe I thought of myself as free. I had gravel in my pants afterward and I didn't really know what to say to him so I avoided him altogether.

The second time I had sex was scary. It was in the bathroom of a Circle K. After that there were no holes that hadn't been filled and that made me feel like a war vet.

I woke up freezing. Buzz, buzz, Miss Nurse, another blanket please. I pointed to my legs, rubbed my hands up and down my arms. I spent the rest of the night kicking the covers off then pulling them back on again. Did you know you could get a fever just from laying in bed too long? Dumb.

Here's something, *the* thing, I guess: my mom was raped and murdered outside a crappy bar when I was eleven. My parents had divorced the year before and as I understood it at the time the divorce was caused by the very strong eggnog she had made at Christmas. It made me dizzy and my head ached and it turned out there was quite a bit of vodka in it. She forgot and poured me a big glass. She picked she grabbed me, swung me around in circles, and we giggled together. She was present, met my eyes, then she tripped on some toys and we both fell hard on the floor. Bam! Moment over. Dad was so pissed. I hyperextended my elbow but I was happy to dance with her and I tried not to cry so she wouldn't feel bad. The doctor said Superman would be similarly injured if Superman flung his arms out too hard while taking flight. He was an idiot, obviously, since Superman can take a bullet without getting hurt.

God, my dad took it hard. The things he said, they were just this side of victim blaming. Things like, "Of course this would happen to her" and "What do you think she was doing at that bar?" and "I told her. I told her." He didn't tell me whatever it was he had told her so often but at twenty-one I was starting to figure it out. Mom had an *appetite* just like me.

I read somewhere that men are much more likely to enact crimes with a gun than

women. Women typically choose something less violent, gentle even, like poisoning. Something that allows the victim to fade out of being. Men use guns, force the end on their victims with a bang all noisy and messy. That's how my mom went out, shot in the gut, full of a stranger's semen.

Dylan saw Mom's ghost in the house all the time after that. Sometimes she was mad, sometimes sad, but never drunk. Not anymore. We thought it was a phase, Dad and I, but he never grew out of it. I mean, I wet the bed until I was twelve, had these crazy nightmares. The hospital bed crackles just like the special water-proof mattress pad I had underneath my deer and rabbit covered sheets. Twenty-one is twelve backwards and for the first few days here I was peeing in bed but I had a catheter and thank god they took that out. Of all the unsexy things I could think of, a bag of pee hanging by your bed was top of the charts.

My dad did not handle the ghost thing well. What I would have done, if I were the parent, would be deny, deny, deny. Maybe make some tea, leave on a nightlight. Instead he jumped onboard the crazy train, became a believer in the afterlife, in spirits, in communing with the dead. He paid a psychic to come to the house and hold hands with him and Dylan around the kitchen table. She had big curly hair and nails that were always painted some shade of blue. We could have made it work, my dad cried. Why wasn't I enough, he demanded from the air around him. Mom and Dad did not have the same ideas about marriage, ownership, ego.

I did not participate in these readings. I listened to boy bands loudly upstairs and touched myself. It was the safest time to do it with them downstairs, distracted. It bothered

me that they were grieving this way, pretending like she wasn't just gone. Completely gone. But this was the silver lining. It started to get to the point that I got excited whenever the psychic's car pulled into the driveway. She would walk up to the door in her scarves and jangling necklaces and I would feel the anticipation building, tingling. The next hour was all mine. I chased the feeling while they chased Mom and we each found the relief we needed.

It got bad though, those two and their ghosts. Out of nowhere at breakfast Dad would say to my brother, "Feel her?" and my brother would nod his head, eyes big.

"Hey, Mom," he would say and we would all wait for an answer. "She's sad today," my brother would say after a long pause and Dad would nod and push his eggs around his plate. When he looked up it was only to shrug at the air around him.

I felt the lack of having a mom most when it came to understanding sex. I let myself wonder if she could tell Dad some advice to give me about being a woman. I didn't want to tell Dad to ask the ghost about getting my period or how long I should wait to have sex but I hoped he would just do it on his own, being a lost single father and all. Then, of course, I'd be stern, remind myself I didn't believe in ghosts, that hope was dangerous. When I did get my period I just wrote "tampons" on the grocery list. He got them and we never talked about it. I didn't know Mom was waiting to talk to me. Waiting not until I'd had sex but until I'd had my first real orgasm: clit and g-spot lit up together with such crystalline intensity I couldn't see.

My longest relationship was with my boyfriend senior year of high school. He wanted to wait until he was engaged to have sex. I changed his mind. The sex didn't get

really good until our six-month anniversary. His parents were at their high school reunion and his little brother was at a slumber party. The house was ours and he cooked me dinner, Hamburger Helper, which I swore made his cum taste weird. There was a hot tub on his screened in back porch and we spent a lot of time there. We drank flavored Smirnoff minis. My favorite was whipped cream, his was watermelon. It was the first time I had been naked outside and the sheen on our skin from the steam and humidity made us look like water nymphs, lithe and sleek. Maybe that made the sex good. Maybe it was because his endurance had gotten better. Maybe it was just because he finally wasn't scared of his parents or God or whatever had made him think marriage came first. I never asked and he never told me. He was on the track team too but I wouldn't say I had a type. He was skinny and white and shy. And he was my age. I read this thing about hot tubs messing up your sperm count and if that's true he's totally screwed because he spent a ton of time soaking in there.

That night was the first time I saw Mom. I was back at home, just out of the shower, wrapped in my towel and sitting on my bed listening to the quiet house settle. I was proud and excited. The potential for sex, all kinds of sex, culminating in that feeling overwhelmed me.

“It's a relief, isn't it?” She was sitting right next to me.

“It is,” I said. “I feel happy.”

“Don't be scared about how it ended for me,” she said. “Your appetite is a gift.”

Dylan visited without Dad. “Hey, sis.” He was happy to have somewhere to drive on his own besides another trip to his best friend's down the street. Or Sonic.

“Dad let you take the car?” I wrote on a pad of paper.

“Yep.” What a great conversationalist. He was rubbing the corner of the blanket on my bed. He might have been high but it was hard to tell with him sometimes. He was a bit spacey even when he wasn’t high. A burn out, some people would call him. Not me. To me he was just Dylan, my brother, my best friend for a while, my twin when it came to taste in movies. We made mac and cheese the same way, we talked to dogs the same way, we preferred objects around us to have no fewer than three nicknames. For example, gummy worms were yummy buggies, rainbow wriggles, or hakunamatatas based on the scene in *Lion King* where Simba learns to eat bugs with Timon and Pumbaa.

Writing on that pad of paper sucked. I would much rather have talked. I could’ve talked all day. Even more, I would have liked to talk to Graham. He told great stories. I think that was one of the reasons he liked being with me—I was easy to please. He’d start running his mouth about Italy and I was all ears, impressed. Older women have been to Italy themselves and just don’t give a shit, maybe. I don’t know if my mom went to Italy or if she would have been impressed that Graham went every three months. He talked about taking me. That would have been rad. Had Mom gone anywhere cool? Did she sleep with younger men and regale them with her travel tales?

“Tell me a story,” I wrote on the pad of paper and showed it to Dylan.

“Chicken scratch,” he said but launched into a story about his friend Toby going out with a girl he, Dylan, had a crush on. It was just the kind of story I would’ve usually loved. I would’ve wanted to know exactly what the girl looked like and what it was about her that Dylan liked and if he had made a move yet and if he hadn’t no wonder she was going out with Toby. But Dylan was distracted, couldn’t seem to hold onto the thread of the story the

way Graham could. Plus he wouldn't quit rubbing the blanket on my bed. I was about to call him on it when he said, "Mom's here."

I rolled my eyes and poked him in the ribs wishing I could say something. I had never told him or Dad that I saw her too. It was the only way to avoid their heaps of feelings. They didn't understand I had to do things my way. Sometimes my way was Mom's way and Dad was terrified I'd end up like her.

"No, seriously," he said and pushed away my hand. He was looking just past the TV. Ugh. "Hey, Mom," he said, then to me, "You should talk to her. I bet she sticks around awhile." He gave me an awkward pat on the head, waved easily at the corner of the room and walked out. I looked but couldn't see her. My brain was foggy, probably because of the painkillers.

When he left I thought I might try my old trick of getting off: regroup, forget, ignore. I closed my eyes but I could still feel how bright the room was, fluorescent, unattractive. I sent my hand creeping down my stomach, under the papery gown. It was clammy and the wiring around my jaw made it impossible to bite the pillow or pant or even adjust the angle easily. I read somewhere that women respond well to the sounds of sex, that if you are having sex but not getting into it you should moan anyway and your body will respond. I was too aware of the open door, the beeping from the room next door, the slap of clipboards at the nurses' station. I knew it wasn't going to work and I felt the tingling not of pleasure, but of panic.

I buzzed for the nurse and pointed at the TV. She turned it on and handed me the remote. "Nothing but soap operas this time of day," she said. "I never cared for them. Too many twists." She didn't expect me to respond, obviously. The nurses probably liked

having a patient that couldn't talk back. She was right about the shows though, so boring. I tried to stay focused even on the commercials so I wouldn't have to think about Mom. I didn't look at that corner at all. I gave myself a headache not looking and I buzzed, buzzed, buzzed the nurse for more painkillers.

The first guy I slept with in college was Simon. I met him at orientation and we joked with each other as we toured campus and drank stale coffee. He was as talkative as me and more than a few times people around us *ssshhhhhed*. He said he was raised to do things by the rules and that he'd like to take me out to dinner before we went to the welcome party that night. Well, fine. I grew up getting off while my dad hung on a psychic's every word. I didn't see what that had to do with how we were expected to interact with people now. If he wanted to party why didn't he just say so? Maybe he had sisters; dating boys close to their sisters was tiring. All that attentiveness and confidence that they knew what women wanted. Graham always just did what *he* wanted, which was way better for me than boys expecting gratitude for things I didn't want in the first place. Simon tried to open doors for me and again and again we bumped into each other as I tried to walk through on my own.

It was a good thing I ate before that party though because we got pretty wasted. College was boring like that. Preconceived ideas of what we should all like doing and we did it and we liked it and the cycle continued. No surprises just drinking and dancing, cramming for exams, fighting with roommates. College felt inescapable, a trap set by the well-meaning, less-educated parents of the world, my dad included.

So Simon and I ate dinner at a pizzeria, great garlic bread, fresh veggie toppings. We

had no trouble talking and later when we were having sex we kept right on talking. Dirty things. It was fun. Made me wonder if my mom would take issue with me liking it when someone called me a slut. Made me wonder if anyone had called her a slut in bed or out. Made me wonder how many people she slept with before Dad. Hard to say what kind of mother she would have been to a teenage girl. After the divorce we lived with Dad so even in that year before she died she was fairly absent.

Mom visited that night, too, after Simon went home. I hadn't showered yet, letting myself revel in all the sticky, sweaty, humanity of the night. The smell of sex is still one of my favorite things. I was nursing the beginnings of a hangover and was happy to see her sitting on the long, skinny dorm bed.

"I do miss nights out," she said.

"How do you feel about giving blow jobs?" I asked her, ready this time with my questions.

She smiled. "I dig them. You know, it can depend on the person, how comfortable they are with it. I was dated a guy who was on the smaller side down there and he hated them. Didn't want me paying such close attention."

"I think they're fun. I love when guys are surprised I like them."

"You're at the top of your game, huh?" she said. Then she was gone. I don't know why she can't stay very long. Maybe it's too taxing.

I thought about what my first words would be when the cage came off my face. I wanted to wait and save them for someone besides the nurses. I could call Graham and say, "I'm free! Is the car out of the shop?" But if he didn't answer all the anticipation of being

able to talk again would diffuse, wasted, and I would be left with my own thoughts again at the beep of the recorded answering service. Loneliness swept through me at the very idea leaving me feeling drenched and cold and I already felt like I was on an alien planet in that damn white room anyway, so no, no, no, Graham would not work.

The sweetest thing to do would be to save them for Dad and Dylan. Tell them how much I appreciated them coming to visit, make a joke about our family getting through anything. The idea of being genuine with them made me queasy. Dylan was the genuine one, present and sweet even in adolescence, even when it was hard. My cloak of sarcasm felt permanent and I decided not to decide about my first words.

Dylan and Dad came back bringing a strained vibe with them. They weren't making eye contact. Dad picked at his cuticles.

"What's up your butts?" I wrote on my paper. Dad finally met Dylan's eyes and shook his head, which just seemed to piss Dylan off more.

"Dad is fucking the psychic." I raised my eyebrows and felt waves of skin shoot up my forehead towards my hairline. Surprise. I pictured them together, Dad's fingers caught in her curly hair. She'd take her time putting her rings and necklaces back on.

"Dylan, I asked you not to bring it up today," Dad said. The skin around his thumb nail started to bleed.

Dylan ignored him. "I caught them at it the other day. Skipped seventh period and went home early thinking Dad would be at work. Those two were going at it upstairs. I could hear them as soon as I walked in."

"How long?" I wrote, looking at Dad.

He started to talk but Dylan roared over him, “Years! Ridiculous! He claims it makes him feel closer to Mom.” He paced around, kicked at the leg of his chair, missed, sat down hard on the end of my bed.

“It *does*,” Dad said. “It *does* make me feel closer to her. And you can’t blame me for moving on. We were divorced anyway and do you even know why?”

“She drank,” Dylan said as I was writing the same thing. All the information we ever had.

“Yes, she drank. But she also cheated on me. Often.” Dad put the end of his thumb in his mouth, sucked away the blood and moved on to picking his index finger. “She picked men up at the bar. She wanted us to get off together talking about what she did with strangers.” His face was a twisted storm of emotion.

It really took the air out of the room. Dylan looked guilty. I was trying not to be excited about Mom’s sex life. I mean, obviously, it sucked for Dad and I would much rather she had waited until they were divorced but this was important. I felt a startling wall of sorrow and anger black out my thoughts.

“Please go,” I scrawled.

Dad was on the verge of tears and Dylan said, “Fine. I’ve got to meet my weed guy anyway.” The words were a dare to Dad. Say something, they demanded. Funny that he got mad at Dad and I got mad at Mom. Amazing, the strength of betrayal from the other side of the grave.

“Me 2,” I wrote and pressed the nurse’s button. When she came in I pointed to my jaw and made a face that looked something like pain and took comfort in the fact that Dylan and I would be high together.

The anger and the ghost stuff were entwined, messy. To me Dad and his psychic were just two delusional people looking for comfort. But Dylan need the psychic, too. The way he needed to talk to Mom so often. His comfort had gotten distorted and dirtied up.

I couldn't help but think about Graham and his open relationship with his wife. If it was real, if he wasn't just flat out cheating like my mom. What had she told men when they asked about her wedding ring? How did she disengage with them after a rendezvous or two? When I met Graham I'd been having nightmares almost every night like I had when I used to wet my bed, though thank fuck I wasn't doing that anymore. My roommates were always banging on the wall, telling me to shut up. They said I was screaming. It must have been creepy to hear, poor girls. I started trying to stay up nights and sleep during the day in between classes while they were out and about. On one of these nights I went to a quiet martini bar that wasn't much for the college crowd but was perfect for getting work done. I had a textbook, my laptop, and my third martini in front of me when Graham came over and started talking to me. For some reason the nightmares weren't an issue on the nights I stayed with him. It created some real confusion for me on days I didn't see him. My sleep schedule was ruined and once I fell asleep in class and scared the shit out of my professor when I woke up screaming. It was actually pretty good luck I got a medical withdrawal for the semester. My grades were terrible. What I'm trying to say is I get the comfort thing—I'm not that much of a bitch. We all need someone.

In the middle of the night I woke up and there was Mom sitting on the end of the bed. Her body weight pressed against my leg, even felt a little warm. Dylan would never let

me forget this. I pictured Dad and psychic in bed together, naked, talking about me finally *seeing*. No way I could tell them I saw her.

“Dylan always has tons to say to me. He doesn’t remember me alive as much though.” She paused. “You’re mad, huh?”

“Seems like you were a real bitch to Dad,” I wrote. I underlined the word *bitch*, something I’d never thought about her before.

“We just didn’t understand each other,” she said. “That’s no crime.”

“Not how he tells it,” I wrote.

“Linds, I know you know better. Nothing is so simple.”

Nothing was real. Maybe the hospital wasn’t real. Buzz, buzz, Miss Nurse. The cage around my face. Maybe I was vacationing in the south of France with Graham, a pitcher of sangria between us, my hair whipping in the salty breeze.

She saw me hitting the call button. “Dammit, Lindsay.”

The nurse shuffled in, tired, and the drugs, like waves, lulled me to sleep.

Dylan came back in the morning to take me home. He was chipper. Maybe he finally got laid. I focused on how much I hated the lighting in the room: too bright, too fake like that stupid empty box the chocolates came in. I couldn’t wait to leave. Though thinner, simpler wires had replaced the scaffolding and I could open my mouth a half inch, I didn’t say anything.

So many years thinking about how she died. I didn’t expect the jealousy to seep in,

make my skin crawl, make my stomach churn. The rape, so grotesque. The human body, something I so revere, a weapon. It was a sexual experience I had never had and couldn't arrange to have though I played out a rape fantasy with a guy from my Statistics class. He wouldn't talk to me afterwards and dropped the class. Graham said he'd be more than happy to act out similar scenarios but that really defeated the point. When I pointed that out he was mad, said, "Why'd you even bring it up?" So I just simmered in my jealousy and if I was honest, fear. I wanted the attention. Without attention I would disappear.

Mom would understand. The need for attention that drove her to sleep around on Dad, how it compounded into a need to drink then relive the experiences for Dad, a tortured, captive audience. I hoped I wouldn't turn out like that, hoped that the man who loved me, married me wouldn't be tortured by me and that I, in turn, wouldn't enjoy torturing him.

At home in my childhood room I called myself Tommy and touched myself. The long-awaited orgasm brought a flood of relief and I started to cry, a thankful cry. I was beginning to feel like myself again.

Dad banged around in the kitchen. The psychic was coming for dinner, no pretense of a reading, just a family gathering. Dylan stomped around his room, still pissed. If Mom was around she wasn't talking and I felt a little proud of her for leaving us alone. The sounds of the house wrapped around me nice and tight.

At first we sat around the table in silence. Glasses clanked, knives squealed against plates. I slurped soup through the wires. Dad patted the psychic's hand. Dylan rolled his eyes. I saw the chance to be the woman of the house, to put my family at ease rather than

rile them up. The words felt clunky and huge in my mouth as I began to speak. “The French called tomatoes *pommes d'amor*.”