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No Such Thing As Happiness

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NO SUCH THING AS HAPPINESS

by
Megan Lindsay

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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To Grandma Evelyn & PaPa Bill

ABSTRACT
MEGAN LINDSAY: No Such Thing as Happiness
(Under the direction of Beth Spencer)

This thesis contains a collection of short stories I have written over a two year period. Major themes include loss, healing, nature, mental health issues, and the ways in which relationships (familial, companionate, etc.) strengthen characters.

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“In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: it goes on.”

- Robert Frost

“But are we all lost stars, trying to light up the dark?”

- “Lost Stars”, Maroon 5

Introduction

This project originally began as a fantasy fiction creative writing thesis, which did not stick as I worked my way through my creative writing classes. Some fantasy elements remain, but my focus shifted to a different topic: the idea of happiness. I remember reading once that the idea of ‘obtaining happiness’ was an absurd Western notion, that we view happiness as a tangible object that you can possess. While reading *Cane* for my African American Literature class, I came across a passage that more eloquently describes the problem at hand:

There is no such thing as happiness. Life bends joy and pain, beauty and ugliness, in such a way that no one may isolate them. No one should want to. Perfect joy, or perfect pain, with no contrasting element to define them, would mean a monotony of consciousness, would mean death. (81)

I think there’s a certain frustration we feel, as people, when this ideal happiness can’t be obtained. But more importantly, this shows there is a fundamental misunderstanding about our own emotional health. Even at our happiest, our emotions aren’t static.

Psychologists, when talking about any kind of mental disorders, talk about them on a sliding scale, meaning there are various degrees to which people are affected. It’s not two separate circles of either “You have the disorder” or “You don’t have the disorder.” Our mental-emotional health isn’t as clean cut as physical disorders. On a daily basis we might feel sorrow, anger, joy, worry, excitement, and so on. The traditional ‘happily ever after,’ leaves quite a bit unsaid.

I fit the stories within the time frame of a seasonal year because of stories like “Moss Creek,” and “The Flower of Death,” which I had written in previous creative writing classes. I wasn’t sure of the overall theme of my thesis at the time, but my older stories had content I wanted to include. I eventually developed each story to deal with an emotional state that correlated with the season in which it was taking place. Weather conditions never play a large physical role within the story; what mattered more to me was the symbolic resonance. “Moss Creek,” for instance, largely occurs in the thawing out between winter and spring as Reagan tries to deal with her anxiety. Similarly, in “The Flower of Death,” Morgen is at an in-between moment in her life, dealing with the return of her ex-husband and looming personal loss, as the weather shifts from summer to fall. From these first stories, I built the rest of my thesis.

The seasonal progression of my stories reflects different states of mind, characters suffering through the worst moments of their lives and others who are at current high points or moments of stability. However, like Toomer’s quote said earlier, sorrow exists alongside happiness, beauty alongside ugliness. There is a kind of balance that exists in life in that the good and the bad moments are constantly counteracting each other. Life oscillates between good, bad, and every place in between, much like the seasons. Happiness may not be a constant, but neither is grief, anger, depression, or pain.

Of the ten stories in my thesis, five are less than a thousand words – I like to refer to them as my intercalary stories. Within each seasonal division, the shorter stories parallel the longer ones thematically. Each story is intended to resonate with its respective season and have moments of overlap with external stories while maintaining its individuality, much like how humans share similar experiences but react uniquely as

individuals. Also characteristic of my intercalary stories are the fantasy undertones. Excluding “The Flower of Death,” these stories are what remain of my original fantasy fiction thesis idea, little moments of magic between the longer pieces. These stories were the most fun for me to write, taking something as ordinary as a sunrise or a firefly and looking at them in a new way. A part of growing up is realizing the world isn’t a magical place. You outgrow Santa Claus, spells, superstitions, and the magical fog of childhood where nothing is limited. And that’s what great about writing: rediscovering a kind of magic in the world.

The Winter Stories

The winter stories are about loss. Albeit this is a constant theme throughout my thesis, but the winter stories, especially “Withered,” deal with the immediate impact of loss and the early stages of grief. Keely (from “Time Capsules”) and Kasey (from “Withered”) are both emotionally distant, dealing with loneliness, and trying to make sense of a world that has left them broken. This low moment in their lives is reflected in the icy winter weather. The parallelism between the two stories (and the ones that follow) is utilized to highlight the universalities of human experience. Grief is handled uniquely by each individual, but the experience can be shared. Despite the predominance of pain and loss in the winter stories, there is still love, loyalty, and hope. These things are not lost in sadness; we must simply dig deeper to find them.

In “Withered,” I modelled Kasey’s grieving a little bit on my own. I have not experienced much personal loss, but her initial numbness reflects how I felt when my grandfather passed away my senior year of high school. When a death occurs unexpectedly, you’re not necessarily given a chance to react, especially when the

visitation, funeral processes, and financial loose ends need to be taken care of. It's the moments almost immediately after these services that you have the chance to react.

That's when it settles heavily in your mind and you must bear it in whatever way you can. For Kasey, this means an emotional freezing, one in which she is still stuck by the end of her story. Her moment of healing, her spring, will come around in due time.

The Spring Stories

The spring stories are ones of healing and rejuvenation, of working toward a place of stability and happiness. In "Phoenix," the birch has that moment of rebirth that Cynthia's spider plant did not in "Withered." Although we lose people, there is life after death, in that the world keeps turning and people keep living. We either learn to keep moving or die prematurely. Reagan, Tyler, and Elise's father are learning to rebuild after hitting their respective low points.

In "Moss Creek," multiple types of healing occur for both Reagan and Tyler. Reagan struggles with her anxiety and how to shoulder outside expectations that don't necessarily align with her own desires. So she runs away, which I'm sure is not an uncommon reaction to feeling trapped by your own life. There have been many times when I wished I could pack up, drive somewhere new, and just start over; so I did what any writer would do: I wrote a story about a character who runs away. That's often the nature of anxiety, being afraid of facing someone or something head-on. Although "Moss Creek" is about facing these issues, recovery isn't an instantaneous thing. Neither Reagan nor Tyler necessarily handles his or her problems in a heroic manner, but Tyler teaches Reagan that she needs time to heal and it is okay to face obstacles on her own terms.

When Reagan's ready, she'll write again. And with a little more time, Tyler will return home to Nashville.

The Summer Stories

The summer stories are ones of stability. "Fetch" is a special case in that we momentarily take a step back from the main theme of loss. It provides a moment to distance yourself from the stories and process what is happening while reminding us of the cyclic nature of day and night, of the seasons, of life itself.

In "Suspended," Avery and Aunt Gwen deal with an older loss. Two years after Avery's parents were killed in an accident (the same one that killed Cynthia in "Withered"), her life is relatively stable and happy. The pain of her parents' absences weighs on her though, particularly in the ways she interacts with others. Aunt Gwen and Avery interact less as parent-child and more as equal adults that take care of each other. When necessary, Aunt Gwen provides parental guidance and authority while Avery helps Gwen through her depressive episodes. Aunt Gwen is very important to me because she's a character *living* with depression, something that needs to be better represented in media. Most of what I see dramatizes (and even romanticizes) it, by constantly showing the character at their absolute worst or being 'fixed' by some romantic interest. No other emotion, just intense sadness. But like I said earlier, mental-emotional health isn't that clean cut. With the help of therapy and medication, Aunt Gwen is able to live a relatively normal life. She's a complex person who experiences a full range of emotions with depression *not* depression with an underdeveloped, two-dimensional personality.

The Autumn Stories

The autumn stories are the ones that are perched on the precipice of something worse, like a rollercoaster about to swoop down into the unknown. The characters of “A Watched Pot Never Boils,” “The Flower of Death,” and “Crash Landing” are stuck in in-between moments. What does the future hold for them? There is a sense of forbidding unknown in these stories that opposes the more hopeful tones of the spring stories. This anticipation, this waiting for the leaves to fall, marks the ending of the old year and the beginning of the next, the renewal of the cycle.

“The Flower of Death” is the longest fantasy piece within my thesis. At the end of summer, Morgen’s day-to-day life, which has been relatively stable, is turned upside down as she struggles to accept her innate abilities, her ex-husband returns to town, and she realizes she’s about to lose a close family member or friend. Fantasy fiction does not have the best reputation in the literary world, so I tried to write a story that had fantasy elements that couldn’t easily fix all the character’s problems. In fact, Lloyd Alexander once said of the genre, “Fantasy is hardly an escape from reality. It’s a way of understanding it.” You can place characters in a magical universe but magic is never the actual solution to their personal problems. A lesson which Morgen learns when she must face the inevitability of death.

Frame of Reference

I didn’t originally intended to include this story in my thesis, but now I don’t think this collection would be complete without it. I have come to think of it as my epilogue story, in fact. It combines the anticipatory vibes of the autumn stories and the hopefulness of the spring stories. Although the message might seem cliché, it’s also

important. As a naturally pessimistic/realistic person, I frequently forget the power of positivity in difficult situations, but we all need something to hold on to, a way of giving weight to our happier memories and learning to let go of the painful ones. So yes, we are always on the precipice of something – good or bad – but we can't forget to live either.

Mental Health Issues

A subtler, but no less important, recurring theme is that of mental health: Kasey's and Tyler's grieving, Reagan's anxiety, and Aunt Gwen's depression and past suicide attempt. I'm exasperated and exhausted that mental health issues are so heavily stigmatized in our society. When our society insists people with anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, etc. are just looking to be given special treatment, people who suffer from these disorders are isolated and feel they can't reach out for help. These stories are for them, so that mental disorders may be better represented in literature. I have dealt with my own emotional lows, and at my lowest, reaching out for help would have been much easier if I hadn't felt isolated or that my problems were invalid. If I hadn't listened to people constantly telling me (and eventually I was telling myself) that others had it worse than me, I wouldn't have nullified my own experiences. This is a toxic way of thinking. Mental health issues are not a competition. People may not all suffer to the same degree, but it should be (and is) more important that they are suffering to begin with. So if no one else tells you, I will: your personal struggles and emotional experiences are valid. I hope you find the courage to ask for help and that you take care of yourself.

Time Capsules

Keely's boots crunched through the frost-covered bean fields. The winter stars glittered overhead and her flashlight cut a butter-yellow swatch of light into the surrounding darkness. She was looking for her father, who had disappeared three years earlier. She searched out of habit rather than hope of actually finding him.

Disappearances in Gordova were a frequent occurrence. A grandmother would leave for a quick Walmart trip, only to drive off into nonexistence. Or a group of high schoolers would hike along icy creek beds and return home minus one. Or a middle-aged farmer walking the lengths of his fields failed to walk back home. For a rather small town – fewer than 1,000 people – the missing person cases were alarmingly high. But most townspeople treated this number with an unnerving nonchalance. They had a tendency to forget about their missing relatives and friends, like a blanket of smoke had smothered their memories. So a neighbor would disappear and the citizens would search for one day and then life would go back to normal the next.

Keely knew that the people weren't so much disappearing, but falling out of time. Winter nights in Gordova were special, her uncle had taught her. Time worked differently in the winter when the night got still, the air frozen in place, you just might find yourself in a wrinkle, a bubble. For some, this capsule was a moment of peace, a pre-universe silence to soothe away the currents of personal stress. Others, though, got swept away, locked within a moment of time.

Uncle Cam said that's what happened to her father and she believed him. Keely didn't remember a version of her father that wasn't distant and hollow. That's what her mother's death did to him, Uncle Cam had said, sucked the life right out of him. When he went on a walk on a brisk winter's evening three years ago, her uncle had been grimly unsurprised when he never returned.

"You can't walk without purpose in Gordova, Keely," he had said. "If you don't have an anchor, something to tie you here, you're just as likely to drift away."

"Dad?" Keely called. The brittle grass lining the irrigation ditch rustled in an icy gust of wind.

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"Any luck?" Uncle Cam asked when Keely stomped into the garage. He was stacking up the firewood he had cut earlier that day.

"Of course not," she said, sitting on a creaky, wooden chair to pull off her boots. "You don't come back from that. You told me so."

"That's not true," he said. He tossed the last log unto the pile and it clunked against the wall before settling into place. He wiped his hands on his pants. "I just said I'd never heard of someone returning. It doesn't hurt to look."

"What's the point if nothing'll come of it?"

"Don't think like that," Uncle Cam said. "You'll end up like the rest of 'em."

"I'm more grounded than Dad was, if that's what you're worried about."

"For now, but life changes you. Just look at your parents."

"Mom didn't disappear, though. She died." Keely set her snow boots beside the chair and followed her uncle into the kitchen.

“But your father did,” Uncle Cam said as he dragged out some pots for dinner.

“And your grandma.”

“Grandma? I thought she died too. We went to her funeral.”

“Your grandpa insisted we hold one after she disappeared from the hospital. Freaked out the nurses when the EKG stopped. No flatline, no nothing.”

“Why did she vanish?”

“She was, uh, a terminal cancer patient. She was hurting a lot. She probably slipped away in a moment when she wasn’t in pain.”

“Where do you think they go?”

“I don’t think they go anywhere. They’re just stuck outside of time, reliving and reliving a moment.”

“This family is sad,” Keely said, sitting at the kitchen table. She watched as Uncle Cam filled one of the pots with water and set it on the stove to boil.

“Not sad.” He pulled a can of green beans out of the cabinet and peeled open the lid. “Easily lost. Looking for some kind of escape from the pain. Besides, it’s not just our family. Life is hard, Keely.”

“I’m aware,” she said. “My mom’s dead and my dad might as well be. But apparently we’re the only ones strong enough to stick it out.”

“Don’t judge people too harshly,” he said, dumping the green beans into a second pot. “We have to forgive them their weaknesses. We’re not impervious or infallible. We need all the help we can get. And if people aren’t willing to be understanding, where does that leave us?”

“We’ve already had this lecture.”

“It doesn’t hurt repeating.”

“And repeating and repeating.”

Uncle Cam sighed. “Go wash your hands and help with dinner.”

Keely pushed in her chair and watched as he poured noodles into the pot of boiling water. “I know you’re worried, but I’m not going anywhere. Winter doesn’t last forever.”

## Withered

“What the fuck is wrong with this plant?” Cynthia shouts from the kitchen. There is the scrape of clay on the linoleum countertop and an aggravated sigh. “I know you’re laughing at me, and you can shut the fuck up.”

I peek my head into the kitchen. Cynthia has her hands on her hips, frowning at her spider plant like a disappointed mother. I smile. “Why do you even bother? You couldn’t even keep a cactus alive. I’m still not sure how you convinced yourself it needed so much water.”

“It was thirsty,” she says.

“Obviously, it wasn’t.”

“Maybe it needs a new pot? Something more fun. I saw some teacup-shaped pots at Walmart!”

“I don’t think it matters how decorative the pot is.”

“If you’re not going to help, then get out.”

“I don’t know if I can help,” I say. “I’m not an expert on spider plants. I’ve always kind of thought they were idiot-proof.” Cynthia huffed. “Just put it in a sunny spot and water it occasionally.”

“I did that,” she says, rubbing her hands over her face.

“Maybe we need a *larger* pot?”

“Maybe,” she says, nudging the generic orange clay pot.

“We could always stop by Home Depot on our way to the grocery store and ask the Garden associates for help.”

“Is their garden center even open in winter?”

“Don’t know,” I say as I unclip our shopping list from the refrigerator magnet.

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I wake to a white tiled ceiling and the steady beeping of a heart monitor. My head is throbbing, my wrist itches, and my muscles twinge in protest as I try to sit up.

“No, no, no,” a nurse in light pink scrubs says, coming up beside my bed, “stay still. I’ll raise the bed – you shouldn’t move too much.”

“What’s going on?” My tongue is heavy and awkward in my mouth, slurring my words. There’s a buzzing in my head that laps behind my eyelids. I am so tired, but unsettled. Something is off – am I panicky? – but I can’t pinpoint what. “Where’s Cynthia?”

“Shh,” the nurse says as the bed churns into an upright position. “You were in a car accident: broken left wrist and mild concussion. Four stitches from where your head hit the window.”

“What about Cynthia? Is she okay?”

The nurse tightly tucks the sheets in around me. Her silence makes me squirm, like she’s deliberately withholding information. Which must mean bad news... Did Cynthia maybe lose a limb? Or is she comatose? What isn’t the nurse telling me?

“You have some family here to see you. I’ll let them catch you up.”

“Family?” I haven’t talked to my parents for nearly five years. Who could have contacted them? I scratch at the tape holding my IV needle in place, anxious at the thought of seeing my parents. The nurse pushes my hand aside.

“Sit tight,” she says, then leaves.

As I wait, I close my eyes and try to remember what happened. My head throbs, as if recalling anything is physically painfully. When I try to press my fingers to my sore temple, I wince at the tenderness of my skin, bruised. With a gentler touch, I run my fingertips along a puckered area of skin – the stitches. I rub along the prickly threads. I let the small pulses of pain and the unfamiliar texture of my damaged skin distract me.

“Knock, knock,” says Diane, Cynthia’s mother, as she steps into the room.

I drop my hand to the bed. “Hey.”

She has a crumpled tissue in her fist, and as she steps closer, I can see her eyes are puffy. She’s wearing sweatpants – an article of clothing which I didn’t know she owned – and a faded sweater that says Lake Barkley, KY in large, swirling letters. She pulls a chair up to my bedside and settles stiffly into the cushions as if her joints can no longer bend.

“Yeah,” I say to the room, “this makes more sense.”

“What does?”

“You being here. The nurse said I had some family that wanted to see me. I didn’t think my parents could’ve really shown up. And they didn’t. That’s one mystery solved.”

“Why aren’t they here?”

“Cynthia’s my emergency contact,” I say, shrugging. “Where is she? How’s she doing?”

“Well, that’s the hard question,” Diane says. “You and Cynthia were in a nasty crash. Another couple T-boned the driver side at that intersection by Fenley – you know, the one with the blind curve. Cynthia didn’t see them when she pulled out onto the road. And well... here we are. The two in the other car – a man and woman – were dead on arrival. Left behind a teenaged daughter – I was in the waiting room when she arrived with her aunt. It was hard to watch.”

“And Cynthia?”

“They hit –” Diane chokes on her words. She swipes at her eyes with the old tissue. “They hit her side of the car. She made it to the hospital, but went into cardiac arrest. The ICU doctors couldn’t resuscitate her.”

“Cynthia died,” I say, the words rotten in my mouth. I clench my right hand into a fist – the other encased in hard plaster – and I can’t remember how to breathe.

“Yeah.” Diane is crying now, tears cut paths through her make-up. “Her chest was crushed, lungs pu-punctured.”

I let her cling to my hand, her fingers slick from her attempts to stop her tears. I stare at the wall.

My heartbeat pounds in my head: No-no, No-no, No-no.

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“Pass me your Jell-o,” Marley says from where she’s lounging in her hospital chair, feet resting on an identical rickety chair.

“No, it’s mine,” I say, pushing her hand away.

“You don’t even like Jell-o.”

“Maybe I do now.”

“Please.” She rolls her eyes. “I’ve known you since third grade. You’ve never once wavered on your hatred of gelatin. What’s up?”

I let her take the Jell-o this time when she reaches for it. “You know what’s up.”

“It’s more than just Cynthia.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Marley doesn’t push me. She spears the cherry Jell-o with a plastic spork while watching *Friends* on the static-y hospital TV.

“I could have gone to the visitation,” I finally admit. “I’m well enough physically... I just couldn’t go. So I lied to Diane.”

“I think she’d understand.”

“I lied.”

Marley slurps up more Jell-o. We watch as Rachel panics and handcuffs Chandler to one of the filing cabinets in her boss’s office. The crowd laughs at Chandler’s frustration, a drawer sliding out as he moves his hands.

“It’s all very complicated,” she says. “But I think it’s okay if you have this moment. One good bye is hard enough. It’s okay if you want to say one less.”

She sets the empty plastic cup and used spork onto the tray. She doesn’t say anything about the half-eaten Salisbury steak or the corn I had pushed around aimlessly in its little compartment.

“Thanks for sitting with me,” I say.

Marley squeezes my right hand. “Like I’d leave you here by yourself.”

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“Ready to go?” my nurse asks. She’s wearing purple scrubs today.

“No.” I’m being released from the hospital in time to attend Cynthia’s funeral. I don’t want to go, but I expect I’m not alone in that. Who *wants* to go to a funeral? I’m not sure I can face her family and our friends and the endless strings of *I’m sorry for your loss.-Are you okay?-Do you need anything?-We baked you a casserole so you don’t have to worry about cooking.*

“Chin up,” she says. With practiced movements, she helps me sit up on the bed and then shift into the wheelchair situated nearby. “Your mother-in-law is waiting in the lobby for you.”

“We weren’t even married. We were waiting until same sex marriage was legalized in the state.”

“You might as well have been, whether or not the rest of the world has caught up.”

I can see Cynthia in my mind, the Saturday morning sun glowing through our cream-colored sheets which were tented over our heads. Cynthia liked to make blanket forts. “Thanks.”

The nurse wheels me down the hall, past closed doors and the nurses’ station.

“There she is,” Diane says. She is standing in the middle of the waiting room. Her arms are resting limply by her side. She looks unmoored, standing in a sea of empty chairs.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” I say. I wipe my hands on my pants and the cast on my left hand grates into my leg. It’s oddly grounding.

Diane leans down and grabs my hands. “I appreciate you coming – I know this is hard for you. But I barely made it through the visitation by myself.”

I look over at a poster on the wall: “Have you gotten your flu shot?” it asks in thick, sans serif letters. “Sorry I wasn’t there. I- I wasn’t sure I could handle seeing Cynthia like that.”

“Don’t apologize,” Diane says as she stands up. “Grief is a tricky beast. It’s complicated and can take many forms, but don’t let someone call you selfish for mourning.”

I give the nurse a half-wave as Diane rolls me away.

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I’m not remotely religious. I don’t find the funeral service spiritually helpful. Instead, I am brittle like an empty paper mâché piñata that has taken one too many hits. I hold Diane’s hand through the entire ceremony, my fingers crushed painfully in hers. Marley occasionally nudges me with her shoulder, trying to reassure me.

I don’t sing. I don’t pray. I don’t respond with more than a mumbled, “Thank you,” when friends and family express their sympathies. I pick at the plaster on my cast until my fingertips are raw. And then Diane is wheeling me out to her gray Hyundai Sonata.

“A beautiful service,” she says, opening the passenger side door.

“Hm.” I stand, my back and legs stiff from inactivity, and duck into the car. Diane collapses the wheelchair and maneuvers it into the back seat.

“Cynthia said you were an atheist,” Diane says once she has settled into the driver’s side. “So I know it wasn’t much of a comfort for you.”

“It doesn’t bother you that I don’t believe in God?”

“No.” She starts the car and lets it idle as others prepare for the funeral procession. She looks in the rearview mirror and flicks a few stray hairs behind her ear. “We do the best we can with what we have. There is no proof one way or another that a God or gods or goddesses exist. Religion is a system of faith. For some of us, it is easier to hope that he or she exists and for others, it isn’t. I get that.” She glances at the hearse, lips wobbling. “I really do. Especially when I’ll be burying my baby in less than an hour...”

“I could have used a parent like you growing up,” I say.

“Did you ever contact your parents?”

“No.”

“You were in the hospital. Don’t you think they deserve to know?”

“You loved Cynthia unconditionally.” I slump in the seat to rest my head on the windowsill and wince as I bump my stitches. I shift again so that I’m resting my left elbow on the console. “My parents didn’t extend me the same courtesy.”

“Don’t say that – they love you.”

“I know they love me as much as they’re capable with their prejudices, but I can’t handle talking to them right now. They’d see Cynthia’s death as deserved, an act of God for sleeping with someone of the same sex, or some other bullshit. That’s not what I need right now. That’s why I’m atheist I think. Too many people using religion as an excuse to be shitty and prejudiced. I’m better than that.”

Diane pats my shoulder. She clicks her seatbelt into place and slowly follows the hearse.

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The lowering of Cynthia's coffin is a relief, like hiding the box of grief. Out of sight, out of mind. As the funeral-goers trickle away, I watch a man use an offensively bright orange backhoe to fill the grave.

Back at my house, Diane slides a plate of chicken casserole and baby carrots in front of me. When I take a bite, I taste dirt.

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The leaves of Cynthia's spider plant are withering from the tips inward. I grab a white plastic cup that is sitting in the sink, run the faucet, and dump some water into the pot.

"One of Cynthia's plant experiments?" Diane asks as she shuffles into the kitchen. She is wrapped in an old fleece blanket and her thick hair is pulled back in a loose ponytail.

I swallow around the sudden stickiness in my throat. "Yeah. Was killing this one too. We were on our way to Home Depot when we were hit. I think... I really don't remember the crash."

"You hit your head pretty hard. Your doctor said memory problems are common with concussions. I'm not sure it's something you would want to remember anyway."

"I don't care," I say, tossing the cup into the sink. "It scares me, to be missing that. The last thing I remember was joking with Cynthia. And then I woke up without her. H-how am I supposed to process that? I want that time back. Every grisly, stomach-churning second, if I can just feel sane for a moment... How long was I out?"

"The hospital staff didn't tell you?"

"I didn't ask."

“About twelve hours – you were sedated because of your injuries. They were afraid you’d wake up and panic.”

“Twelve hours? Really?”

“You were in surgery for your wrist for a few of them. Had to put pins in your arm. And then they were letting you rest.”

“I’m sorry you had to suffer through the news of Cynthia’s death by yourself.”

“That wasn’t your fault, dear.” Diane reaches for a napkin and wipes at her eyes.

“It wasn’t fair.”

“No,” she says. “But I was so worried I had lost you both.”

“I feel like I was lost anyway. I don’t feel like me, kind of hollow. Not all here.”

“You might still be in shock.” Diane sits at the kitchen table. “I know I am. I don’t really know how to process her death. It was the same way when Cynthia’s dad passed away. This whole thing feels surreal, like the worst is yet to come.”

“Maybe,” I say. I slide my cast along the countertop to grind out the silence of the house.

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“Will you be okay by yourself?”

“I should be asking you that,” Diane says as her suitcase thumps down the stairs.

“I’ll be fine. Marley will be checking up on me. I think she’s actually insisted on staying for a couple nights.”

“Yeah, I imagine I have friends anxious to see me too. Just promise to take care of yourself.”

I hug her tight. “Be careful on the road – looks like it’s getting ready to rain. Are you sure you don’t want to wait until tomorrow? It’ll be sunnier.”

“I’ve been driving for over thirty years. I can handle a little water. Besides it’s a 45 minute drive. Nothing I can’t handle.”

I hug her again. Diane grabs the handle of her suitcase and hustles to her car. She tosses it into the backseat before getting behind the wheel. She rubs her hands together, starts the car, and waves as she pulls away.

I close the front door, leaning into it as I try to catch my breath. It’s the first time I’ve been alone since I woke up in the hospital.

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“You look worse,” I say to the spider plant. Only a couple half green leaves remain. “Despite the fact that I’m watering you properly. I’m not drenching you like Cynthia was.”

I move it to the windowsill in the living room where the sun shines in most of the day.

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“I come bearing food” Marley shouts, kicking the front door shut. She has two medium pizzas balanced on one hand and a one liter bottle of Pepsi tucked under the other.

“Hey Diane,” I say, interrupting her story about how the neighbor’s cat, O’Malley, left a dead robin on her back porch, “can I call you back? Dinner just arrived.”

“Sure. Same time tomorrow?”

“Sounds good. Bye.”

The line clicks dead.

“Diane again?”

“Yeah.” I follow Marley into the kitchen, grabbing a stack of paper plates from the cabinet.

“You’ve been talking to her a lot lately.”

“Cynthia used to call her every other day. I think we’re both just trying to fill her silence.” I open the first pizza box: pineapple and ham and slick with grease. The best possible kind of pizza. I don’t feel hungry, so I only grab one slice.

“That’s it?” Marley’s plate is loaded with two slices of pepperoni and one slice Hawaiian.

“What?”

“You didn’t eat breakfast this morning. Or much of the spaghetti I made last night.”

I nudge the piece of pizza on my plate. “I’m just not that hungry.”

“That’s just what you think because you’re distracted by grief,” she says, adding another slice to my plate. “But I’ve been listening to your stomach growl for the last three hours. You need to eat more even if you don’t feel like it.”

“Fine,” I say. My stomach does hurt, but whether from hunger or anxiety, I wouldn’t know.

“Movie?” Marley asks as she scoops ice into two glasses. When she hands them to me, I fill them with Pepsi.

“Sure,” I say as I head to the living room with my food and drink. “But I get to pick!”

“No fair! It was my idea.”

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“Have you gone back to work?” Diane asks.

I shrug and nearly drop my phone from where it’s perched on my shoulder. “No, I’ve been using my vacation days. Not like I need to save them for an actual vacation later this year.”

“Bull,” Diane says. “You can go on trips by yourself. I think it would be good for you.”

“Traveling alone is lonely. And scary even.”

“Take a friend, like Marley. Or maybe we could go together. We could probably use the time away eventually. Of course, that’s not going to happen if you keep wasting your vacation days.”

“I’ll try to go back Thursday, take a short week. It’s too quiet here anyway, when Marley’s at work.” I lean back into the sofa. I want to close my eyes and sleep. I want to sleep all the time now. I’m not sure I could make it through an entire day of office work without passing out on top of my filing cabinet.

“Easing your way back into it. Good.”

“I guess.”

“Kind of hard to do when you’re a teacher, like me. But, for once, I think my students are keeping me sane instead of driving me crazy.”

“I’m sure they keep you busy.”

“Yeah...” An insistent whine echoes down the line. “Well, Mopsy is practically eating my pant leg. I better go feed her.”

“Alright,” I say.

“Make sure you eat too, even if it’s just a bowl of cereal.”

“Still not all that hungry,” I say, shuffling my feet against the carpet.

“But try anyway. We’ve got to take care of ourselves.”

“Alright.”

“And call me on Thursday, after work, of course.”

“Will do.” I set my phone on the sofa’s armrest and rub my fingers across my stiches. The skin isn’t sore anymore, but it’s starting to itch. The threads holding the wound together are ugly and black, like little insect legs sticking out of the puckered skin. I try to avoid the bathroom mirror when possible.

When I run my fingers through my hair, it feels oily. I can’t remember when I last showered. Two? Three days ago? I should probably do that after I eat something for lunch.

But before I do either of those things, I check on Cynthia’s spider plant. The fertilizer I found in the garage, wedged on the shelf between weed killer and Raid, doesn’t seem to be helping.

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“You sure you’re ready for this?” Marley asks Thursday morning. She’s leaning against the kitchen counter sipping from a thermos of green tea and trying to do the crossword puzzle in our local newspaper. “Maybe just take a half day? You still need lots of rest. You were in that accident too, you know.”

I swallow down a mouthful of toast, the crisped bread scraping against my throat. “I’m tired of sitting around the house. Besides, I work in an office, nothing strenuous about that. My biggest concern will be boredom.”

“If you’re sure,” Marley says. She folds up the newspaper and tosses it in her purse. “For lunch break. Oh and text me when you’re on yours. You know, to check in.”

“I’m not five, Marley. I can handle a day of work.”

“I know, but I’m a concerned friend. Just let me worry about you.”

I sigh, but get up to put my plate in the dishwasher. “Drive me to work?”

“Of course!” She smiles, but her eyes are watchful. I haven’t told her how I afraid I am of cars. I’m sure she suspects it, though; I haven’t left the house since the funeral.

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On my first day back, I throw myself into my work. It’s not hard to do – I’m behind on several payroll accounts after missing a week and a half of work. The data input and the endless spreadsheets ease the tide of anxiety that’s settled in my stomach since I woke up in the hospital. The clicking of the keyboards, the ring of the phones, the crispness of office etiquette, the sterile gray fabric of my cubicle walls: all once mind-numbingly repetitive, now a new brand of therapy.

I don’t forget Cynthia’s dead. Never. But for four straight hours, it’s not as present, as *loud*. I plan to stay longer, to work the rest of the day, but Clarissa, the Accounts Manager, shoos me out of the office, insisting I need to eat and get some rest. I sulk on the bench outside our building as I wait for Marley to pick me up. She’ll use up most of her lunch break to take me home. I’ll need to remember to thank her so I don’t seem ungrateful.

I know everyone means well, but work is what I need to do. I'm angry by the time I get home. I don't want to be here. I don't need sleep or food or comfort. I need something to do. It's an intense itch that starts at my stitches and spreads to my arms and down my spine to my legs. I can't sit about my house any longer.

So I start packing Cynthia's clothes into boxes. I can donate them to Goodwill, or put them in the basement. I'm not sure I can give her stuff away, so I don't think about what I'll do with her things and concentrate on folding.

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I wake up on the couch, a pile of old t-shirts bunched at my feet. There's a text on my phone from Marley – she's spending a night at home. Boxes, socks, and random knick-knacks litter the floor, a tumultuous sea of all things Cynthia. I stumble to my room and collapse on the bed until my alarm goes off for work.

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“Why the fuck won't you grow?” I slam my right fist on the windowsill beside the potted plant. “Why are you even dying? You have everything a plant could possibly want. A sunny spot, some water, and soil. Why are you doing this to me?”

I know how crazy I must look, yelling at a plant while in a living room overflowing with Cynthia's elementary art work, photo albums from family vacations, and a box full of touch-worn Beanie Babies. The plant is an irritation, like the itchiness of my stitches or the way my left arm is constantly weighed down by the plaster. I should throw it out. Instead, I watch as the leaves wither, mottled brown and brittle to the touch.

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“You forgot to call on Thursday.”

“I know,” I say. “I was packing away Cynthia’s stuff.’

“What are you planning on doing with it?”

“I don’t know. Probably’ll give the clothes away. The rest I’ll store in the basement. Unless you want anything? I found her high school diploma, some track and field medals. Things from before I knew her. They might mean more to you...”

“I can stop by around lunchtime tomorrow,” Diane says. She sounds tired, like divvying up Cynthia’s possession will be harder than the funeral or getting the phone call about our accident. And maybe she’s right. There’s more Cynthia here in my living room than in the coffin buried in the cemetery.

“Sounds good.”

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“You need to throw that plant out,” Diane says. She is digging through a box of old photographs, ones that Cynthia had meant to scrapbook, stuff from our college years, our trip to England for our five year anniversary, our yearly trips to Lake Barkley with Diane and our friends.

“Oh, I’ve tried,” Marley said. She’s sitting on the couch trying to match a huge pile of socks. Cynthia never wore her socks with their matching pair. It was a game for her, finding the most ridiculous color/pattern combinations. “She practically threw a hissy fit.”

“Did not,” I say. “Why would I throw it out?”

“Well, for one thing, it’s dead.” Diane glances at me, where I’m hovering over the plant.

“No it isn’t. It’ll come back. Just needs some more time.”

“All the leaves have gone brown,” Marley says, rolling her eyes. “It’s been two weeks and no new growth.”

“So?” I don’t like that they’re teaming up on me.

“So it’s dead,” Diane says. “Get rid of it Kasey and quit angsty over it. It’s not healthy.”

“But it was Cynthia’s...”

“Which is probably why it died,” Marley says before blushing bright red. Diane’s lips are twitching, eyes shiny and round like cat’s eye marbles. She looks torn between crying and laughing. Marley coughs. “Sorry, I didn’t –”

“No, no, you’re right.” Diane waves away her apology. “My daughter was good at many things, but keeping a plant alive wasn’t one of them.”

I smile, the sensation foreign after two weeks of numbness. Diane stands, knees popping as she does so, and grabs the plant off the window sill.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re going outside,” she says, the plant pot nestled in the crook of her arm. Marley and I follow her to the back door. I shiver in the wintery wind when Diane slides it open. She hands me the pot, “Here.”

“What am I supposed to do with it?”

“Throw it. Smash the pot on the concrete. Be angry. Cry. Feel something.”

“But the plant.”

“It’s dead,” Diane says. Her voice is neutral, bland, like it’s taking all her control not to let it crack. “And what’s dead can’t be saved. So mourn. Be sad. Be upset. But also be happy again.”

“But –”

“Get rid of the damn plant,” Marley snaps. She has her arms wrapped around her midsection, her skin rippled with goose-bumps. “It’s fucking cold out here.”

“Cynthia’s dead,” I say.

“Yes,” they say.

“Cynthia’s dead,” I tell the plant. I hate it for dying on me. How easy would it be to lift the pot in the air and hurl it on the concrete patio? Scream “She’s dead!” so the whole neighborhood hears. Hears the hurt and anger and empty love as I kick the clump of roots and soil. Stamping the shattered clay pieces, trying to ground them to dust... I hug the pot to my chest and start to cry. “I can’t.”

Diane frowns, but doesn’t argue. Marley moves out of my way when I walk back inside and down the hall to our bedroom. After I set the spider plant on Cynthia’s old beside table, I curl around her pillow and let it soak up my tears.

Diane and Marley sit on the bed beside me. Diane runs her fingers through my hair, her voice shaky when she whispers, “Shh, shh.”

Phoenix

“You can’t cut down the tree,” Elise said, her slim arms wrapped around the trunk and cheek pressed into the flaking bark.

“It’s dead,” her father said.

“But it’s mommy’s tree.”

It was true; Elise’s mother, Carol, had planted the birch sapling in the backyard when they first moved into their, ranch-style house. But that was nearly fifteen years ago. It had stopped budding a year after Elise was born, just months before his wife passed away.

“But it’s dead.”

“Not dead,” she said, shifting her head so that her ear lay against the bark. “*Sad.* Can’t you hear her crying?”

“Trees can’t cry, Elise,” her father said. “Come on, step back.”

“No. I won’t let go.”

“Elise.”

“Don’t kill her tree,” she said, her arms squeezing as she held on tighter. “Please.”

“One more month,” he said. “No leaves and it goes.”

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“Daddy, where’s extra tape?”

“Why?”

“I made leaves for mommy’s tree,” Elise said, holding out a pile of green paper cut in the shape of maple leaves. “I put some of them up already, but then I ran out of tape.”

Her father walked onto the back porch and saw the trunk of the birch tree covered in bits of green. “Why are you taping paper to the tree?”

“You said you wouldn’t cut it down if it had leaves. It’s still too sad to grow any of its own, so I made some.”

“The tree’s dead; it needs to go.”

“But you promised!” Elise stamped her foot.

“I know, but I meant real leaves.”

“But that’s not what you said.”

“Yes, but it’s what I *meant*.”

“Fine,” she said. Her brow was furrowed in annoyance. “It’ll grow real leaves, just needs some encouragement.”

He couldn’t tell her that encouragement and hope wouldn’t bring the dead back to life. Instead, he found her a new roll of tape and watched from the back porch as she decorated the birch with paper maple leaves.

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He peeled one of Elise’s paper leaves off the birch’s trunk and examined the black marker veins on the green construction paper.

“I don’t know what she sees in you.”

The branches creaked in the wind. He crumpled the fake leaf into a tiny ball and tossed it into a white trash bag he had grabbed from the cabinet under the kitchen sink.

“I hate your tree Carol. I see our daughter out here talking to it, like a friend. And you died when Elise was barely one. It’s something you’ll never get to be for Elise. You hardly even got to be her mother. How is that fair?”

He yanked two more paper leaves from the trunk and threw them in the bag.

“I’m not haunted by you,” he said.

One, two, three more leaves.

“She doesn’t know how to miss you, but she’d miss this stupid tree. You were so much better.”

He sank to the ground and spread out across the grass, like he and Carol used to on lazy Sundays. A few paper leaves still clung to the trunk. The branches overhead cracked the blue sky into a thousand fragments.

“I don’t want to cut your tree down, Carol. But it’s as dead as you are...” He let out a long breath. The words were small, but death leaves painful scars. “What’s the point of holding onto the things we can’t save?”

Neither the grass nor the wind answered him. The birds chirped, the clouds slid by, and his question went unanswered.

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One morning, about a week later, Elise flopped onto the bed beside her father and nearly slapped him in the face, waking him from dreams of flower-fragrant breezes and sun-dappled grass.

“Daddy!”

“What?”

“You can’t cut down the tree!”

“I’m sleeping,” he said, trying to roll away from Elise.

“You said we could keep the tree if it got leaves and now it has leaves.” She tugged at his arm, insisting he get out of bed.

“Real leaves, remember?” he said as he sat up. “Paper leaves don’t count.”

“They’re real.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The leaves!”

Once he was out of bed, Elise dragged him down the hall to the kitchen.

“Look,” she said, pointing at the tree through the sliding glass door.

“Impossible,” he said, pushing open the door and rushing into the yard. The remaining paper leaves were gone- probably scattered by a strong wind – but the birch’s branches hung heavy with young leaves. They undulated in a gentle spring breeze, soft shadows dancing across the ground. “It’s – it’s impossible...”

“I told you,” Elise said, arms raised in triumph. “I told you it wasn’t dead.”

Moss Creek

January 24, 2013 –

“Reagan, you haven’t answered my calls or texts since I returned from Key West. I stopped by your apartment complex and your landlord said you’d moved. I don’t know where you are, but I hope you are safe. Please call me when you get the chance.”

BEEP.

“What an eyesore,” I say to the real estate agent as he fiddles with his blue tie. The squat, wood paneled A-frame sitting before us has been on the market for eleven months, so I’m sure he already knows that.

The agent shuffles awkwardly, glancing between me and the house. Outdoor wood paneling wasn’t a good idea in the seventies. But it is even worse in the humid climate of Kentucky, nestled along the shore of one of the twin lakes. Kentucky or Barkley? I haven’t bothered to learn the name. Exterior molding aside, the rent is reasonable for a lakeside residence, especially since I’ll be living off my savings for the next few months. It isn’t a majestic ocean view from an airy beach house, and a persistent fishy-gasoline smell pervades the air, but this more is private – an equal trade.

“I’ll take it.”

“Don’t you want to see the inside?” the real estate agent asks. “The house is furnished, including the washer and dryer. The kitchen has –”

“Been recently remodeled,” I interject. “As delightful as that is, I’m not particularly concerned with the luxuries. Just tell me everything’s in working condition. That’s all I care to hear.”

“Uh,” the man stutters. He is easily intimidated for a salesman.

“Good enough. Let’s sign these papers – I need to ditch this rental truck.”

“R-right this way then,” he says, leading me down the gravel walk to the front porch.

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*January 31, 2013 –*

“Checking in real quick. I heard from your mother yesterday. She says writing was causing you some anxieties and I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything to help with that.”

BEEP.

I stopped writing about a year before my big move, the words shriveling up like a drought-stricken riverbed. The ideas crowded more and more each day, pressing at some immovable barrier. My words were gone. When I explained the problem to my sister, she scoffed. Words couldn’t go anywhere, not physically. “You’re making this more complicated than necessary,” she said. “Just sit down and write, Reagan.”

That’s like telling a depressed person to stop being sad. There are some mentalities you can’t force your way past. Her recommendation made me resentful. She was an advice columnist – what did she know about fiction writing? She sat at her desk all day, reading emails and choosing which lucky readers she’d deign with her awe-inspiring insight.

But each day I would sit in front of my computer, fingers skimming the keyboard and eyes dazed by the flashing cursor. *It's just writer's block*, I told myself. *Just writer's block. It'll pass. It's supposed to.* A personal mantra that irritated rather than soothed.

I tried to write in the morning when the sunlight shone gray through my dingy bedroom window. *It's just writer's block.*

I sat in the living room, soaking in the late afternoon sun and listening to Drew Holcomb & The Neighbors. The music should calm me and the words should come. *Just writer's block.*

I moved to the high barstools crouched around the little breakfast nook. The whooshing water of the dishwasher had more to say than I did. *It'll pass.*

Even the late night writing binges were fruitless. Where I once easily wrote 2,000 words between midnight and two a.m. curled up in an old blanket, I now stared despondently at my crumbling bedroom ceiling. *It'll pass. It's supposed to. It has to.*

*It'll pass*, I told myself over and over again until it was thrumming like white noise. *It'll pass.*

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February 7, 2013 –

“It’s been a week since I’ve checked in. Your mother says you’re currently in Kentucky, but you won’t tell her much else. If you’re worried about the book deal, then don’t be. Take as much time as you need.”

BEEP.

I can't describe how I feel those first two weeks after leaving New York. I am not as relieved as I thought I would be. I may not be writing, but I still feel boxed in and constricted, panic a constant and swift undercurrent. When I can no longer stand the caving pressure of the surrounding walls, I'll run for my car and drive circles around Paducah until my chest stops clenching like a steel trap.

I nap on the sofa sectional that came with the A-frame as a way to pass long afternoons and dreary evenings. The temperature outside, although warmer with spring grappling control from winter, is too cold for my preferences. Instead, I curl up under a blanket and watch the sunlight drifting in through the windows, occasionally broken by clouds, until I fall asleep.

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A rapping on the sliding glass door that leads to the back deck startles me awake. Blinking stupidly and disoriented with drowsiness, I peer at the man standing outside. Despite weather in the fifties, he's wearing Bermuda shorts and flip flops like he is on a tropical vacation. On top, he wears a gray, knitted pullover zipped only halfway up over a powder blue t-shirt. He has his hands cupped against the door and his face wedged in close enough for his breath to mist the surface of the glass. When he sees me sit up, he yells, voice muffled by the glass, "I knocked on the front door, but there was no answer!"

With the blanket wrapped around my shoulders, I stumble to the door, fumble with the lock, and push the door open. "What?"

"I knocked on the front door," he says. "But there was no answer. There was a car in the drive, though, so I figured someone had to be home."

“Brilliant deduction, Sherlock,” I say, running a hand through my hair. “Although you clearly don’t care about boundaries if you’re not deterred by someone not answering.”

“It’s not like I was going to rob the place,” he says with a shrug. “I just wanted to speak to the new resident.”

“What do you want?”

“Your dock.”

“What?”

“I want to use your dock,” he says. “This’s my father’s rental house. While it was empty I used the dock.” He points in the direction of the shoreline, where a small dock with a tin roof juts out into the lake. It bobs in the languid waves as the water laps at the rubber-bumpered sides.

“And?”

“I would like to keep using it.”

“It’s a little cold for boating,” I say, glancing at his feet. “And flip flops. You know it’s fifty-five degrees outside, right?”

“I’m not here to talk about the weather.”

“No, you’re here to talk about the dock. Which you want to use. What I’m not getting, is why you’re telling me this.”

“I’m here to ask if I can continue to use it. Unless you’re using it, of course.”

“Do you see a boat?” I ask. The cold wind is seeping through my blanket. If his fingers weren’t resting on the doorframe, I would close the door in his face.

“Uh,” he says, sending an exaggerated glance over his shoulder toward the dock before turning back to me. He smiles crookedly. In the right circumstances, it might be a smirk. “Doesn’t look that way, but I didn’t want to make any assumptions. Unless you’re secretly Invisible Woman?”

“Are we done?”

“No,” he says, sticking his hand out to shake. “My name’s Tyler.”

“Reagan,” I say, reciprocating the gesture in the hopes it would end the encounter sooner.

“It was nice meeting you,” he says, taking a step back and lifting his hand in an aborted wave. “See ya around, neighbor.”

I close the door, not interested in seeing him anymore.

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February 14, 2013 –

“Happy Valentine’s Day! We had Casey’s engagement party last night. I still think of her as a little girl, you know? And now she’s getting married. She looks a lot like Janice did at that age. Casey missed seeing you at the party – well, we all did. Janice likes to think of you as an adopted daughter. As always, I hope you’re doing well.”

BEEP.

February 21, 2013 –

“I still haven’t heard from you. We’re putting the final touches on Carter’s third novel. He’s a complete nutcase right now. I wish you were here to tell him to shut up, sit down, and take a deep breath like you used to. He said to tell you hi.”

BEEP.

February 28, 2013 –

“Your mom calls me every now and then to talk about you. She can’t tell me much – says you’re not exactly talkative right now. I tell her you just need your space. We’ve both been worried about you these last couple of months. I’m afraid I maybe put too much pressure on you unintentionally. All that matters is that you’re taking care of yourself.”

BEEP.

March 7th, 2013 –

“The final edits for Carter’s book were finished today. We went out to eat to celebrate and we had a grand ol’ time. We missed you.”

BEEP.

I didn’t have much in the way of friends in New York, so only my mom and my sister know about my cross-country move to Kentucky. I don’t give them an address when they ask and I only answer their phone calls once a week. I let them know I am okay and nothing more. I won’t talk about New York or the book deal or Mr. Daley. Now’s not the time.

Mr. Daley has taken up the habit of calling every Thursday around 4 p.m., central time. I am sure my move was a nasty shock when he came back from Key West, Florida, but he didn’t clog up my cell phone the way my mom and sister did. When I don’t answer his weekly call-in he leaves a message. I listen to them on occasion, but I don’t call him back.

I sit out on the back deck, typically reading on one of the plastic lounge chairs, and listen to the lapping water. Sometimes, I will hear the flop of a fish or the splash of an idle motor from the brick house about 100 yards down the beach. The weather is in that awkward pubescent phase between winter and spring, where temperature fluctuates between 40 and 75 degrees Fahrenheit on a daily basis.

I see Tyler almost every day now. He has a little fishing boat that he'll take out for two or three hours. Occasionally, he'll drive over in his silver Toyota Camry. Other times, he walks. I'm not sure from where or how far away, but I'll see him as he ambles along the muddy shoreline. There are no poles in his boat. As far as I can tell, he doesn't fish. What a waste of a good fishing boat.

"Will you be joining me today?" Tyler asks as he steps around from the front of the house. He invites me along when he can, usually when I am out enjoying the weak sunshine. If he walks that day, he will wave me down from the dock.

"Can't," I say. "I'm determined to finish *Ocean at the End of the Lane* by nightfall." Reading or cleaning is my typical fallback excuse. I haven't once said yes to his invitations, but he remains weirdly persistent. I'm not sure what he's playing at.

"Didn't you just finish *The Maze Runner* yesterday? You're sure in a hurry to get some reading done."

"I've gotten behind with all the moving and what not," I say.

"I won't keep you then," he says. He waves over his shoulder as he heads for his boat.

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Mr. Daley is my book agent. His first name is Harris, which he prefers. I never felt comfortable calling adults by their given names though, like many of my professors insisted in college. I guess it was their way of treating us like adults. I never much felt like their equals. When you were younger, adults asked you, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” They neglected to tell you the line between childhood and adulthood isn’t a line at all, but rather a gray, greasy smear.

In truth, I never aspired to be an author or journalist or a writer, really. I was a science whiz, sucking in every dusty bit of information like I was a Hoover vacuum cleaner. I hated my literary analysis classes in high school and college. Writing was a nuisance at the best of times. I had no interest in discussing diction or hypotactic language or the million other secret tidbits that authors slipped into the text. To me, it felt like teachers and critics tried too hard to find hidden meanings that weren’t there. No, I was a reader and only that. I read because I liked the way the stories fed my thoughts, filling my head with the endless possibilities of storytelling. If you changed one detail, how would the story change? Like a science experiment, where one incident was the independent variable and the effects it caused the dependent.

My first story was an accident, really. I was working on a lab report for a biology course in college and I was too distracted by my own mental wanderings to get any fruitful work completed. Hoping it would sharpen my focus, I wrote and a tide of ideas broke their levee. My first effort at writing was an absolute mess. When I lost track of one idea, I would start a new one mid-paragraph. I tried to get as much down as possible. The experience was cathartic and exhilarating. Whenever I would get stuck on an

assignment from then on, I'd go back to that first document, writing, tweaking, and refining until it became something legible, something real.

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March 14, 2013 –

“Your sister called me on Tuesday, wondering if I’ve heard from you. She says you won’t talk about anything writing-related or give her an address. She got a little snappy. I know it’s because she misses you. You’re in for an earful when she finds you. Call me when you’re ready.”

BEEP.

“No,” I say.

“You’re being completely ridiculous, Reagan,” my sister says. “Mom and I are worried about you. First, you move to God-Knows-Where, Kentucky, and then you refuse to talk to us more than once a week. You’re cutting us out, but you won’t tell us why. We just want to help you.”

“I’m not one of your advice column write-ins. I can take care of myself, Emery.”

“Please, get that giant stick out of your ass and realize you don’t have to do everything alone.”

“When you put it like that,” I say, “how can I resist inviting you down for a visit? You sure know how to sweet-talk someone.”

“Fuck you,” Emery says, voice crackling over the phone. The cell phone reception out by the lake is never higher than three bars.

“I don’t want any visitors right now. I’m still settling in and I need some space.”

“*Space, schmace*. You left New York almost two months ago. You’ve had plenty of time.”

“I don’t want you here,” I say. This is the point where Emery usually gets frustrated and hangs up.

“Tough noodles. You need me there.” She must be feeling particularly determined today. “So help me God, I will use the tracking system on your phone. I am coming, whether or not you give me an address.”

“Fine,” I snap, pulling my fingers through my hair. It needs to be brushed. I give her my address, but hang up before she can win any other battles. I am still glaring at my phone when Tyler comes around the front of the A-frame. I was too busy fighting with Emery to hear the crunch of gravel that usually signifies his arrival.

“Did your phone personally offend you?” Tyler asks.

“Let’s go.”

“What?”

“Let’s go,” I say. “You’re about to go out on your boat, right? And you always invite me along. So let’s go.”

He smiles as he understands what I’m asking. “I knew you couldn’t hold out forever.”

“You can give your victory speech later. Daylight’s burning – let’s go.”

The fishing boat is relatively new. The hull is a dull, metallic gray and sits low on the water. A cane pole is the only fishing pole in the entire thing. I don’t see a tackle box or bait of any kind.

“What’s the point of having a fishing boat, if you don’t fish?” I ask. This conundrum has bothered me for a while now.

“A boat is a boat,” Tyler says as he unties the vessel from the dock. “They might call it a pontoon or a house boat or a barge, but they all have one function in common: transportation across water. As for why *I* specifically have a fishing boat, a friend sold it to me for a good price.”

“Hm,” I say. Tyler starts up the motor and idles away from the shallows. He doesn’t take off like a race horse at the gate; instead, we cruise across the lake, churning up a gentle wake. Wind whips off its surface, blowing my hair out of my face. I trail my hand in the cool water. It’s a brisk spring day and I regret not grabbing a jacket on our way down to the dock.

Tyler steers the boat into a small, sheltered cove. The water is too murky to tell how deep it is, but it lies in a narrow strip between two sandy embankments before widening into a large circle. I can’t see any nearby houses through the dense ring of trees edging the shoreline.

“Where are we?”

“Nowhere particular.”

“What?”

“It’s just a small cove, too small to have name,” Tyler says. He turns off the motor and lets the boat drift. “I found it shortly after I moved here. I like to follow the shoreline if I can. You find neat places like this when you do.”

“You should name it.”

“Why?”

“Because this place obviously means something to you – you have this stupidly fond look on your face. My guess is that you come here a lot.”

Tyler hums, watching the water ripple as the boat rocks back and forth. “Maybe you’re right. What made you change your mind?”

“About what? Going on a boat ride?”

Tyler nods.

“My sister’s coming to visit.”

“You have a sister?”

“Yeah, younger sister. She’s not easy to get along with.”

“Is that trait characteristic of all women in your family?”

“What?”

“Oh come on, it took me over a month to get you out here. I thought the entirety of our acquaintanceship would consist of me inviting you along and you turning me down.”

I give him a wry smile. “I think it’s a family trait. My mom’s a real piece of work, probably had to be because her mother was downright unbearable. The postman was terrified of her. Emery or I would always have to meet him at the end of the block to get our mail.”

Tyler’s face crinkles as he smiles and he throws his head back. His laughter is surprisingly high-pitched. And contagious. We laugh long and hard, each string of giggles eliciting another. As we’re calming down, I realize it’s been months, half a year even, since I have laughed like that. I’ve missed it.

“Better?” he asks.

“A little,” I say.

“Ready to head back?”

“Let’s give it a few minutes.”

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*March 21, 2013 –*

“Winter is slowly thawing into spring here in New York. When I retire, I’m moving to somewhere tropical. Maybe Hawaii. I’ve had enough cold weather to last a lifetime. I hope Kentucky isn’t too cold right now.

BEEP.

*March 28, 2013 –*

“I’m meeting up with Carter for drinks, so I don’t have long. But I just wanted to check in on you. I hope you’re doing well.”

BEEP.

*April 4, 2013 –*

“Janice and I are on our way to a dress fitting with Casey. They haven’t settled on a date just yet, but Casey’s expecting it to be sometime next spring. Maybe May. Mark’s pretty dead set against an outdoor wedding, though. Can’t say I blame him – the weather’s too unpredictable.”

BEEP.

*April 11, 2013 –*

“Denise is moving me to a bigger office. I’ll be glad to have the extra room. When Carter gets writer’s block, he’ll sit with me and we’ll bounce ideas off each other. The advance copies of his third book are generating good reviews. You should read it when it comes out.”

BEEP.

“When’s she coming?” Tyler and I are sitting out on the dock. It’s a warm and sticky day in early spring, so we’re cooling off by dipping our feet in the water. Tyler’s knocking back a Coke Zero.

“Don’t know,” I say. “I hung up before she could tell me. I haven’t talked to her about it since. She’ll get here when she gets here, I guess.”

“Is she flying in? Or driving?”

“Hard to say. She has the address now. That’s all that was keeping her from showing up here. Although, if push came to shove, I’m sure she’d go from door to door if she had to.”

“Why’s she so intent on visiting?”

“She says she’s worried about me. Emery’s an intense person. So by default, her concern and other emotions tend to be, you know, intense.”

“Let me guess, you were the quiet one.”

“Our dad always used to joke that I was so levelheaded that all the drama I was born without must have passed on to my sister. She lives for dealing with drama – it’s why she’s an advice columnist. That and she likes telling people what to do.”

“Did you fight a lot?”

“Not when we were younger, but she’s gotten into the nasty habit of giving me unsolicited advice.” I circle my feet in the water. Emery can be intimidating and unrelenting. She’s also painfully honest, making you listen to all the little lies you tell yourself. Her honesty is a blunt knife that tears and bruises skin leaving you more

immediately wounded than the sharp, precise blade of a lie ever could. A person's emotions should never be spared for a lie, even if that's what someone would prefer.

"Your best bet is to hide when Hurricane Emery arrives. As soft as you are, she'll chew you up and spit you out."

Tyler chuckles. Amusement is not the appropriate reaction. "I think I'll be fine. I managed to be your friend."

"Yeah, but I'm the nice one."

~~~~~

Emery was the reason I signed a book deal. Three weeks before my college graduation, she came to visit for a long weekend. I am not sure how she found the time. Our schools were five hours apart and her finals week was one week earlier than mine. Instead of studying though, she harassed me. She took long showers and used all of my hot water. She cooked meals only for herself and left the greasy pots unwashed in the sink. She was constantly doing something – singing, watching TV, talking on her phone – and I hardly had a moment to myself. She paced around my bedroom bemoaning her boredom and read over my shoulder as I worked on my laptop. That's how she found out about my writing.

Trying to deal with the stress of her visit, I started messing around with a short story. I was editing the ending and struggling to achieve the proper tone. I was relatively happy with everything else. My mind was already on the next story I could start; I just had to fix this final portion. In one of her obnoxious over-the-shoulder-peeks, my secret was out.

"What are you writing?" she asked.

“A lab report,” I said.

“I’ve seen you working on lab reports – there’s no graphs or tables,” Emery said, her eyes narrowing on me as she caught the lie. “I can recognize prose when I see it.”

“Prose?”

“You know, story writing?”

“If you know it’s a fucking story, why did you ask?”

“What are you so upset about?”

“You can’t mind your own damn business. Why are you here, Emery?”

“Visiting you, obviously. If I didn’t make the effort, I honestly think you’d just wander off on your own and forget about mom and me.”

“Whatever,” I said, pushing away from my desk. “I’m going for a walk.”

“Yeah, run away, that’ll solve your problems,” Emery said.

“Fuck you.” I snatched a light jacket off my bed and I left her standing in my bedroom.

I went to the apartment’s courtyard and sat on one of the rusty, green benches. They were the only bit of color in that square patch of dirt. The gray buildings reared overhead, their tops blending into the overcast sky. The windows stared like dead eyes. The courtyard grass was brown from lack of water and dust stung my eyes every time the wind blew. I sat on that bench until the sun went down and yellow slabs of light burned harshly in the windows.

When I returned to my apartment, Emery was seated on the couch, legs propped on the coffee table, intently reading from my laptop. I wanted to be angry, but I was done fighting for now. She looked up as I closed the front door and clicked the lock into place.

“I’d never leave you and mom,” I said. I hate when Emery used family against me.

“I didn’t mean it.”

“Then why say it?”

“Heat of the moment,” she said. “You write really well.” She was double majoring in English Literature and Journalism, so I guess she would know.

“It’s just something I wrote in my free time,” I said. Neither of us were the apologizing sorts. Our fight ended in a shaky truce, like they always did.

“Have you considered getting it published?”

I snorted. I was not a writer, so it had never crossed my mind. “Of course not. It’s just a hobby.”

“Hobby or not, it would be a waste of talent to keep this to yourself.”

“Why do you care?”

“Just think about it.”

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*April 18, 2013 –*

“I’ve heard Emery plans on visiting you next week. I guess that means you’re finally settled in. That or your sister’s found a way to blackmail you. I hope she doesn’t give you too much trouble.”

BEEP.

Emery doesn’t arrive until the last full week of April. The most warning I get is Mr. Daley’s voicemail from the week before and a text message from her when she is an hour away by car. A message I miss.

Tyler and I are at Moss Creek that day, a popular spot with the locals. When he doesn't have another beach in mind, I ask him to take us here. Tyler's childhood moniker, Rocky Beach, is a more appropriate name. It's literally a beach of rocks. And spiral shells – more shells than you would ever think to find near a body of fresh water. I take them home by the pocketful, lining them across my bookshelves, the deck railings, and window sills as if they can ward off evil. I even have some in a glass fishbowl on the coffee table. They are an ugly brown, but I enjoy collecting them.

When we return to the dock, Emery's sitting on the back deck. Her shoulders are rigid and her hands grip the armrests like the chair is about to launch itself through the air. Her chin is lifted high and she looks down on Tyler and me as we tie the boat to the dock.

“So that's Emery,” Tyler stage whispers.

“In all her melodramatic glory,” I say. “You walked here today, right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Then there's no need for you to come up to the house.”

“Am I not good enough to meet your sister?” he asks, hand going to his heart in a swoon of mock offense.

“That's not it. She's cranky right now – it's best if you wait to meet her after she cools down. I'm used to her temper tantrums, but you're not.”

“Whatever you say, boss.” Tyler gives me an outlandish salute and starts off down the beach.

When I look back at Emery, her posture is more relaxed. As I walk up the porch steps, she shifts in the plastic lounge chair. “Who was that?”

“The landlord’s son,” I say. “I let him use the dock.”

“Is that all?”

I don’t like the implications in her tone. “Ew, yes. I don’t even know him that well.”

“But he takes you on romantic boat rides?”

“Get your head out of the gutter,” I say, sliding the back door open.

“That was open this entire time?” Emery stands up and brushes out the wrinkles in her skirt. “I might have known that if someone ever responded to their messages.”

“I left my phone in the house,” I say in lieu of an apology. I wave Emery into the living room and close the door behind her.

“God, this place is more depressing than your old apartment,” Emery sniffs as she eyes the mismatched furniture. “How do you even find such shitty places?”

“I didn’t invite you here to make digs on my living situation,” I say, taking a seat at the kitchen peninsula and ignoring Emery’s proffered jacket. “And I am not a butler. Hang up your own damn coat.”

“Oh please, like you’d ever invite me anywhere.” She tosses her jacket over the back of the couch before taking a seat at the barstool beside mine.

“Not like it’d stop you from showing up.” I brush my fingers through my tangled hair, wondering why I agreed to this. I’ve been dealing with my sister for 23 years and I still can’t win.

“Don’t be so resentful. If it wasn’t for me, you’d probably still be in that crummy biology lab, writing lab reports for the rest of your life.”

“Tell me, Emery, how’s Connor? Are you still hooking up with a married man?” I ask, feeling a small moment of victory when Emery flushes. I never wanted her to interfere with my “crummy” lab job.

“Go fuck yourself. I think you like being a bitch.”

“And you don’t?”

“I only ever say what’s true because it’s what people need to hear. I don’t rub salt in their wounds.”

“Oh good for you, you have a moral high ground. Would you like a cookie?”

“This is about what I said about the house, isn’t it?” Emery says with a huff. “It’s a piece of junk and you know it.”

“Still my house,” I say, crossing my arms.

“Jesus,” Emery says. “The house is fine.”

“I’m moved by your sincerity.”

“Quit throwing a fit.”

“Quit sticking your nose in my business.”

“I can’t believe I missed you,” Emery says with a roll of her eyes, slinging her arm around my shoulders in a sideways hug.

~~~~~

After graduation, I moved to New York and worked in a small biology lab. At Emery’s insistence, I wrote in my free time. Emery had been acting as my self-appointed agent since she read the stories I’d saved on my laptop. At her request, I would send her stories and begrudgingly edit them as she demanded. She wrote into magazines, journals, and literary contests and collected the rejection slips. With my college graduation to

worry about at the time, I refused to be involved in the publishing process. I had final papers to turn in and job interviews to attend. I made it clear to Emery that if she wanted my stories published, that was her own project.

“Oh my God, Reagan,” she asked, “Why haven’t you been answering your phone?”

“I have a job, Emery,” I said. “I’m not free to chat at 1:30 on a Thursday anymore.”

“But this is important – it’s about your writing.” She called me on daily basis about this story or that one, claiming it was urgent. I had taken to ignoring her phone calls if she called less than four times in one day.

“My writing is not more important than my job,” I said.

“Writing could be your job,” Emery said. “*The New Yorker* is publishing one of your stories! You know what this means, right?”

“No, not really.”

“You’re so out of the literary loop. Agents will practically be begging you to sign on with them. You could even wind up with a book deal.”

“I don’t write books,” I said.

“But you could.”

“As long as it doesn’t interfere with my work.”

“God, could you just be excited about something other than dissecting earthworms for once?”

“It’s very exciting,” I said. “And I don’t dissect earthworms. You know my work deals with genetic mutations.”

“Who cares?” Emery exclaimed. “Your writing career is about to take off!”

~~~~~

“Fuck off,” I mumble the moment I feel the bed dip with extra weight.

“It’s 12:38 on a Tuesday. Get your ass out of bed,” Emery says, voice pitched high with fake cheer as she pokes me in the side. Four days into her visit and Emery’s getting impatient with my lack of hostess-ing, as she puts it. More like, catering to her every whim. She tries to talk about the book deal and various literary contests I could submit to. I walk out of the room when she does.

“I’ll get up when I’m ready.”

“But I’m bored.”

“Not my problem.”

“You’re the hostess.”

“And you’re an uninvited guest,” I say, rolling my back to her.

“Do you always sleep this late?”

“What do you care?”

“I don’t,” Emery says.

I look over to see her face pinched in annoyance. “What?”

“You’re so ungrateful.”

“What?” This conversation is giving me whiplash.

“Nothing. Not important. I’m going for a walk.” She stomps out of the room and down the stairs.

~~~~~

Emery is gone when I get out of bed an hour later. So is Tyler's boat. I'm sitting on the dock, hoping Emery hasn't stolen Tyler's boat in a moment of anger, when they come cruising along the shoreline. Emery's wearing a purple sundress and large, round sunglasses that cover half her face. Her hair streams idly in the wind. Tyler says something that makes her laugh. When he sees me standing on the dock, he waves. I wave back, my eyes on Emery.

Tyler nudges the boat into the dock and I help him tie it down. Emery climbs out and walks back up to the house without offering any assistance.

"I guess she's still angry," I say.

"Had a fight, huh?" Tyler asks. We're standing in the shade of the dock's tin roof. The water is choppier than usual – a storm is coming – so the wood rolls beneath our feet.

"She didn't tell you?"

"We talked about other things," Tyler says, taking a deep breath, his shoulders suddenly tense. "She thought there was something going on between us."

"I know." Emery and her big mouth. "She didn't believe me when I told her there wasn't."

Tyler's shoulders fall. "What did you fight about?"

"I'm not really sure. She's not too thrilled with my sleeping habits because it means I spend less time entertaining her. She called me ungrateful."

"Hm."

"What? Did she say something?"

“That’s something I think you should talk to Emery about,” Tyler says. We walk down the dock and up the incline to the house. Tyler fishes for his keys. “I’d better go. And you should talk to your sister.”

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*April 25, 2013 –*

“Carter’s made quite a bit of headway into his next book. 20,000 words in two weeks – he’s like a machine. I miss reading the little tidbits you would turn in, though. You two have such unique writing styles. I consider myself blessed to work with writers like you. I worry that I haven’t heard from you in so long, but your mom reassures me you’re doing well. As far as she can tell anyway. As always, I hope to hear from you soon.”

BEEP.

We don’t talk. Emery spends the following days ignoring me and I refuse to indulge her. If she wants to passive-aggressively type at her advice column all day, then fine. It may be childish, but communication has never been a familial strength. We’ll boil over before we talk about anything in a mature manner.

Tyler comes by every day and Emery’s always waiting for him. I haven’t been out on the lake for five days. It’s weird how much the boat trips with Tyler relaxed me. I feel keyed up again. I am trapped in a house with a petulant 23-year-old woman with no outlet of my own.

I take to driving around Paducah, burying the white noise under country music. It’s farther from the twin lakes than I remember. I also explore the other lakeside towns:

Grand Rivers, Eddyville, Kuttawa, and Calvert Town. I twist through back roads and farmland, taking the curves a little too wide. I try to find a road that follows the lake's shoreline, but end up pulling into numerous residential lots. That's how I survive the ensuing days of silence. Without Tyler's company, I'm alone again, and for the first time I mind it.

Emery arrived on a Sunday. By chance, I find Moss Creek on a Saturday one week later. I'm driving on a paved, unlined road. I catch glimpses of sparkling water through the trees on my right side. It's around four in the evening and the sun glows like dying embers. The road bottoms out in a weedy, makeshift parking area. I am getting out of my car, the view immediately recognizable, when I see the sign **Moss Creek**. It's piked into the ground next to a giant boulder.

I spend hours on that beach. I wade in the water and collect more shells. I take some pictures with my phone as I watch the sunset. I watch boats stream across the lake. I don't go home until long after the fireflies and the stars come out. Emery can steal all the boat rides she wants, but I have Moss Creek.

~~~~~

"Reagan," Emery said as she bustled into my apartment, arms full with Chinese take-out food. In New York, our apartments were a short subway ride away from each other. In the name of sisterly bonding, Emery insisted we had dinner together at least once a week. That was her code for *I don't think you're getting enough writing done and I'm here to breathe down your neck and generally irritate you into writing what I deem an appropriate amount*. "You missed another deadline."

"How do you know that?"

“I talked to Mr. Daley.” Emery unpacked four cartons from the brown paper bag.
“Chicken fried rice or egg drop soup?”

“Why are you talking to my agent?” I set my laptop down on the couch and joined her in the kitchen, grabbing the container of fried rice.

“Because you don’t keep either of us up-to-date on book stuff,” Emery said, opening her carton of General Tso’s chicken.

“I check-in with Mr. Daley on a weekly basis. I have a book agent now, why are you still so involved with this?”

“If I wasn’t here to keep you focused, nothing would get done.”

“So I’ve missed a couple deadlines? Mr. Daley doesn’t seem to care as much as you. I don’t need to write this book in a year, Emery.”

“Don’t lose momentum now.” She punctuated her sentence with a flick of her chopsticks.

“I’m not losing momentum,” I said, taking a bite of rice. “I’ve just been working overtime the last couple of weeks finishing up our latest research project.”

“You should quit your job.”

I choked on my mouthful of rice. “What?”

“You don’t need a job – you have a book deal. So quit and focus on finishing your novel.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I enjoy what I do.”

“It’s interfering with your story, though,” Emery said. “You know what comes after your first book? A second book.”

“I don’t want to quit my job. My career isn’t writing.”

“But that’s what we’ve been working toward.”

“We?”

“Yes, we. I didn’t bust my ass those first two years trying to publish your short stories for you to put all that effort to waste.”

“It’s not going to waste,” I snapped. “I’m writing. I write a little bit every day. Can’t you be happy with that much?”

“Fine, but you need to try harder to meet your deadlines.”

“Fine,” I said. I grab one of the fortune cookies before sitting down on the couch.

“And consider becoming a full-time writer.”

“*Emery.*”

“I’m serious – you might like writing just as much as your current job.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

~~~~~

A week and half into the Emery Invasion, I return from Moss Creek to find Emery sitting expectantly on one of the kitchen barstools. Tyler’s lounging on the sofa sectional, head lolled back and eyes closed.

“We should talk,” she says.

“Why’s he here?”

“I’m here to mediate,” Tyler says, opening his eyes. “And to make sure conversation actually happens.”

“Then talk,” I say to Emery. I feel cornered. “You’re the one who started this whole pissing contest.”

“Have you been writing?” Emery asks.

“No,” I say. I am gauging Tyler’s reaction, but he doesn’t appear remotely surprised to learn I am a writer. Or whatever I am.

“How long are you planning on staying here?”

“I’m not sure.” I signed a six month lease. This place was supposed to be a temporary stop; I had planned to travel more, but I’ve grown attached. Although, I never intended to return to New York once I left. “I like it here.”

“You love the city – I know you do.”

I look over at Tyler again. He nods. “Yeah, but I was really unhappy there.”

“Unhappy with *what*?” Emery asks, raking her hands through her hair. She’s standing now. “Do you know how many writers would kill for a book deal?”

“I’m not them. Writing was only meant to be a hobby. *You* forced me into this! I’m not cut out to be a writer, Emery. I’ve tried and I can’t do it.”

“This is what I’m talking about,” Emery says, shoving me in the shoulder. I clench my hands into fists, but don’t push back. Tyler has moved from the couch and is pulling Emery out of arms’ reach. “You’re so ungrateful and selfish. You have talent and people willing to support you. And what do you do? You throw it all away! You throw a fit!”

“Emery, what’d I say about the accusatory language?” Tyler interrupts.

“Fuck that,” Emery says, giving him a swift glare. “She needs to hear this.”

“Not like this –

“Shut up,” Emery says, wrenching her arm free from his grasp. She pokes me in the shoulder to enunciate her next point. “You move to fucking Kentucky without telling anyone. You whine about not being able to write and yet you don’t try. You sit here, in

this stupid lake house and wallow in self-pity. You haven't even thanked me once for coming to see you! Or for getting your story published."

I grab her wrist and push her away. "I never wanted you here, Emery! You're so wrapped up in your self-righteousness that you don't even realize it was you I was getting away from. You put too much pressure on me, forcing me to be some version of myself that I'm not meant to be. You're so convinced you're right that you're only capable of criticizing me. I'm not one of your readers, Emery. I never asked for your help."

"Reagan, calm down," Tyler says. There is a buzzing in my ears and the room is spinning. I think he might be holding me upright. Emery's face is weird mixture of anger and concern.

"I'm not done," I say. My voice sounds wheezy. "Your anger with me has always been about *you*, Emery. About what *you* think I should do. And if I don't want to do it? I'm an ungrateful, spoiled-rotten bitch. It's too nerve-wracking and I can't – I can't take it anymore. I want more good days where I can catch my breath. If I keep living like this, soon enough, I'm not going to be able to get out of bed in the morning."

"Reagan," Emery says, her voice soft.

I feel like I can't breathe, gasping like a winded marathon runner. Inhale. *One Mississippi, two Mississippi*. Exhale. *Three Mississippi, four Mississippi*. I shake loose from Tyler's grip and grab my keys from where I dropped them on the counter earlier.

"I'm going for a drive," I say as I head for the door.

"Reagan, wait!" Tyler shouts, but I don't stop.

~~~~~

I moved to Kentucky because Emery and I had one fight too many. I couldn't stand living within walking distance of her apartment. If she didn't have a car, I would have moved to the suburbs. Mr. Daley's frequent visits and check-ins didn't help much either. I needed to go off-the-grid, completely sever myself from Emery, Mr. Daley, and the writing world. I loved life in New York City – the bustling streets, the constant hot dog stands, the pricey little boutiques – but I couldn't live in a state of constant anxiety.

I packed up my overstuffed apartment in one week while Mr. Daley vacationed in Key West and Emery visited our mom. It was a spur of the moment decision where logic lost to instinct. I pulled the books from the shelves and arranged them like jigsaw puzzle pieces in various cardboard boxes, doing my best to pack as much in as little space as possible. I recycled the old magazines that sat in dusty plateaus beneath my threadbare, floral couch and meticulously wrapped the gray-scratched plates that originally belonged to my grandmother, passing into each subsequent generation like a kind of hereditary hot potato. Down came the black plastic picture frames containing memories of family vacations, birthdays, and those awkward high school years. I coaxed posters from the wall, cursing every time a corner ripped or the tape peeled off chunks of paint.

The cleaning and packing burned through my anxieties. That week was the best that I had in months. I had no time for words – the floorboards needed to be polished and the stovetop degreased. I had to meet with my landlord to terminate my lease and scrub two years-worth of dirt from the kitchen baseboards. I needed to wash all my sheets, sell off my dresser, and carry the rickety coffee table to the Goodwill three blocks over. I had a mile-long to-do list with new tasks constantly being added. It was a good distraction while it lasted.

On moving day, Emery called me as I was rushing into the hallway, a last box of pots balanced on my hip. When I saw her name flash on the screen, I dropped the phone in a moment of pure, irrational panic – she *knew* I was trying to sneak away! As I crouched to pick up my phone, which was still ringing, I gave into a moment of self-indulgence and hit the ignore button. I leaned against the front door, the box resting precariously in my lap. *Breathe*, I told myself, counting Mississippis to regulate my inhales and exhales. My goodbye was quiet, wide and gaping like the empty apartment I was leaving behind.

~~~~~

I go to Moss Creek. I sit at the water's edge so the lake water laps at my feet. The sun is half an hour from setting when Tyler's boat putters into view. He pulls in close to the shore and drops an anchor before plopping into waist-deep water.

"I thought I would find you here," he says as he wades toward me. "Emery and I were worried about you."

"I'm fine."

"How'd you get here?"

"I drove." I point to my white Neon where it's sitting in the gravel parking lot, shaded by leafy tree branches.

"So you have a novel in the works?"

"Did Emery tell you that?"

"Yeah, but I could have guessed as much too. Anyone who has a piece published in *The New Yorker* usually has agents chasing after them."

"Sort of –" I stop. "Wait, you know I was published in *The New Yorker*?"

“I recognized you the day we first met,” Tyler says. He is sitting beside me now and fiddling with the hems of his shorts. “My wife loved your story. I laminated a copy for her she read it so many times. It’s probably still on our fridge.”

“You’re married?” Tyler doesn’t wear a wedding band and I never thought to ask.

“Uh, not anymore. Not exactly.”

“Did you get divorced?”

“No, she died. About two years ago – breast cancer that metastasized to the bone.”

“Oh.”

“It was hard,” Tyler says, “when she relapsed. The doctors said it was terminal. She decided not to go through chemo and the decision never sat well with me. Cancer’s a trickster and sometimes doctors are wrong. But Celia didn’t want to spend her last months in more pain than necessary and I tried to respect that. It wasn’t easy, though.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because running away isn’t cowardly, Reagan. Sometimes, it’s the best thing you can do for yourself. When Celia passed, I needed some place to take refuge, somewhere I could heal. Paducah’s my hometown, so I moved back here. When I’m ready, I’ll return to Nashville – to our house... And when you’re ready, you’ll find your words again.”

“Is that why you invited me on all those boat rides?”

“You needed a friend,” Tyler says. “No matter how much you thought to the contrary.” He grabs my hand gives it a gentle squeeze. “You had that look in your eyes,

like you were watching the world from an observation window. It isn't easy to reach out when you feel isolated."

"I don't think I'm meant to write a book," I say. "Writing was a hobby, a way to help me focus when I was too distracted to do my school work. But it's too much. As a job, I mean. There's all this pressure to write and write well. It's no longer fun. I'm forced to cater my words to best please the reader. The stories don't feel like they're mine anymore. And I can't force the words. The harder I tried to produce something, the less I had to say. Until one day, there was nothing. Nothing but anxiety and fear of failure. I've been stuck in this gray area ever since."

"What did you major in in college?"

"Uh, biology. I was actually working in a small lab when Mr. Daley called to tell me I had been offered a book deal."

"Mr. Daley?"

"He's my agent," I say. I tuck my hair behind my ear from where the wind had dislodged it. "And I accepted. How do you not accept something like that? It worked for a while until I quit my job, at Emery's insistence, and tried to just focus on my writing. It was scary though, relying only on my imagination to make a living."

"Go back to work."

"What?"

"If writing full time is too stressful for you, go back to work. Find a new job and make writing a hobby again. It's okay if you need a safety net. Emery may have good intentions – although she *does not* voice them well – but ultimately, you know what's best for you."

“Emery’s a tyrant.”

“Maybe a little.” Tyler chuckles. “Talk to her. She wants to understand.”

“I’ll try,” I say. Tyler leaves a little later, hoping to get the boat back before sun down. I stay until the stars are glowing overhead and the night breeze prickles my skin with goose-bumps.

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When I return home this time, Emery’s not waiting to pounce in the kitchen. Instead, she’s in the guest bedroom, folding clothes she plucks from a nearby laundry basket. I knock on the doorframe.

“I-I’m just packing,” Emery says, voice wobbly. “I think I’ll leave tomorrow.”

I take a seat on the bed and watch as she folds a blue camisole. “You can stay as long as you like.”

“No, I really can’t. I’m disrupting your life here. You’re trying to rebuild and I’m making it more difficult. I always do. Do you remember when dad died?”

“Kind of hard to forget,” I say. “Mom didn’t get out of bed for weeks.”

“And you took care of me – made me lunch and checked my homework and comforted me when I cried. I was angry at mom for a long time, just leaving us to our own devices. I was so wrapped in my own thoughts that I didn’t try to be understanding.”

“Mom was depressed, Emery. That’s not something you or I could easily understand, especially when we were kids.”

“But I did the same thing to you!” Emery says, pushing her laundry aside and sitting next to me. “I remember the panic attacks you used to get, too overwhelmed with school and taking care of me. You would lock yourself in the bathroom and I would stand

outside, scared. I would hear you panting and crying. Sometimes, I fell asleep on the hall floor waiting for you to come back out.”

“And then I would have to drag you back to bed,” I say wiping at my eyes.

“You always took care of me,” Emery says, resting her head on my shoulder.

“Have you thought about seeing a counselor again?”

“No, I didn’t actually realize how bad the problem was until I was halfway to Paducah, you know. But this place is doing me good; I can feel it.”

“I know.”

“I also need to you back off my writing career. I have an agent now – let Mr. Daley do his job. I appreciate all you’ve done for me, Emery. I really do. But going forward, if I need your advice or assistance, let me ask for it – don’t shove it down my throat.”

“Just as long as you actually ask from time to time.”

“Deal,” I say. “Tyler says I should try getting a job again, that it might help the writing process.”

“Maybe it will,” Emery says. “He seems to have a good head on his shoulders. Whatever you do, though, you should at least talk to Mr. Daley. He’s anxious to hear from you.”

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Emery leaves the next day, a Wednesday. “I didn’t know anyone even had dial-up in 2013. If I have to wait five minutes to send another email of my column responses to my editor, I’m going to strangle someone! I expect you to have wi-fi when I come to visit

again. And more frequent phone calls, please. I have your address now; I will come back if you ignore me.”

“Got it,” I say, fiddling with the zipper of her suitcase before I load it into the trunk of her Ford Explorer.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m afraid to talk to Mr. Daley. Out of all the people I might have pissed off with my cross-country move, he’s the one I regret ignoring the most. Do you think he’ll forgive me for not answering his phone calls?”

“I don’t think he was ever angry at you, Reagan,” Emery says, wrapping me in a tight hug. “He’s a patient man – he could wait 15 years for you to write your novel and not lose faith in you for a single moment. I think if you listen to those voicemails of his again, you’ll hear what we’ve known all along: you’re a good writer and your novel will be awesome.”

“Thank you,” I say as she climbs into her vehicle.

“Take care of yourself,” she says before closing the door. And then I’m waving as she drives off, losing sight of her vehicle as the road veers into the trees.

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When I walk around the back of the house, Tyler’s climbing up the hill from the dock. The late afternoon sun is bright overhead.

“Hey, I was just coming to see if you and Emery were interested in going out on the lake.”

“Too late,” I say. “Emery’s on her way back to New York.”

“You didn’t kick her out, did you?”

“No,” I say. “Like she would let anyone evict her. I even told her she could stay longer, but she was missing home and faster internet service.”

“Dial-up not good enough for her?”

“Nope. We were on good terms for once – I think she left before we could have another fight.”

“Probably a good idea,” he says. I shove him in the shoulder. “You up for that boat ride?”

“Always.” I smile as I watch the waves roll into the shore. We walk down to the dock, untie the boat, and Tyler angles us toward the channel. “I missed this.”

“Where should we go?” he asks. “Moss Creek?”

“No, Celia’s Cove.”

“What?”

“That’s what you should call that place you took me to on my first boat ride. Celia’s Cove – it has a nice ring to it.”

He looks a little nostalgic as he considers my suggestion. “I like it.”

After that, we’re relatively silent. The sun glares off the lake and the sky is an uninterrupted blue canvas. The trees along the shoreline have filled out with green leaves and a crane makes a swooping dive over the lake.

“One of these days,” I say over my shoulder, “we should put this fishing boat to good use and try our hand at fishing.”

Tyler laughs. “You’re weirdly determined that a fishing boat should be used to fish for a writer who doesn’t write.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to write. I just need to find a better way of doing it.”

“That’s the spirit,” Tyler whoops. “My dad has some poles we can borrow. We can be fishing this time tomorrow.”

“Can’t,” I say smiling at Tyler’s frown. “I’m expecting an important phone call.”

Fetch

The old man flung open the door to his garage, flicking on the light switch as he stepped down a set of concrete steps. A large black-and-tan coonhound trotted out the door after him. The old man sat heavily in a dark wooden chair, the seat cushion pressed thin with age. The dog's claws clicked on the concrete as he paced around the enclosed space.

The man grabbed his rubber boots and slipped them on one at a time. "Summer days start early, don't they, Dusk?"

The dog wagged his tail. He paused for a moment in his circling to rest his head on his owner's lap. The old man smoothed his hand over Dusk's head before scratching along the side of his neck.

"Ready to go?"

Dusk's head popped up off the old man's knee, his eyes alert. The dog shadowed the old man as he opened a black plastic toolbox that sat on the metal shelving unit next to the outer door. As he eased open the lid, a brilliant white light spilled between the cracks. Dusk yipped in excitement, tail thumping into the old man's leg. The old man reached into the tool box and pulled out a small orb. It lit the entirety of the cramped garage in glaring detail from where it rested in the palm of his hand. He tucked it deep into the pocket of his coveralls and unlocked the heavy wooden door that lead into his front garden. Dusk bolted out the door and over the dewy lawn.

“Wait up!” the old man called. Dusk stopped at the end of the drive and turned to look back at the old man, entreating him to *please hurry up*.

Together, the old man and the dog walked along the cobblestone pavement. The road sloped gently downward and was bordered on both sides by eroded rock walls. Beyond them, sheep grazed in the rolling hills of bracken and heather. It was late June, much too early for the heather to bloom, so the bushes sat dense and brown on the hillsides.

At the bottom of the hill, the rock wall was broken by a wooden gate. The old man unlatched the lock, pulling up the pin, and pushed the door open. Dusk bounded into the bracken, nose snuffling along the ground.

Out in the moorlands, without the aid of streetlights, the black outlines of the hills were barely discernible against the deep navy of the night sky. The stars glimmered, their light soft with age. The air was bracing and pine-scented.

“What a night, Dusk. Today’ll be a cool one.”

The two stumbled through the dark, skirting the bases of hills. Dusk yipped and pranced, running ahead of the old man only to bound back to him with miscellaneous twigs.

At the foot of a steep hill, the old man said, “How about a little light.” He plucked the glowing orb from his coveralls pocket. The light fell gently over a dirt path that fell between the heather bushes where Dusk stood expectantly. The night sky softened to a royal blue then purple and pink then gray-blue as they ascended the hill. When they reached the top, the small orb bathed the nearby moorlands in watery light of dawn.

“Ready Dusk?” the old man asked, holding the orb aloft. Dusk barked, lowering the front of his body into a playful bow and tail wagging in the air. The old man drew back his arm and chucked the orb high over the land. “Go fetch.”

Dusk burst down the hill, crashing through the heather and bracken. The orb arched long and high through the sky, lighting the entire landscape in bright detail. Only small puffs of clouds interrupted its light.

The old man stood on the hill waiting for Dusk to return, just like he did every day. The dog would be back as night fell. The old man stuffed his hands into his pockets, content to watch the sheep graze among the green and brown-splotched hills of the moorlands.

Suspended

“God, what a shitty way to start summer vacation,” Aunt Gwen says as she checks her sunglasses in the rearview mirror. “Couldn’t you have waited to punch Mallory Carson for another three days? Jesus Christ.”

“The way I see it, my summer vacation is now seven days longer,” I say as I slide into the passenger seat.

“Oh, you sound proud. That’s the exact opposite of what you should be feeling. You should be ashamed or guilty or repentant. Not smug!” She sighs. “As if Thea doesn’t meddle enough.”

“She was being a bitch. What was I supposed to do?”

“Language, Avery. And ignore her. You can’t punch out every asshole that pisses you off.”

“Language, Aunt Gwen.”

“God, she’s going to have a field day,” Aunt Gwen says as she starts her car and pulls out of the school parking lot.

“What’s Grandma Thea gonna do? I’m not missing out on anything vital. Do you know what we do the last three days of high school? Nothing. How about the first four days? Read syllabuses. I’m missing out on *so* much.”

“It’s irresponsible. That’s what she’ll argue. That I’m not a good influence. That you’re better off in her care.”

“No one’s better off in her care,” I say as I fiddle with the edge of my skirt.

“She certainly thinks so.”

“She thinks a lot of things. Doesn’t mean she’s right.”

“That’s not the point,” says Aunt Gwen as she taps her fingers on the steering wheel. “The point is, she’ll use this as just another reason why you shouldn’t be in my custody. If she was your guardian, you wouldn’t punch people.”

“What a load of bull shit.”

“Avery!”

“Sorry, what a load of bull *crap*. Guardianship wasn’t going to stop me from punching someone who thinks it’s okay to make fun of orphans.”

Aunt Gwen glances over at me, frowning. “What did she say?”

“That I was a waste of space and I should’ve died in the crash with my mom and dad.”

She reaches for my hand and gives it a squeeze.

“Wasn’t a good insult anyway,” I say as I lean my head against the window.

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Aunt Gwen calls Grandma Thea when we get home. She leans against the kitchen counter as she dials and I sit on one of the island stools. Aunt Gwen’s posture stiffens when Grandma Thea answers.

“Avery’s been suspended from school,” Aunt Gwen says. “As her grandmother, I thought you would like to know.” Aunt Gwen looks down at the floor, tapping her boot against the cabinet. When she winces I know Grandma Thea is seething, lashing Aunt Gwen with her words.

Grandma Thea's and Aunt Gwen's relationship is cordial at best – there's a bitterness in the way she treats Aunt Gwen. I would chalk it up to my mom's death, her only daughter, but she has been consistently nasty: refusing to attend my birthday parties with Aunt Gwen present, making snide comments about Aunt Gwen's depression, and expounding on what she perceives to be Aunt Gwen's character flaws. I wish I could silence her the way Mom used to. Just one look and Grandma Thea's lips would seal into a tight line, mid-sentence even.

“We don't have time tonight,” Aunt Gwen says, her voice unyielding like concrete. “We have our therapist visits. No... No, we aren't skipping. We'll see you tomorrow night...”

I trace the scratches in the countertop.

“She's not skipping, Althea. We're not discussing this further.” I can hear the sharp tones of Grandma Thea's voice as she responds. “Tomorrow, 5:00 at Maggie's. We'll be there.”

“I don't get why you called her,” I say when Aunt Gwen sets her phone down. “You know she overreacts.”

“She deserves to know what's going on in her granddaughter's life.”

“Not when she talks to you like you're dirt.”

“Your grandmother is... upset, Avery. She misses Marcy and you're her last connection to her. As long as she treats you well, I'm not going to keep you two separated. Your mom would want you two to have a relationship.”

“Mom also didn't let her treat you like this.”

Aunt Gwen rubs her hand across the countertop. “It’s fine, Avery. I can handle Thea. And you can go get ready for Therapy Thursday.”

“Ice cream afterwards?”

“You got suspended today.”

“It’s a Therapy Thursday tradition!”

“For *punching* someone.”

“It’s *tradition*.”

“I’ll think about it. Now go get ready.”

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“How was your week?” Dr. Bhalla asks once she has closed the door to her office and I’ve settled on the sofa. I tuck my legs under me and lean against the arm rest.

“You know how it was – Aunt Gwen’s already told you.”

“Only the suspension part – and we’ll get to that – but what about the rest of the week?”

“Same as usual,” I say. “School, homework, Aunt Gwen’s depression acted up a little bit on Monday and Tuesday. So I tried to help with the little things – like making dinner and doing laundry.”

“It must be hard taking care of your aunt.”

“I guess it would be if it was all one-sided, but we take care of each other.”

“Good, good. Have you been by the house yet?”

“No,” I say, picking at a hole in the fabric of the couch.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to see it. We cleared out my stuff – there’s no need for me to go back.”

“What about your parents’ stuff? Are you planning on keeping it? If you sell it, you’re going to have to clean out the house.”

“Grandma Thea paid off the rest of the house when Mom and Dad died,” I say. “I won’t have access to my inheritance for another two years. I don’t need to mess with the house before then. I don’t want to.”

“Try to push yourself – I know you can handle it. Avery, it’ll be good for you to go back. Over the summer, I’d like you to work on that.”

“I’ll try,” I say, but I have no intention of following through on my promise.

“Alright,” Dr. Bhalla says, shifting in her chair, “let’s talk about your suspension.”

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“How did your talk with Dr. Bhalla go?”

“Okay, I guess.” I stir the melted ice cream remnants around the bottom of my bowl. “Same as last week, nothing new to say.”

“Except you punched someone,” Aunt Gwen says.

“Not what I meant,” I say. “The stuff I have to deal with on a daily basis, it doesn’t change. My parents are dead, my aunt is bullied by my grandmother, and the world is full of asshole teenagers. It’s the same thing week after week. I just feel whiny repeating myself all the time.”

“First of all,” Aunt Gwen says punctuating her list with flicks of her plastic spoon, “I am not bullied by your grandmother. You don’t need to worry about us – I have it under control. Second of all, you are dealing with legitimate issues. Don’t let anyone else try to tell you otherwise, not even yourself. Third of all, you need to put a dollar in the Swear Jar.”

“We don’t have a Swear Jar, though.”

“So?” Aunt Gwen collects our trash into a small pile and pushes back her chair. “As soon as we get home, I’ll find a Mason jar, you’ll put a dollar in it, and we’ll officially have one.”

“That’s so stupid,” I say as I follow her to the trash can. “Why does it matter if I occasionally say asshole?”

“That’s two dollars,” she says as she holds the door open for me. “I can’t have Thea thinking I’m raising a hooligan.”

“Hooligan? Who even says that anymore?”

“Me,” she says dramatically flipping her hair over her shoulder. Therapy Thursday is Aunt Gwen’s yoga; she leaves the therapist’s office more at peace with the world, calmer and freer.

“If you’re starting a Swear Jar, I’m starting a ‘Dorky Mom Words’ jar.” I flinch. “Guardian. Dorky Guardian Words jar.”

“How much?” she says as she throws an arm over my shoulder and pulls me awkwardly close as we cross the parking lot. I trip over a curb and nearly spill us onto the asphalt.

“For hooligan? At least three dollars.”

“Hmm, I think I can swing it.”

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“Stop that,” Aunt Gwen says, pushing my hand away from my cheek. I shrug and clasp my hands together in my lap. Biting the inside of my cheek is a nervous habit.

“Isn’t Grandma Thea supposed to be here by now?” I ask. I tap my fingers along the edge of the table, then fiddle with the silverware.

“You know Thea – fashionably late for everything.”

Maggie’s is a family-owned bistro crammed full of circular tables covered in white linen. The lights are dimmed, but the room is well lit by the evening sun. At 5:09, the attendants haven’t lit the tea candles yet and only one other table is occupied with two waitresses rolling silverware in red cloth napkins. The sound of clinking dishes carries in from the back.

“I’m here,” Grandma Thea says after she flings open the door to the restaurant.

“Evening Gwen. Avery, stop biting the inside of your cheek.”

I drop my hand into my lap once again. “Hey, Grandma Thea.”

“Hay is for horses, dear,” she says as she shimmies off her shawl and drapes it across the back of her chair. Aunt Gwen and I stay silent as Grandma Thea sits and examines her menu. She orders a glass of water when the waiter returns and doesn’t speak until he has left again.

“So Avery,” she says, peering over her glasses at me, “Gwen tells me you were suspended for fighting?”

“It wasn’t really a fight,” I say. “I punched a girl and she started screaming about a bloody nose. I don’t think it counts as a fight when the other person doesn’t, you know, fight back.”

“Avery,” Aunt Gwen says, “I don’t think Thea came here to quibble over whether or not you *technically* fought someone.”

“But I didn’t.”

“I’m sure,” Aunt Gwen continued, “she would be much more interested in why you did it and how you plan on occupying your days of suspension.”

“I punched this girl, Mallory, because she was being a bitch.” Aunt Gwen buries her face in her hands and Grandma Thea’s brow furrows, as I retrieve my purse from the back of my chair.

“Such lovely language. Do you allow her to speak like this all the time, Gwen?”

“Of course not,” I say, handing Aunt Gwen four quarters I had fished out of my wallet. “But you can’t sugarcoat the kind of person Mallory Carson is. She takes pleasure in teasing people, poking at their insecurities. She wouldn’t shut up when I told her, so I punched her. And now I’m suspended.”

Aunt Gwen glares at me. But what else is there to say? I don’t regret what I did. People will tell you that you can’t fight words with actions, but I sure as hell can try. Words may have lasting power, but a fist to the face may make Mallory think twice before she verbally assaults someone again.

“And what will you be doing during your days of suspension?” Aunt Gwen asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. “We haven’t really discussed if I’m grounded or not. Maybe watch TV, if you’ll let me. Or read if you don’t.”

“No,” Grandma Thea says, “unacceptable. You don’t get to use your suspension days for pleasure.”

“I’m not sure boredom counts for pleasure,” I say.

“Were you not planning on punishing her?” Grandma Thea asks Aunt Gwen.

“Of course I was,” she says. “But this just happened yesterday and *you* insisted on being included in the discussion.”

“Obviously, otherwise you’d let her get away with anything,” Grandma Thea says as the waiter approaches our table again. We order our food: a Caesar salad for Aunt Gwen, sirloin steak for Grandma Thea, and spaghetti for me.

“What were your suggestions, Thea?” Aunt Gwen asks. I grab my bundle of utensils and focus my attention on unraveling the fabric.

“During her suspension days,” Grandma Thea says, “I want her with me.”

I pull out the salad fork and set it next to my plate.

“I have work she can do around the house.”

I set the second fork – for the main course – next to the first.

“I’ll make sure she stays productive, that she doesn’t use these suspension days as some kind of joy ride.”

I catch my reflection in the blade of the knife before placing it on the table.

“If we let her use this time as she pleases, she’s not going to learn, Gwen.”

“Avery is sitting here with us, Thea. Please quit talking as if she isn’t.”

“I don’t think she should get a say in her punishment,” Grandma Thea says. I smooth the red napkin over my thighs.

“That doesn’t excuse your behavior,” Aunt Gwen says as she unrolls her set of silverware. She glances at me and I shrug. “She deserves to be treated with respect – no matter what the situation.”

“Well, if you did a better job of parenting Avery, we wouldn’t be here. Honestly, fighting, Gwen? When are you actually going to start disciplining her? You are not suited for guardianship. I don’t know what Marcy was thinking.”

I push back from the table and toss my napkin onto the table.

“Quit talking to Aunt Gwen like that,” I say.

“Excuse me?” Grandma Thea says.

“I don’t feel well,” I say, my stomach clenching. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

I hurry off to the restroom and lock myself in a stall.

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“Avery?”

“I’m not hungry,” I say, wiping my nose with a wad of toilet paper. The stall door rattles when Aunt Gwen tries to open it.

“Come on, let me in.”

I slide open the lock.

“I had the staff box up your food – told them you were feeling sick. Thea left about five minutes ago.”

She pushes open the door and gathers me in a hug. I bury my face into her shoulder. “How long was I in here?”

“Hm, maybe 45 minutes. Your grandmother was livid when I told her to leave you alone. You should have seen the way she carved into her steak. I was afraid she was going to cut clean through her plate.”

“She didn’t yell at you when I left, did she?”

“She tried, but other customers started to show up and you know how she hates to make a scene.”

“In public, anyway,” I say, finally stepping back. “Can we go home?”

“What? You done hugging it out in a bathroom stall?”

“Yeah,” I say, laughing as I push past her. I throw away the toilet paper and wash my hands.

“Your grandmother and I came to an agreement on your punishment.”

“How much am I not going to like it? On a scale of one to ten?”

“Probaby twelve.”

As I dry my hands, I scrunch my nose at my reflection. “Tell me when we get home so I can cry in the comfort of my own room.”

“So melodramatic – you are your father’s daughter.”

“I miss his stupid jokes,” I say as we exit the bathroom. I scoop up the to go box of spaghetti as we pass our table. “His favorite response to ‘I’m hungry,’ was ‘Hi, Hungry. I’m Dad.’ Cracked himself up every time.”

“Yeah, they were pretty stupid,” Aunt Gwen says.

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“Why would you agree to that?” I say as I shove a plateful of spaghetti into the microwave. I slam the door and punch in 45 seconds on the timer.

“It wasn’t an unreasonable suggestion and she gets her way. My life is easier when Thea feels like she’s getting what she wants.”

“But I don’t want to dust her precious figurines. She’s going to be breathing down my neck the whole time.”

“You’re just going to help clean up around her house, Avery. No need to overreact.”

“Then you haven’t heard the stories,” I say. The microwave beeps three times when the counter reaches zero and falls silent. I snatch a fork from the utensil drawer, grab the plate from the microwave, and settle on an island stool to eat dinner. “Mom used to tell me about Cleaning Day in Grandma Thea’s house. She’d make her get up at six on a *Saturday* to clean every possible surface until they shined, shampoo the carpets, dust all the wood surfaces, degrease the stove, polish the silverware, flip the mattresses, launder the curtains, scrub the toilets, disinfect the tub. And they used to do that every other week! I’m going to die if I have to do that kind of cleaning for three days straight.”

“Don’t make me start a jar for melodramatics as well,” Aunt Gwen says, nodding her head towards the Swear Jar. “If Marcy survived, then so can you.”

I twirl some spaghetti around the end of my fork, watching the noodles spool like a roll of yarn. “What time will you be dropping me off and picking me up?”

“I’ll drop you off on my way to work.”

“I have to be ready by eight? Ugh, that’s so early.”

“It is not,” Aunt Gwen says, rolling her eyes.

“It is for summer vacation.”

“You’re not on summer vacation – you’re suspended. Your summer doesn’t start until school lets out, same as any other kid.”

“Fine, but you’re not making me spend the night too, are you?” I scrape the spaghetti to the side of the plate.

“No, I’ll be picking you up on my way home from work.”

“Fine,” I say, taking my plate to the trash can and dumping away the bits of tomato and the heap of noodles, no longer hungry.

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“Ready?” Aunt Gwen asks as I stumble down the stairs Monday morning.

“No.” I rub my eyes, but a sleepy blurriness persists around the edges of my vision.

“Oh cheer up. It won’t be so bad. You’ll be so busy that the time will fly by.”

“You’re so optimistic for someone diagnosed with depression,” I say.

Aunt Gwen has her bad days, where she will call in sick to work and spend most of the day sleeping. I’ll leave her a cup of peppermint tea on the nightstand before I leave for school and watch movies with her when I get back. Like Mom used to do. But between the medication and the therapy sessions, Aunt Gwen is in a good place, well prepared to handle her emotional downs.

The closest I have ever seen her come to a relapse was shortly after Mom and Dad died. We spent several weeks tucked beneath her comforter, unmoored, unattached, and confused. I remember her running her fingers through my hair, the stickiness of dried tears, and the hollowness in my gut that was reflected in Aunt Gwen’s eyes. We never needed my parents more than in the weeks after the car accident.

“Learned behavior,” she says in an infomercial voice. “If you’re determined enough, you *too* can learn optimism.”

“You’re also not the one condemned to clean Grandma Thea’s house.”

“Condemned? You owe me a dollar.”

“What? Why? That’s not a swear word!”

“I’ve decided to start the Melodrama Jar.”

“That’s so stupid,” I say as we walk to the car. “I never agreed to that. I won’t participate.” Aunt Gwen winks at me as I open the passenger-side door.

“You’ll be fine,” she says. “You’ll have your cellphone – if Thea does anything to upset you – crosses any boundaries – you call me and I’ll come get you.”

I slide my fingers along the shoulder strap of my seat belt, the ridges of the fabric grating against my skin. “I don’t understand how Grandma Thea raised a person like Mom. They are so different. *Were* so different, when Mom was alive.”

“Your mom and Grandma Thea were very close when she was younger.”

“What changed?”

“Your mom met your dad and me. Avery, your dad and I, we didn’t have the greatest childhood. Or teenage-hood? Our mom left when we were in elementary school and our dad, well, he worked all day. We hardly ever saw him before he retired. Your grandma didn’t want her daughter associating with people like us. Your mom, Marcy, she wasn’t perfect – she ate Crunch bars like they were going out of style and had near meltdowns when people forgot to use coasters – but she could find the good in people. It’s why she never gave up on me or her mother or people in general.”

“Every night, before I went to bed, she’d tell me five things she loved about me. And Dad would always pipe in that he loved her for her corniness.” I look out the window and watch the grass and trees and blacktop slide by. “I miss it.”

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“We’ll start with something simple,” Grandma Thea says, then hands me a greying washcloth and a can of Pledge. “Dusting. All wood surfaces need to be dusted – end tables, the mantle, picture frames, the coffee table, the TV set, bookshelves, and so on. Make sure you move books and other items out of the way so that you can clean the entire surface.”

“What?” I say. “That’s going to take so much longer!”

“This is about doing the job correctly, not easily.”

“Fine. Any specific way I need to dust the surfaces?”

“Don’t be a smart-alec,” she says. “Just spray the cloth and wipe thoroughly. I’ll be working on bills in the office when you finish.”

“You’re not going to help?”

“I didn’t punch someone, so this isn’t my punishment. Now get to work.”

She walks off down the hall, her footsteps muffled by the carpet. I glance around the living room and sigh. Practically every wooden surface is covered in knick-knacks, books, photos, or magazines.

I begin with the fireplace mantle. One item at a time so as not to break anything, I relocate everything to the couch: a ceramic angel, my baby picture from the hospital, Mom and Dad’s wedding photo, a lopsided clay fish with “Marcy, 4th Grade, 1981” carved into the back side, and a picture of Mom and Grandma Thea at Mom’s

Kindergarten graduation. The photo has a yellowish hue and the frame is ornate, made of silver interwoven branches. Mom's in a purple checkered dress with a paper graduation cap clipped in her hair. Grandma Thea is kneeling beside her, arm looped around her daughter's waist, and they are smiling at the camera. I wonder who took the picture – Grandpa Fred died when Mom was three and Grandma Thea raised her as a single parent. Probably a teacher.

As I look at that picture, I envy my mom for a moment. She never had to miss her parents. Mom couldn't remember her father. But I remember how safe I felt when Dad hugged me, the scent of his aftershave clinging to the collar of his shirt. The short notes he would leave in my lunchbox punctuated with smiley faces. The scratchy tenor of his voice when he sang along to the radio, Mom giggling in the seat beside him and chiding him when he switched radio stations halfway through the song.

I set the picture frame next to the ceramic angel and focus on dusting. I spritz the washcloth with Pledge and wipe down the mantle in meticulous circles until the wood shines and the citrus scent burns at the back of my nose. I replace the items as precisely as I can and move onto end tables. Then the two bookshelves. Then the TV set. And when I'm done with the living room, I move on to the guest bedroom – Mom's old room – then the kitchen and Grandma Thea's bedroom. I don't think about Mom or Dad or Aunt Gwen or Grandma Thea, though. I feel the sweat pooling in the small of my back and the sore twinge of the muscles in my arms, but it's the good kind of exertion. It's just me dusting away the sadness and resentment that has accumulated on the bookshelves and tables over the years.

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“I’m done,” I tell Grandma Thea from the doorway to her office. “Aunt Gwen should be here in a couple hours – are there any small tasks you’d like me to take care of before I leave for the day?”

She punches a few numbers into her ten-key calculator, hits the ‘=’ button, and writes the sum in her checkbook. She sets aside her pen and glasses, and turns to face me. “It took you nearly all day to dust.”

“You have a lot of wood in your house,” I say, then shrug. “I wanted to make sure I did a good job so you wouldn’t make me redo anything. Mom used to say you were worse than a perfectionist.”

“How unflattering,” Grandma Thea says, but her lips twitch into a small smile. She stands up and smooths the wrinkles out of her shirt. “You can take care of the trash while I check your work.”

I wrinkle my nose at her back when she passes me, but I follow her down the hall, into to the living room and kitchen. She leans over the coffee table, angling her body to see if any smudges remain.

I grab a handful of garbage bags from under the kitchen sink and work my way throughout the house, emptying the trash bins in the bathrooms and the shedder basket next to Grandma Thea’s office desk. On the way to the garage, I grab the kitchen trash and jab the garage door button with my elbow. I sort the trash from the recyclables in the moist summer heat before pushing the cans out to the curb.

Grandma Thea is gone when I return – probably checking Mom’s old vanity and dresser in the guest room – so I settle on the couch. I groan when I feel my muscles relax,

unaware how tired I am. I drift off to the humming of the AC and creaking of doors as Grandma Thea moves from room to room.

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“Hey Avery,” a voice says. Hands are shaking my shoulders. “Wakey wakey – you’re sleeping the day away.”

“Mom?” I ask.

“No, sweetie.” And then I recognize Aunt Gwen’s voice. I finally get my eyes open and she’s leaning over me, her expression carefully blank. “Just me. You ready to go home?”

“I guess.” I run my hands through my hair and look around the living room. Grandma Thea is flipping through a magazine on the loveseat. “How long was I asleep?”

Grandma Thea glances up from her reading and says, “About two hours.”

“What about all the cleaning?”

“We have six more days to get everything done. You did a good job on the dusting, so I let you rest.”

“Six more...? You mean I have to come back and do this again at the beginning of the next school year too?”

“Seven days of cleaning for seven days of suspension,” Aunt Gwen says. “We thought it was a reasonable punishment. You’ll have plenty of summer days in between to recuperate.”

“You failed to mention that last night!” I stand up with a huff. “What about my homework?”

Aunt Gwen smirks. “I thought you only went over syllabuses on the first several days.”

“That might have been a slight exaggeration,” I say.

“We’ll make time for it in the afternoon,” Grandma Thea says.

“It’s several months away, anyway,” Aunt Gwen adds. “We’ll work something out before then.”

“If we must... What’s for dinner?” I ask.

“We’ll discuss that on the way home,” she says. “We’ll see you tomorrow, Thea.”

Grandma Thea nods, but doesn’t look up.

“Bye Grandma Thea,” I say as Aunt Gwen opens the front door and steps outside.

I lean over the arm of the loveseat and kiss her on the cheek.

“Lock the door on your way out,” she says.

~~~~~

“Are you sure this is good for the metal?” I ask. Grandma Thea has given me a stack of tarnished silverware, a Tupperware container of baking soda, water, and a few drops of lemon juice that I watched her mix, and a clump of steel wool with which to scrub them clean.

“Of course,” she says. “I wouldn’t tell you to do it otherwise. When you’re done with that, wash them and set them in the dish rack to dry. I’ll be doing some laundry and ironing if you need me.”

She leaves me in the kitchen and heads downstairs to the laundry room. I settle in a kitchen chair and set about polishing the metal, dipping the steel wool into the baking soda paste and scrubbing until the metal surfaces shine. My fingers are cramping by the

time I finish the set. I plug the bottom of the sink, run the hot water, and add soap. As the water suds up, I carry over the various forks, knives, and spoons.

I'm washing each utensil with a sponge when Grandma Thea reappears in the kitchen, a stack of hanging clothes draped over her forearm.

"What do you want me to do after I finish up here?" I ask.

"I'll get out the vacuum cleaner and the shampooer so you can take care of the carpets next."

~~~~~

I'm drying my hands on a kitchen towel, the silverware lying in the dish rack, when my phone vibrates in my pocket.

"Hello?" I say, when I see I have an incoming call.

"Hey Avery!" Aunt Gwen says. "I have an extended lunch break today, so I thought I would pick up some sandwiches from Paisley's Bakery and come eat with you."

"Turkey and cranberry for me."

"I figured as much. Ask Thea if she would like me to bring her anything and text me her response."

"Alright, I'll do that," I say. I'm not sure how well this impromptu lunch idea will go over with Grandma Thea, but she managed to remain civil when Aunt Gwen picked me up last night.

Grandma Thea walks in as I'm hanging up. "Who was that? You're not supposed to be using your phone to call friends."

“It was Aunt Gwen,” I say. “She’s bringing us lunch. Would you like anything from Paisley’s Bakery?”

“That woman spoils you,” Grandma Thea says. “How is this supposed to be a punishment when she’s constantly coddling you?”

“She’s just bringing me lunch. That’s a pretty normal thing for a guardian figure to do. She is in charge of feeding me and caring for me, you know.”

“The way she caters to your every emotional whim – it’s not healthy, Avery. She can’t say no to you. It’s no wonder you punch people when you don’t get your way. And all these therapy sessions? It’s like she’s telling you it’s okay to be depressed or mentally ill. It’s disgusting.”

“How can you say that?” I ask. “None of your arguments make sense. It’s like you don’t even know why you’re mad at her.”

“She’s a disease. She’s manipulative. She’s –”

“My aunt and my dad’s sister. She was Mom’s best friend. And when you talk about her like that, you’re insulting all of us.”

“She had you all fooled,” Grandma Thea says. “After her little suicidal stunt, Marcy just couldn’t stay away. And then she started dating Gwen’s brother and taking care of Gwen.”

“Suicidal? Aunt Gwen tried to commit suicide?”

“She didn’t tell you? Oh how convenient of her. She’s always been an attention seeker. That’s what happens when you’re born into a white trash family – always needing to parasitically feed off the fortune and kindness of others.”

“Stop it!” I say, pushing past her out of the kitchen. “You don’t know anything. Aunt Gwen didn’t want your money or to steal Marcy from you or any of your other stupid complaints.”

“Where are you going?”

“You’re wrong about Aunt Gwen.” I run into the guestroom and lock the door behind me.

Grandma Thea rattles the door knob and knocks on the door. “Avery!” She tries to turn the knob again. “Let me in.”

“Go away,” I say as I pull my phone from my pocket and hit the redial button.

“Can you skip Paisley’s and come pick me up?” I ask when Aunt Gwen answers.

“Grandma Thea and I had a fight.”

“I’ll be there as soon I can.”

~~~~~

I am sitting on the floor, back against the door, when Aunt Gwen arrives. The inside of my cheek is raw and I think I can taste a little blood, but I can’t stop biting. There is an angry burst of whispers before she’s talking to me through the paneled wood.

“Avery?” she calls. “I’m here. You can come out now.”

“Grandma said you tried to commit suicide.”

There’s a tense pause, then, “You *what?*”

“You were going to have to tell her at some point,” Grandma Thea says. “You couldn’t keep it a secret forever.”

“I wasn’t planning on it. I was waiting until she was older and we could talk about suicide in an informed and mature manner. But all the stuff that happened to her parents, it’s more important that she is allowed to grieve and to heal. You had no right to tell her.”

“You’re raising her to be self-absorbed, just like you.”

“Self-absorbed?” Aunt Gwen asks, voice sharp like a shard of glass. “You are the most self-absorbed person I know. You have accused me of using my mental illness as crutch to get sympathy, as an excuse to be lazy. But what about yourself, Thea? Yes, you lost a daughter. But what about us? I lost my *brother* Chris and my best friend. And Avery, she lost her parents when she was fourteen. And not once have you tried to make this easier on us. Avery’s still here, still needs all the support she could get and you’ve failed her. I had hoped you would come through for her, but you haven’t. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to spend time with her anymore.”

“Don’t be unreasonable,” Grandma Thea says, voice shaky.

I slowly open the door and look between Aunt Gwen and Grandma Thea. “Aunt Gwen, what are you saying?”

“Please go get in the car,” Aunt Gwen says.

“Avery,” Grandma Thea says, reaching for me.

“Don’t touch her.” Grandma Thea’s hand drops to her side. And then we’re all standing in the hall, staring at each other.

“I want to go home,” I say, my throat suddenly sticky.

“We’re going.” Aunt Gwen grabs my arm and pulls me down the hall and into the living room. I glance over my shoulder at Grandma Thea’s hunched figure leaning against the wall, her shoulders heaving as if she can’t get enough air.

“No, I want to go *home*.”

~~~~~

“Are you sure about this?” Aunt Gwen asks as we pull into the driveway. My parents’ house sits dark and empty before us, the windows like dead eyes.

“Everything is so messed up. This can’t make it worse.”

We get out of the car and walk up to the front door, hand-in-hand. As Aunt Gwen fishes for the house keys in her purse, I say, “Mom wanted to paint the door a lighter blue – said this one was too dark. Dad promised to take care of it when the weather cooled off, but they never got around to it.”

When Aunt Gwen gets the door open, I sneeze. Layers of dust have settled thickly on the hardwood floors. I walk around the kitchen and the living room, touching the walls, the countertops, and the sofa. I look into my old bedroom, the green walls and the red tulips sponged around the ceiling. Mom and Dad’s bedroom has sat untouched since the car accident: the laundry basket for dirty clothes sits beside the dresser, the bed has been made but the decorative pillows are on the floor beneath the window, and the earring drawer in my mother’s jewelry box is only partially closed. Everything looks like I remember it, just emptier, more forlorn. Eventually, Aunt Gwen and I lay on their bed. The covers are musty but I can still make out faint traces of Mom’s hairspray and Dad’s aftershave.

“Did you try to commit suicide?”

She sighs. “Yeah, I did.”

“Why? When?”

“I’m not sure I can tell you why, sweetie. Mental illnesses don’t always have a specific reason why. Sometimes the chemicals in your head are just screwy. When I was nineteen, I was dealing with untreated depression and even though I had Chris and Marcy, I felt so alone in the world. I cried myself to sleep nearly every night for no particular reason. I didn’t understand why I was sad, Avery, and that was unbearable. I couldn’t always remember what happiness felt like and somehow I came to the conclusion that it would hurt less if I was dead. And so I tried to kill myself, but, thank God, your parents were able to intervene. They rallied for me, pushing me toward recovery when I wanted to give up. They were good people.”

“Yeah,” I say, then pause. A bird chirps shrill outside the window.

“Are you mad?” she asks. “A lot of people called me selfish, Thea included.”

“I don’t know how to feel. I can’t imagine losing you too. But it’s easy to pass judgment when you’re on the outside looking in. It’s easy to be angry. We always have the choice to do the right thing, though, and I don’t think yelling at you will make me feel better.”

“But punching will?” Aunt Gwen asks with a jab to my ribs.

“Quit it,” I say, pushing her away. “I can’t be angry with you because I think I understand where you’re coming from. On days when I really miss Mom and Dad, I sometimes wish I had been in that car with them. Not because of survivor’s guilt or because I’m truly suicidal but because I would be with them, wherever they are. You know? I just want them back with us, where they belong.”

“I know,” she says, wrapping me in a tight hug.

“But then you would be all alone.”

“I know.”

“And if you had committed suicide, where would that leave me?”

“Alone,” she whispers into my hair.

“And that scares me. I don’t think I can handle any more grief.”

“I know, I know.”

We sit in the house until night falls, the light of the sun fading across the floors.

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“What are you doing up so early?” Aunt Gwen asks when I bound into the kitchen. She takes a sip of her coffee.

“I have one more day of cleaning before my summer starts,” I say.

“You don’t have to go. I would prefer it if you didn’t.”

“But I need to. I can’t leave it like we did. She looked so broken when you pulled me away yesterday. I’m still angry with the way she’s treated us, but we need to work toward some kind of truce. I don’t know, something.”

Aunt Gwen sets her coffee mug down and studies me for a moment.

“What?”

“You just remind me of your mom, sometimes,” she says. “Well, if we’re gonna do this, we need to leave now. I have some work I need to catch up since I took an unexpected half-day yesterday.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. It’s important that you take care of yourself. If Thea tries anything funny today, you call me immediately. Got it?”

“Got it,” I say.

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Grandma Thea answers the door on the first knock.

“Avery?” she asks, lifting her hand and tracing her fingers along my cheek, like she can’t quite believe I am there. “What are you doing here?”

“I believe we left off with vacuuming the carpets, yesterday.”

“But Gwen said...”

“I know what she said, but I have a job to finish.”

“Okay,” she says stiltedly. She lets me inside after I wave to Aunt Gwen, whose car has been idling in the driveway. “The vacuum is in the hall closet.”

“Alright. What will you be working on?”

“What do you mean?”

“I have to clean because I punched someone. You get to clean because you were rude to both Aunt Gwen and me. I know we may never get along, but you two are all the family I have left and I need you to try. We’ve lost a lot and I think it’s time to start doing something other than all this petty bickering.”

Grandma Thea wrings her hands as she looks about the living room. Her eyes land on the silver-framed picture on the mantle and she nods.

She says, “I’ll mop the kitchen floor.”

“Good,” I say. “We’ll need to get a lot of work done today. I have another cleaning project we can start tomorrow.”

A Watched Pot Never Boils

“Where can I get sunflowers?” a boy asked the elderly Walmart greeter.

“You can get seed packets in the garden section,” the woman responded.

“I don’t want the seeds. I want the flowers. I don’t have time to *grow* them.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think we have any. Maybe there are some fake ones in the craft aisles.”

The boy twisted the end of his blue-striped shirt around his first two fingers and sighed. “They need to be living!”

“Do you have a parent with you?” she asked, looking around. Saturday shoppers bustled in and out, carts rattling and wheels squeaking on the tile. The boy appeared to be alone.

“I guess the seeds’ll have to do,” he said.

“Wait, do your parents know where you are?”

But the boy was already slipping past the first row of hygiene products.

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The boy was pondering over several packets of sunflower seeds when a hand clamped down on his shoulder.

“Grayson, what are you doing here?” his grandfather asked when the boy turned around. His red and blue plaid shirt was grease-stained and his white hair pillowed out of his head like a fluffy cloud. “You had your grandmother and I worried. You can’t wander off like that.”

“Mom’s room is so dark. I thought she could use more sunlight.” Grayson held up the packets of seeds, shaking the contents inside.

“Sunflowers don’t actually produce light.”

“Do too – Mom said so.”

“I’m not sure they’ll survive, son,” his grandfather said. “And I’m not sure your mother’ll ever see them bloom.”

“Doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try.”

His grandfather sighed. “We’ll need some potting soil and a pot, but hurry up. Grandma’s waiting for us by the check out.”

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“Grandma and I are headed to the cafeteria – will you be okay?”

Grayson nodded. He was kneeling in the chair by the windowsill, studying the clay pot full of dark, moist dirt.

“A watched pot never boils.”

“It’s not that kind of pot,” Grayson said.

His grandfather was leaning against the doorframe, a sly smile on his face “I know,” he said. “But it got you to look up, didn’t it? Why don’t you try talking to your mother for a little bit. We’ll bring you back a sandwich.”

After his grandfather left, Grayson pulled a chair over to his mother’s bedside and rested his elbows on top of the thin mattress. “Grandma and Grandpa don’t think you’re going to wake up anymore. You slept all summer – I’m ‘sposed to go back to school next week.”

Grayson shifted his weight in the chair so that he could hold his mother's hand. He fiddled with the mother's ring on his mom's left, middle finger. Two sapphire stones: one for him, one for her. "You were the best birthday present I've ever gotten," she'd tell him every year on his birthday.

"I think you just need more sunshine," he said. "The room's so dark that you still think it's nighttime. But I planted you some sunflowers and when they bloom, they'll fill your room – no, the whole floor with sunlight. And you'll wake up."

He looked back at the clay pot, but nothing had sprouted yet.

"You said every sunflower has a drop of sunshine in them, that the sun sent them to Earth to spread its light on cloudy days. I don't think Grandma and Grandpa believe your story, but I do. They'll see. Our house used to be full of sunflowers, so bright."

He sighed.

"They all died without you."

He adjusted her ring so that the jewels were centered on her finger. In the dusky lighting, the sapphires were almost black.

"I know you're really tired now, so I'll bring back the sunflowers while you sleep. It'll be okay, I think."

The Flower of Death

One – A Trespass

“You got your bag?” I asked. It was my daughter’s first day of second grade. She wore a bright red skirt with a white daisy pattern, a butter yellow shirt, and white sandals – she picked it out.

“Yep,” she said swinging around to show off her *Despicable Me* backpack. The shiny, plastic material probably wouldn’t hold together more than two months, but it was her favorite movie.

“Alright, then let’s get going.”

I grabbed two small suitcases off the floor and shuffled us out the door. I helped buckle her in.

“Remember, Grandma Royce’s picking you up from school and you’ll be staying with her a couple days,” I said once I had settled into the driver’s seat. “I’ll only be in Atlanta for five days, but I will call every night.”

“Promise?” She looked at me through the review mirror.

“I promise.”

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After I had dropped Alyssa off at the local elementary school, I made my way to my grandmother’s house. Grandma Royce, technically Alyssa’s great grandmother, raised me after my father died.

My grandmother had a beautiful yard – heather, phlox, forget-me-nots, and lavender blooming in a sea of reds, purples, and blues in her front flower beds. Morning glories and moon flower vines climbed the bricks of her small house, buds constantly opening and wilting throughout the day. She had a knack for growing plants out of season.

Living on the outskirts of town, her house sat singularly on a large hill of yellow-green grass, a pine forest off in the distance. Hedgerows bordered her property, an immaculately-trimmed, living fence. Around back, you would find her vegetables, the rose garden we planted when I was in middle school, and the apple tree she grew from a seed when she was sixteen. My grandmother spent so much time with her hands in the dirt, she was practically a flower herself.

“Grandma,” I called as I pushed through the front door. A sprig of lavender fell from the door frame and bounced off my shoulder. *Lavender over a home’s threshold protects the dwellers from evil intentions.* I set Alyssa’s overnight bag to the side, by the arm of Grandma Royce’s beloved purple sofa and closed the door. I replaced the sprig once more over the door frame. “Grandma?”

“Out back, Morgen!”

I crossed the living room to the back door, the late summer air flowing in heady pine-scented waves through the screen. A small, cherry-finished porch housed two white wicker chairs and four planters of various herbs. Down past the stairs, I could see Grandma Royce fussing with her tomato plants.

“The fruitworms are really doing a number on my tomatoes this year,” she said when the screen door banged shut behind me. “It might be time to sprinkle some vanilla over the roots.”

“I think that’ll just attract more pests.”

“Vanilla’s an excellent pest repellent,” she said and plucked an infested tomato from the vine and tossed it into a plastic bucket. She pushed through leaves and vines, picking some tomatoes and leaving others.

“Insecticide is also a good repellent. Maybe you should try that instead of a home remedy for once.”

“I could.” She straightened up and stretched her back, arms lifted high. She picked up her bucket of infected tomatoes and walked up to me, her face marshalled into a look of careful consideration. Grandma Royce ‘considered’ my suggestions to be polite, but I already knew her answer. “But the vanilla’s worked for years, so I’ll stick to what I know.”

~~~~~

“I packed plenty of clothing choices for Alyssa. She likes to pick out her own outfits and prefers to do a small puzzle before bed – says reading’s for after dinner. If there’s anything I left at the house, Alyssa knows where the spare key is. If you need to reach me just call me on my cellphone. I’ll have that with me at all times.”

“I’ve raised plenty of children in my time, Morgen. I can handle a couple days,” said Grandma Royce.

“I’m just trying to make it as easy as possible.”

“Alyssa’ll be fine. We’ll have a grand ol’ time.”

“Just try not to fill her head with all you superstitious nonsense,” I said as I spun a glass of sweet tea in my hands. After Grandma Royce had finished in the garden and taken the weeds to the compost pile, we relocated to her airy kitchen. The walls were daffodil yellow with white cabinets. White, gauzy curtains rippled by the open window. On the countertop next to the sink sat a small vase of frying pans and California poppies. *To ward off poisoning or foodborne illnesses and promote healing, respectively.* “I had nightmares for months after your stories about wendigos.”

“Superstitious nonsense, I should hardly think so. I’m teaching her the secrets of our craft, like I taught you and your father. He was much more receptive though.”

“Just keep it to a minimum. I can’t have her hanging lavender over the door because she thinks the boogeyman’s going to get her otherwise. It’s silly.”

“But children are silly, Morgen.”

“I wasn’t.”

“No, I suppose you weren’t.” She studied me with sad eyes. “But just because you lost faith doesn’t mean I am wrong. And as I’ve told you many times in the past, lavender protects from evil intent *not* physical harm. And the boogeyman is just make believe.”

I sighed. “I need to get to the airport. Alyssa gets out of school at 3:10, but you might want to get there early so you have a place to park.”

“I know, sweetie,” Grandma said. I picked up my purse, rifling through tissues and old receipts for my car keys as I walked to the front door. “Here, before you go.”

She placed a single maple seed in my hand. *For safe travels.* I found the simplicity comforting. It reminded me of a time when parents couldn’t die and spouses

didn't divorce you, like the seed would be all I ever needed to pass through this world unharmed. I pulled her into a tight hug.

"See you on Saturday, Grandma."

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*"Come on!" I yelled to Grandma Royce down the hallway. "You promised we would plant the roses today."*

*"Roses are such frilly flowers, Morgen," Grandma Royce said as she entered the living room. "Only good for romantic purposes. And it can only influence preexisting feelings. I tell them all the time, but they never listen."*

*"They who?"*

*"People who rely on everyone and everything else to fix their problems."*

*"So we're not planting roses?" I asked. I had researched the types of roses with my dad the night before: Rhapsody in Blue, Maiden's Blush, Robin Hood, Irish Eyes, and Queen Mother. I loved them for their fragrance and their duality, simultaneously beautiful and biting. "But you promised!"*

*"I know I did, sweetie," she said after a long assessing gaze. "And we are planting roses. So many roses that the house and garden will stink of them. Just don't depend on them to solve your relationship issues, or lack thereof."*

*"I won't," I said, not completely understanding what I was promising her. I followed her into the kitchen. She pulled a small vial of vanilla extract from the spice cabinet and dabbed a bit on her fingertip before rubbing some over her ankles and wrists, behind the ears, and on her forehead.*

*"What're you doing?"*

*“For the gnats. Vanilla will keep them away.”*

*“Is this more of your magic?” I asked as she handed me the container.*

*“No, never magic. Think of what I do as little shortcuts or rule bending maybe.*

*The vanilla will keep the gnats away, but we’ll have to extra be careful when you’re older, though. It attracts boys – the only pests it can’t keep away.”*

*I rolled my eyes and placed the brown vial in my pants’ pocket. “Better use it on your apple tree, then. Worms have gotten into some of the fruits.”*

*“Good eye,” Grandma Royce said, patting my shoulder.*

~~~~~

“Mommy!” Alyssa shrieked as I stepped onto the back porch. Grandma Royce had plaited her long black hair with buttercups and mountain violets. *A double shot of happiness.* Grandma was still kneeling in the vegetable patch where Alyssa had left her.

“Grandma braided my hair for me!”

“Oh, very pretty.”

“She said the flowers *influence* certain things. Like, uh, like that buttercups are for happiness.” Alyssa pulled her braid around and pointed to the aforementioned flower.

“Did you know that? She said she could teach me more too, like she did for you.”

“Oh really?” I asked. When I glanced over at Grandma Royce, she had busied herself with re-mulching the roses. “Well, that’ll have to wait for another day – we need to get home.”

“You’ll let Grandma teach me then? She said you might not, that you didn’t believe her.”

“We’ll discuss it later,” I said, making eye contact with Grandma Royce. She smiled and waved, nonplussed.

“Remember Sunday night dinner,” she said, getting up to hug Alyssa. “I’ll see you two tomorrow.”

~~~~~

Alyssa and I stumbled into a dark kitchen, me with her backpack and our two suitcases in hand. As I deposited the suitcases by the washer and dryer, Alyssa fumbled for the light switch. I was pulling out dirty shirts and socks when the light flickered on and Alyssa gasped.

“What is it?”

“Mommy, there’s something on the window.”

“Something what?” I asked.

“Something green.”

I looked over my shoulder toward the small kitchen window. In the darkness of the house, I had missed the thick mass of ivy leaves pressed up against it. I walked through the dining room and the back bedroom, checking every window. Ivy vines had spilled into the half bath from the ventilation window, slowly creeping down the tiled wall.

I ran out the front door and around to the back.

“Holy sh-what?”

Vines, green and unruly, covered the entire back of my house – windows, bricks, and roof tiles. The leaves chattered lightly in the blowing breeze, but the tangle of ivy was deeply rooted to the outer wall.

“Mommy,” Alyssa called. She peaked around the edge of the house. “What’s going on?”

“I-I’m not sure, sweetie, but I think we’ll need to call a lawn service of some sort.”

### *Two – A Return*

“This may be the worst infestation I’ve ever seen,” Grandma Royce said, running her fingers over the ivy leaves. “Why’d you let it get so bad?”

“Let it? I was gone for five days and I came home to this. *None* of it was here when I left.”

“Odd. Ivy is for persistence – any way that might pertain to your life?”

“Of course not. It’s just a plant. I bought weed killer, but it didn’t kill a single leaf. There’s too much, so I called a professional lawn-care service. It won’t be cheap to get this all removed.”

“Bradford pear.”

“What?”

“Save yourself some money and bury some Bradford pear bark in the roots. It’s a negator, as you’ll remember.”

“I don’t have time for folk remedies, Grandma. Carson’s Lawn Service will be stopping by to take care of it all tomorrow.”

“If you didn’t want my help, why’d you drag me out here?”

“You’re familiar with plants. I figured you’d have a little more input on how to get rid of it. Or if it was even possible for so much to grow in such a small time period.”

“I gave you my answers, but you didn’t like what I had to say.”

“Because they didn’t make sense.”

“No, you’re unwilling to listen,” she said with a shrug. “Bradford pear bark will clear this right up, trust me.”

“Come on,” I said. “Alyssa’s hungry – we’d better go get ready for dinner.”

~~~~~

“Ma’am, there’s nothing we can do about the ivy,” said the serviceman. I had returned from work during lunch time to find Carson’s Lawn Service absent and the ivy stubbornly trickling towards the front of my house. I called the number the servicemen had left taped to my front door.

“What do you mean there’s nothing you can do? It’s a freaking plant. How is that a match for garden sheers or chain saws or – or whatever?”

“The vines are incredibly resilient. We cut at them for an hour, but it was endless. We sprayed them with some heavy duty weed killer, but I’m not sure it’ll do much good. There isn’t anything else we can do without significantly damaging the exterior of your house. If the ivy hasn’t already done that.”

“If you won’t take care of the problem, I’ll hire someone else,” I said.

“Any other service will tell you the same thing, ma’am: that ivy’s not going anywhere.”

“Thanks for all the help,” I said trying not to grind my teeth. “Goodbye.”

I hit the *End Call* button before he could respond.

~~~~~

“Whose car is that?” Alyssa asked from the backseat. I had just picked her up from school. A black Toyota Camry was parked in the driveway. I pulled up to the curb outside our house and dialed Grandma Royce.

“He’s here.” I watched my ex-husband step out of his new car. I hadn’t seen him since we signed the divorce papers two years ago, when he had a blue Camry. He had an odd preference for Camrys. “Mark’s here and I don’t know why. Can you please come and get Alyssa? I can’t deal with him while she’s here.”

“Give me ten minutes.”

~~~~~

I didn’t leave the car until Grandma Royce arrived. I could see Mark watching me from the driveway, but he kept his distance. I tapped at the steering wheel and studied my fingers instead of acknowledging him. Alyssa continued to ask what was going on and squirmed petulantly in the back seat when I refused to answer. But once Grandma had her safely buckled in her car and the two drove off, I was ready to face him.

“What are you doing here?” I kept his car between us as I approached, my arms folded and his resting on the car roof.

“Hello to you too,” he said.

“Don’t start.”

“You came firing, Morgen. I just want to talk.”

“Talk about what?”

“We didn’t leave on good terms.”

“*Obviously.*”

“Would you stop that.” He paced around the front edge of his car, shoulders taut and cheeks flushed. For each of his approaching steps, I took one backward. With a deep breath, he stilled. “Don’t be so difficult.”

“How am I supposed to be, Mark? You cheated on me. You ditched Alyssa. You drove off, God knows where and failed to keep in touch for two years. And now you’re in my driveway. What did you expect? Some cookies? A glass of lemonade?”

“The divorce was bad...” He sliced his hand through the air when I tried to interrupt. “But our marriage was already shitty and you know it. We were fighting all the time and sleeping in separate bedrooms. I needed to clear my head, get my life back together. I had found someone else and I needed to be with her. I didn’t deal with everything in the right order or the right way and I’m sorry. But I want to be involved. I’m her dad.”

“No,” I said. “No, you don’t get to do that. When you divorced me, when you left, you abandoned her. You didn’t call or write a single God damn letter. Only monthly child support checks. You’re not allowed to have contact with her!”

“Not allowed? We have joint custody!”

“Well, that was before you pulled your little disappearing act. You’re clearly not responsible or considerate. What am I supposed to tell Alyssa the next time you leave? Or the time after that? She needs stability and dependability. You’ll only hurt her and I will fight for full custody if that’s what it takes to keep her safe. I don’t think it’d be hard – you’ve been an absent father.”

“I’m not like – I wouldn’t do that to my own daughter.”

“You already have,” I said. I stepped around him, key in hand to unlock the front door.

“I’ve remarried,” he said. I dropped my keys. He swooped in beside me, picked them up, and handed them back to me. “I have another kid now – he just turned one.” He pulled a touch worn photo from his wallet and showed it to me. I shoved his hand away. “I’m a great dad to him, just like I was for Alyssa. Like I will be. You of all people should know how it feels to have an uninvolved parent. She can have both of us again. Don’t you want that for her?”

I jammed the key into the lock, feeling like I’d been elbowed in the solar plexus.

“Fuck you.” I wiped at my eyes. I frantically twisted the door knob, but it refused to give.

“Let me,” he said, winding the key until the lock clicked and door swung open.

“Go away.”

“We’re not done talking about this.”

“Go away.”

I stepped over the threshold and shut the door in his face.

~~~~~

*“Why do I have to meet Lexie?” I asked my dad as I ate cereal at the kitchen table.*

*“Because she wants to meet her daughter, which is you.” He had just stepped in from our small flower garden. He set a bunch of tulips, daffodils, and jonquils on the counter. He took a pair of scissors from the drawer and cut the last half inch of each stem.*

*“Only biologically. She’s never been a mom to me.”*

*I was raised by my dad. My parents were still in college when I was born, having already been broken up for several months at the time of my birth. Lexie had intended to give me up for adoption, but my dad intervened. He couldn’t wrap his head around letting someone else raise his child, so Lexie signed over fully custody to him. About a year later, they graduated college and went their separate ways, not communicating past the occasional letter for the first thirteen years of my life. Until she called him a week ago.*

*“And she’s not trying to be, Morgen. You always wanted to meet her when you were younger and now’s your chance.”*

*“She gave me up,” I said.*

*“She was young,” he said, taking a clear glass vase out of a nearby cupboard. He filled it with water and sprinkled in a dab of plant food before arranging the flowers.*

*“So were you.”*

*“We were two different people. She wasn’t ready for the responsibility of a child, so she tried to do the best thing for you. We both did. We just had two different answers to the same question.”*

*“Then why can’t she stay away now?”*

*“Because she’s going to have another baby soon and I think she wants him or her to know their half-sister.”*

*“Why did I have to wait thirteen years for her to decide she was ready to be a parent? Why should I care about my half-sibling who’s getting more from her than I ever did?”*

*“Lexie only ever had your best interests in mind. It’s what parents do.”*

*“She’ll never be my mom.”*

*“Perhaps not,” Dad said as he placed a final daffodil in the vase. He handed me one of the leftover flowers: a tulip. For forgiveness. “She deserves understanding and forgiveness; it’s a kindness we all need. Try not to be too harsh in your judgments of Lexie.”*

~~~~~

“What did he want?” Grandma Royce asked. When Mark left, I had driven over to her house. Alyssa was playing in the garden, sniffing the rose bushes and then picking some yellow daisies. *For friendship.* She poured me a glass of lemonade, spiking it with vodka.

“To be involved.”

“And you told him to get lost?”

“Yep,” I said, taking a sip of my drink and cringing. She made it strong.

“You can’t do that.”

“Why not? He’s an asshole.”

“That’s a personal issue between the two of you, Morgen,” Grandma Royce said. “He betrayed you and you’re still really angry. Maybe rightfully so. But *do not* put your child in the middle of your fight – that’s selfish. Alyssa should get a chance to be involved with her father. It’d be completely different if he’d been abusive, but he treated Alyssa well when you were married. He’s been inconsistent, yes, but he’s ready to try again. Why punish either of them for that?”

“I don’t trust him,” I said. I watched Alyssa out in the garden. She sat in the grass as she wove a daisy chain. “When he left me, he left her too. What am I supposed to do when he gets bored and wanders off again?”

“I think you need a new angle,” Grandma Royce said. She lifted an apple from the wicker basket by the sink. *For reasoning and perspective.* “Maybe you should try calling Lexie and hearing what she has to say.”

“Maybe,” I said as she handed me the apple.

Three – Something Broken

“Hello?” Lexie’s voice crackled through the receiver. “Can you hear me?”

“Lexie? It’s Morgen.”

“Hey, I haven’t heard from you in a while! I’ve been meaning to call.

Everything’s been so busy with Nicole going off to college and time’s just gotten away from me.”

“No, no. It’s not a problem. I know how crazy it can get with kids.”

My relationship with Lexie was awkward at best. We were like those mother-daughter couples that claimed they were best friends. With the unequal power dynamics, though, daughters just weren’t meant to be friends with their mothers. But that was the best I could manage with Lexie. She came too late into to my life to be an actual parent figure; however, I was her daughter and that placed an unavoidable kink in our relationship. We constantly worked around each other, never able to define our roles.

“Did you need something? Is Alyssa needing to sell something for a fundraiser again?”

“No, nothing like that.” I pause to take a deep breath. “I have a situation with Mark. He’s back in town, just showed up out of the blue after two years of radio silence and he wants to be involved again. But I don’t trust him. So I’m asking for your… advice.”

“That’s tricky,” Lexie said. I heard the clatter of pans in the background and yipping from Chester, Lexie’s Yorkshire terrier. “No matter what I say here, I’ll come across as the bad guy. I know you’ve never really forgiven me for giving you up at birth or suddenly reappearing when you were thirteen. But I still stand by my decisions and I won’t apologize for that. It was unfair that you grew up without a mother and the same could be said for Alyssa and her father.”

“I just can’t have him constantly coming and going. She needs someone who’s dependable and that’s not Mark.”

A pause.

“Give him a chance. If he’s really invested in his relationship with Alyssa, he won’t do anything to jeopardize it now.”

But in matters of divorce and child custody, it’s never that simple.

“Thanks, Lexie. I’ll talk to you later.”

~~~~~

“Alyssa’s school lets out at 3:10,” I told Mark over the phone. I hated conceding to his wishes but my grandmother and Lexie both seemed to think I should give him this opportunity. I was at work when I called him, eating a quick lunch at my desk. I twirled the apple Grandma Royce had given me across its surface. “I’ll pick her up after dinner.”

“I only get a few hours with her?”

“It’s either that or nothing. If this first visit goes smoothly, we’ll work for a longer one next time.”

“Fine,” he said, voice clipped. “But I’ll be dropping her off.”

“Fine.”

~~~~~

When I first got home later that evening, I paced around the living room, fluffing the couch cushions and straightening picture frames. I vacuumed and dusted, trying to find anything to keep me busy while Alyssa was gone. Around six, I picked up the phone and called Grandma Royce and invited her over. Once she hung up, I ordered some Chinese takeout while I waited for her to arrive.

“What’s that?” I asked when I opened the front door. In Grandma Royce’s hands was a small Tupperware container of wood shavings.

“Bradford pear bark,” she said, handing the box over. “Since your way didn’t work, I thought we could try mine.” She patted my cheek before settling on the nearby couch.

“Fine,” I said. “But I don’t think it’ll work any better. Watch the door, will you? The food should be here in about ten, fifteen minutes.”

I marched around the side of my house, yanking off the plastic lid as I went. Hunching close to the ground, I scooped up a handful of the shavings and sprinkled them over the roots. I waddled along the wall until I ran out, watching the dirt for some kind of sign that it would work. Instead, the shavings wriggled like worms when the wind blew. My stomach turned.

~~~~~

Grandma Royce was rifling through the kitchen drawers for utensils when I stepped back inside, empty container in hand.

“Help me out here,” she said, sliding a drawer closed and opening the next one.

“Which one is the silverware drawer?”

“The one to the right of the stove.”

“Bingo!” The utensils clattered as she opened it. “What’s this?”

“What’s what?”

“This,” she said, proffering a wad of dried flowers. “Forget-me-nots, Bradford pear leaf, baby’s breath, and a lock of hair: an amplified memory repressor. Who did you make this for?”

“Um, that,” I said, trying to back out of the kitchen. “I made it a couple years ago...”

“For *who*?”

“Alyssa. It used to sit above the door to her room.”

“Are you crazy? I did not teach you these things so that you could manipulate other people, especially your own daughter. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that my daughter had just been abandoned by her father. She cried for days after Mark left. And he never picked up his phone when we called. So I tried to help her.”

“By destroying her memories?” Grandma Royce flung the bundle on the floor and ground it with her heel.

“By trying to make his departure a distant memory.”

“This could have caused unforeseen damage, especially when made by someone so out of touch with the practice.”

“But it didn’t. Because these things never work! Not when I tried to get Mark to stay with aspen leaves or protect D-Dad...” I sat at the kitchen table and rubbed my hands over my face. “Nothing ever works like you taught me it would. I made the sprig out of habit rather than any true belief it would work.”

Grandma Royce squeezed my shoulder reassuringly, as she passed to retrieve the broom from the hall closet.

“Sometimes, it skips generations.” She swept the crushed flower petals into the dustpan. “But as her mother, Alyssa relies on you to take care of her and you violated that trust. Even if it didn’t work, you had hoped it would. You should have known better.”

“I know.”

The doorbell rang, but Grandma Royce waved me off to answer it.

“You can’t always protect your daughter from the world,” she said when she returned with a brown paper bag stuffed with cartons of fried rice, egg rolls, lo mien.

“Sometimes, it’s a disappointing place and we have learn to deal with it.”

“Can you take Alyssa for the night?” I asked. “I need some time to think.”

“Of course, sweetie.”

~~~~~

“It’s not fair!” I said as people bustled past in the busy airport. “You said I only had to meet her and then you made me call her once a week. Now I have to stay with her for a whole summer?”

“This will be good for the two of you.”

“I don’t want to go. She’s not my family.”

“But she is,” Dad said, smiling at the staring people eavesdropping on our conversation. “And you need to spend some time with Nicole. You have a baby sister now.”

“So?”

Dad pulled me into a tight hug as I started to cry. I was frustrated that Lexie always earned the concession in these arguments, that I was the one who had to yield. He said, “You two were doing so well, that I figured you visiting her wouldn’t hurt. This is the last thing I’ll ask of you when it comes to Lexie.”

“You promised that when I started doing the phone calls and you didn’t keep it.”
I pulled back to wipe my eyes.

“I’m not lying,” he said, removing an acorn from his pocket. For honesty. “After this trip, it’s completely up to you whether or not, or to what extent, you stay in contact with your moth—”

“Lexie.”

“With Lexie,” he said. “If this summer in New York doesn’t go well, you never have to interact with her again. But I also want you to think about how your decisions ultimately affect others.”

“Fine,” I said.

Dad handed me the acorn. “I will keep my promise this time. I’ll never be more than a phone call away.

~~~~~

After Grandma Royce left, I finished my Chinese takeout in the glare of my living room TV. I channel surfed, not sure what to do with myself, until I fell asleep on the couch.

~~~~~

Four – Something Found

“Grandma, let me in,” I said, knocking on the front door. “I left my key at home.”

The lock clicked and the door opened about six inches. Alyssa poked her head through the gap and I could hear the Spongebob Squarepants theme song playing softly in the background.

“Grandma’s sleeping,” she whispered. “Why wasn’t daddy allowed to take me home?” Alyssa opened the door further and stepped onto the front porch. We settled on the wooden porch swing.

“I wasn’t feel well last night, so I asked Grandma to watch you. I’m sorry, sweetie. How was dinner with your father?”

“He made me mac and cheese!”

“In the hotel?”

“It had a little stove and kitchen. We went to the park too.”

“Did you swing?”

“Yeah. And daddy pushed me.”

“How high did you go?”

“Higher than the trees!”

We swayed, back and forth, back and forth, in the early morning light. I asked the occasional question as I brushed my fingers through her hair. When Grandma Royce joined us on the porch, Alyssa was asleep with her head in my lap.

“Does it really skip generations?” I asked.

“Sometimes,” she said, taking a seat on the porch swing and moving Alyssa’s feet to rest on her lap. “Skipped over my brother, your great Uncle Hal. You could probably find more in our family records. It’s like genetics – not everyone is guaranteed to express a gene just ‘cause it runs in the family.”

“I’m still not sure I believe any of this, but I want to – Dad certainly did. It was so easy for him... It’s not a good excuse, but I only wanted a better childhood for Alyssa.”

“You had a good childhood,” Grandma Royce said.

“For a little while,” I said as I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my daughter’s ear. “And then Dad died. You were always there for me, Grandma, but I was sad, alone, and essentially an orphan without my father. Alyssa deserved better. I tried to give her love and stability and... I don’t know. It just didn’t go to plan.”

“Normalness is overrated. Life is unavoidably messy.”

“I don’t care about those silly ‘normal is boring’ quips. People who criticize it have either had it all their lives and are ungrateful or they are trying to make themselves feel better about being eccentric weirdos. It’s not unreasonable for me to want some normality, but for whatever reason, I can’t seem to find what I need. It’s like you never stop being lost in life.”

“You’ll find the answers you need if you’re patient and willing to listen for them,” she said, patting me on the shoulder. “Just take care of Alyssa and yourself and you’ll be on the right path... I’ll start on breakfast – pancakes sound good to you?”

“They sound awesome,” I said. Grandma Royce left me on the front porch, still swaying gently on the swing. A couple maple seeds fluttered onto the porch, slipping through the railings, with a soft morning breeze.

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*“Lexie was nice enough,” I said. Grandma Royce and I were digging in the vegetable garden, the soil damp and crumbly. “Nicole was pretty cute when she wasn’t crying. She wants me to come back next summer.”*

*“Do you?”*

*“I don’t know.” I unearthed a potato and tossed it into a red bucket that sat between us. “You can’t not interact with your daughter for thirteen years and think spending time together will be easy. Lexie cares about me, I guess, but I don’t completely fit in her life. It’s like when you do a puzzle, and you put two pieces together that look like they match up, but once together, the edges are a little off. I don’t see a reason to stay away, but I don’t have one to keep going back either.”*

*“Sometimes,” Grandma Royce said, tossing several potatoes into the bucket, “family doesn’t have a reason for sticking together. You just need each other.”*

*“I guess.” We lapsed into silence, making our way through the rows of planted potatoes. The sky was overcast and the air was sticky. As I dug into the dirt, my spade clanged against something metallic. I used my finger to brush away the soil and found a small silver locket. Delicate swirls were etched into its surface.*

*“What’s this?” I asked Grandma Royce, holding up the necklace for her to see. Stuff wasn’t buried in her garden without some reason or another.*

*“Can’t be,” she said. She took the locket in her dirt-encrusted hands, turning it over in her palm. She popped open the halves to reveal tiny pictures of dad and grandpa. “I lost this years ago – your father couldn’t have been more than ten. Your grandfather was so upset with me. It was a pricey birthday present.”*

*“But now you have it back!”*

*“I lost this locket on a family vacation to Myrtle Beach. Got swept away in the ocean our first day there.”*

*“Then how is it here?” An uneasy feeling budded in my stomach, the same sensation I got every time I looked at Dad the last several days.*

*“I’m not really sure,” Grandma Royce said as she closed the locket and slipped it into her pants’ pocket. “But I’m sure glad to see it again.”*

~~~~~

“Hey,” Mark said as I opened the front door. He was carrying Alyssa who had fallen asleep in the car. I stepped out of his way, so that he could lay her on the couch.

“Did she have fun at the zoo?”

“Yeah, she really loved the birds.”

“We can’t visit the zoo without walking through the bird house at least three times,” I said, sitting on the arm of the couch.

Throughout the remainder of Mark’s week-long stay, they had gone on a picnic, walked dogs for the humane society, and swam at the local indoor water park. On his last day in town, Mark promised Alyssa they would go to the zoo. He invited me on each trip,

an unexpected courtesy I hadn't expected but appreciated. I declined, though, letting Alyssa and Mark have their much overdue father-daughter time. He was returning to his home two hours away early the next morning.

"I have something for you," he said. "I grabbed a box of your stuff accidentally when I moved out. I found it when Kathleen and I were clearing out our storage unit last May. Thought I should give it back to you."

He leaned over and kissed Alyssa on the forehead before heading out to his car. I draped a fleece blanket over her and followed him.

"I'll call at least once a week," Mark said as he opened the trunk, "if not more. I know she's in school right now, but I'd like it if she could visit some weekends and school holidays."

"We'll see what we can arrange," I said. Mark handed me a heavy cardboard box. He had taped the edges to keep the sides from splitting open.

"I mean it, Morgen. I want to be involved."

"I know you do, just don't let her down again. She missed you so much the last time you left."

"I know, I know."

"No, you really don't."

"I missed her too, you know." He slammed the trunk closed. "I haven't been the best father the last two years, but it wasn't easy for me either. That's two years I'm not getting back."

"Please don't mess this up."

"I won't," Mark said.

I waved awkwardly around the box in my arms as Mark pulled out of the driveway.

~~~~~

I sat the box on the living room table and used a pair of scissors to cut open the yellowed packaging tape holding the top flaps down. Inside were notebooks from college, high school, and even some from middle school. Many were stuffed with graded assignments, others with notes from friends. I pulled out each notebook and flipped through the crinkled pages.

When I got to the bottom of the box, I was hit with a sudden bout of nausea. It was the only hardback notebook I had ever owned. Dad had given it to me for my twelfth birthday, full of detailed notes for the various uses of plants and our family history dating back to the 1800s. He had hoped I would pass it on to my future children, but then he died and none of his notes did a damn thing to save him. So I had buried it with him. *How was it here?*

I flipped through the pages, skimming the familiar notes:

*Trees and their uses:*

1. *Aspen* – *strengthens love, whether familial, romantic, or otherwise; has no effect where love isn't present*
2. *Birch* – *encourages healing and the renewal of health, specifically bodily ailments*
3. *Bradford pear* – *negates the effects of a flower or tree, be it growth of or influence; when used in combination with a plant of influence, it results in the opposite effect: i.e. forget-me-nots & Bradford pear cause memory loss; when*

*used in opposition to a previous influence, it cancels out the effect; use sparingly*

I traced my fingers over my father's quick, angular handwriting. There were times when I'd be playing with Alyssa or cooking in the kitchen and I thought I heard him calling my name, as if he were right down the hall.

I set the notebook aside and lifted Alyssa off the couch. She whined into my shoulder, but otherwise stayed asleep. I stumbled down the hall – soon I wouldn't be able to carry her anymore – and tucked her in. I sat on the floor beside her bed, like I did when she had nightmares, and listened to the soft sound of her breathing.

#### *Five – A Small Kindness*

I fell asleep on the floor beside Alyssa's bed and woke up with a crick in my neck. Alyssa hummed as she ran her fingers through my hair.

“Did you have a nightmare last night?”

“No sweetie, mommy was just sad. I started missing *my* daddy.”

“Here,” Alyssa said, sitting up in her bed and pulling a small Lisa Frank diary from beneath her pillow. She flipped it open to the back pages where she pressed flowers – Grandma Royce taught her how a couple weeks ago – and handed me a buttercup blossom. “For happiness.”

“Thanks,” I said. I cupped the dried flower blossom in my palm and my skin tingled for a brief moment, as if tickled by the delicate petals. I smiled, but handed it back to her. “You'd better hold onto this. It's safest with you.”

Alyssa replaced it in her journal and snapped the covers closed with a dull thump. She bounced off the bed and asked, “What’s for breakfast?”

“Hm, cinnamon rolls?”

“Yes!”

~~~~~

“Morgen, what’re you doing?” Grandma Royce asked. She set a bundle of roses on the counter.

I was seated at the kitchen table rifling through several old notebooks and journals. Dad was working late that day, so Grandma had picked me up from school. I had been reading since she had started pruning the roses two hours earlier.

“Just research.”

“You look worried, though.” She stepped around the kitchen table to look over my shoulder. “Anything I can help with?”

“I got it under control.” When she reached for one of the notebooks, I slammed it shut. “It’s nothing, I promise.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I-I’m sorry. It’s just – I’m –” I fell silent and busied my hands by closing the other notebooks.

“It’s okay, Morgen,” she said, patting my shoulder. “You don’t have to tell me if you’re not ready.”

She sighed and sat in the chair beside me. Her brow was pinched, but she didn’t ask any further questions. I didn’t know what to do to reassure her. I was worried about

Dad, but I didn't know how to tell her. Visibly, he was fine, but a worry niggled at the back of my mind, building since I had returned from Lexie's in late July.

"Here," Grandma Royce said. She handed me one of the yellow roses – for companionship – she had brought in from the garden. "Chin up, sweetie. I'm sure it'll all be fine."

~~~~~

I took a personal day that Monday, which I called in after I dropped Alyssa off at school. I sorted through my old notebooks, ripping the pages from the spiraled metal spines of the ones I decided to throw away. I kept a few of them out of pure sentimentality: old letters from friends, notes from botany class in college, a mostly empty sketchbook that I could give to Alyssa. I dithered over keeping a college journal full of notes between Mark and me:

*Morgen,*

*I don't really get why you want me to write in this notebook. I feel like some high school girl passing notes with her football-player boyfriend. I'd much rather talk to you in person...*

In the end, I tossed it. Leave the past in the past and all.

I piled the remaining notebooks on the dusty lower shelf of a multi-purpose television stand and broke down the box. Dad's notebook still sat on the loveseat where I had left it last night. I wasn't sure what I should do with it.

~~~~~

"Mommy, what's this notebook?" Alyssa asked. She was sitting in the living room flipping through Dad's handwritten anthology of the craft.

“Just some of Grandpa’s old notes.” I heard the rustle of paper and decided to let her be. I was loading clothes into the dryer and I would need to fold the ones I had just taken out. I hummed as I sorted through the warm pile of clothes. *Alyssa’s striped shirt. My jeans. Alyssa’s newest sundress. Her favorite pink shirt. A pair of tan dress socks.*

“What’s a death omen?” Alyssa asked. I set down the next shirt I had plucked from the laundry basket and joined her in the living room.

“Death omens are a kind of indication that someone is about to die,” I said. “Let me see.” Alyssa handed over the notebook, flipped to one of the last pages. The handwriting was my own, much larger and rounder than my father’s:

After looking through Grandma’s anthologies, which were more about plants, I did manage to find a death omen in one of the older journals.

Six Signs a Loved One is About to Die:

- 1. A trespass (the infestation in Grandma’s tree)*
- 2. A return (Lexie wanting to be in my life again)*
- 3. Something broken (Dad breaking his promise about contact with Lexie)*
- 4. Something found (Grandma’s locket that she lost in the ocean)*
- 5. A small kindness (Grandma giving me a rose)*
- 6. A stranger’s comfort (? – Hasn’t happened yet)*

According to the texts, these signs are largely interpretable and present themselves in various ways. (I’ve included my own interpretations in parentheses.)The signs must occur in this specific order to qualify as a death omen. They can occur within several days of each other or over several years. Supposedly after the final sign, the person has at most, six months to live. Usually only days. The omen only indicates an

impending death of a loved one, not specifically who. The omen-seer must figure out who the signs are for, usually called the Marked. The source does not indicate if it's absolute or changeable. Just in case, I've looked up some protection charms for Dad. Now that I've been looking, I've noticed that Dad is shadowed by... something...

“What’s trespass mean?”

“It’s when someone or something invades – or um, attacks – your home or your personal space.”

“Like the ivy?”

“The ivy?”

“It attacked our house,” Alyssa said, pointing to a window on the back side of the house. The thick mass of green leaves and vines blocked out most of the late evening sun. “And then daddy came back... Is someone going to die?”

“What? No, no. Of course not, no.” But I read through the list again and the items clicked into place. The ivy *trespassed*. Mark *returned*. I had broken...? Nothing physical recently, but the incident with the forget-me-not sprig. I *broke* Grandma and Alyssa’s trust. I had *found* dad’s notebook. Alyssa had given me a buttercup to cheer me up: *a small kindness*. That was five signs and I had almost missed them. Of course, I hadn’t been looking for them either.

No, I told myself. *You’re being silly*. But I remembered the dread that built in my stomach the three months before Dad died. When Grandma Royce picked me up early from school because Dad had collapsed at work, I was scared but not surprised. Then he died in the ICU from a heart attack. And after that, I was too preoccupied with trying to survive his death that I forgot about the whole death-omen-thing.

If this was all true, though, what did it mean for me and my family?

“I need to call Grandma Royce,” I said. I handed to the notebook back to Alyssa and went to find the house phone.

~~~~~

“Grandma,” I said when she picked up. “I think I might be some kind of banshee.” I laughed, high and edging toward hysterical. “Apparently I know when someone’s going to die. Ha! That’s a thing.”

“What? Does this relate to what we talked about on the porch the other day?” she asked. The white noise buzzed in the silence that followed.

“Remember that research I did when I was thirteen? Right before Dad died?”

“I think so?”

“I was looking up death omens and there are six signs that a loved one is about to die. And I thought I was seeing them for Dad. Can you see them too? Alyssa, oh god Alyssa. I think, I think –”

I stopped. I could hear Alyssa humming in the living room, probably still looking through the notebook. *Oh god, don’t let it be her.*

“I think I see death omens. The signs. I saw five of the six. I wrote them down. Five signs. And I think I might be seeing more...”

“I’m confused.”

“I-I have a notebook.” I took several deep breaths. “It’ll just be easier if you look at it yourself.”

“Alright,” she said. “Stay calm, I’ll be over in about ten minutes.”

After I hung up the phone, my stomach rolled with uneasiness. I returned to the living room and sat beside Alyssa. I stared at her, trying to see something, an angel or a skeleton hunching over her shoulder. Any kind of indication one way or the other: I didn't know what I was looking for.

“What's wrong?” she asked, setting aside the notebook.

I clutched her shoulders to hold her still, but as long as I looked, nothing changed. *I think she's safe.* I breathed a sigh of relief and pulled her into a hug. “N-nothing. You're just growing up so fast.”

~~~~~

When I opened the door for Grandma Royce, I reined in a gasp and suddenly understood my words in the notebook. She looked darker in complexion, oddly shadowed. With unfailing certainty, as I waved her inside, I knew. The next set of signs were for Grandma Royce.

Six – A Stranger's Comfort

“So this was what you were looking for in the anthologies all those years ago?”

“I guess so,” I said, smoothing my hand over the pages. I could hear the opening strains of “Circle of Life” coming from Alyssa's bedroom. While Grandma and I talked, I had sent her off to watch *The Lion King*. “I don't really remember writing any of this, but I recognize my handwriting.”

“And you think you've been seeing signs again?”

“What?”

“Over the phone, you said something about ‘seeing more’. Are you?”

“Oh, uh, no,” I lied. “I got my words confused. I was freaked out.”

“Understandably so,” she said. “This explains quite a lot, though.”

“It does?”

“You were so anxious in the months leading up to his death and I never understood why. Until you showed me this. Seeing death omens is not an easy burden to bear. You tried to save him, that’s what you said the other night, but when couldn’t, you lost faith.”

“Yeah. Not that it would have mattered. I don’t think I could ever do any of the things you do.”

She clasped my hand and squeezed gently. “There’s no saving someone who’s been marked by Death. Even if you had my abilities, you couldn’t have done anything for him.”

“Yeah, I think I learned that the hard way.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t really understand it,” I said. “And I wasn’t sure if it was really happening. I thought I was maybe making it all up in my head.”

“I could have helped you make sense of everything, though.”

“What good would it have done? You just said we couldn’t save him. I don’t think I would have listened to you, or even the anthology, if it had included that information. I would have tried anyway.”

She wiped a stray tear from her cheek. “I would have too.”

~~~~~

I moved about the kitchen mechanically stirring a pot of macaroni noodles and then plopping a baking sheet of garlic bread into the oven on the rack beneath the baking chicken breasts. I hadn't slept much the night before. Once Grandma Royce had left yesterday, I read through the entirety of Dad's notebook. I didn't know what I believed and what I didn't.

I tried to keep up the appearance of normalcy around Alyssa, but the signs weighed heavily on my mind. *Only one more left.* I felt outside of myself and I hadn't quite recovered from the previous night's shock. And Grandma Royce... She had been a constant: through Dad's death, college, my marriage, Alyssa's birth, and my divorce. I had never considered a version of my life without her stalwart presence.

"Alyssa, did you set the table?" I had been giving her odd tasks all day to keep her nearby, but she had sneaked off while I was preoccupied with dinner.

"There's a dog in the yard, mommy."

"What?" I wiped my hands on a kitchen towel and walked into the living room. Alyssa was perched backwards on the couch, leaning into the window sill and nose almost touching the glass.

"There's a dog." She pushed her index finger up against the glass. Leaning over her shoulder, I spotted a medium-sized, black mutt curled up on our front lawn. He dozed in the bright sunlight.

"We'll leave him be. He'll go away eventually."

"Can't we give him food? Maybe we could keep him!"

"I don't think so. He could be rabid."

"What does that mean?"

“That he might attack us,” I said. I wound the blinds shut and shoed Alyssa from the couch. “Go wash your hands and set the table. Dinner’s almost ready.”

~~~~~

We started leaving food out for the dog at Alyssa’s insistence. A week passed, but it remained sitting in our yard. Alyssa would give him a pat on the head on her way to the car. He’d lick her wrist before returning to his vigil. She named him Scottie.

“He looks more like a lab,” I said.

“But his fur is all curly,” Alyssa said. So I let it go.

~~~~~

*“You okay there, miss?”*

*My hands were pressed over my shins where I had skinned them tripping down the rough trail. Instead of reassuring him that I was, in fact, okay, I started to cry. Sitting alone in the woods, lost and scraped up, the thought of losing my father hit me.*

*“Hey, hey, it’s okay.” He crouched beside me, setting aside his canvas backpack.*

*“Let me see.”*

*I lifted my hands and wiped them on the ground. He rifled through his bag and pulled out a first aid kit.*

*“Not too bad, but we’ll need to pull out the mulch bits,” he said, holding up a pair of tweezers.*

*“It’s not that, but gross. I just got turned around out here and I don’t know where I am. And fell trying to get back to the main pa– Ow!”*

*“Sorry,” he said. He gave me a moment to breathe before working on the next splinter.*

*“What’re you doing so far out here anyway?”*

*“Class project,” I said. It was the same lie I had told Grandma Royce when I had her drop me off at the trail entrance. “I have to find plants for my biology class.”*

*“Did you at least find what you were looking for?”*

*“All but one, but I think my grandma has some in her garden.”*

*“Isn’t that cheating?” he asked, setting down the tweezers and picking up a disinfectant spray. “This’ll sting a bit.”*

*I winced when the spray made my cuts burn. I said, “Not if the teacher doesn’t know.”*

*“Here, you should probably put these on,” he said, handing over a set of bandages.*

*I peeled back the paper covering the adhesive and applied them to the worst areas on my shins. Patting down the edges, I said, “Good as new.”*

*“Need help getting back to the main path?”*

*“Thanks.” I brushed away the tears that began to well again. “I’d really appreciate that.”*

*He replaced the tweezers and the disinfectant spray in the first aid kit and tossed it back into his backpack. After he stood, he offered me his hand.*

~~~~~

“Grandma,” I said, taking her hand in mine. We were sitting on my front porch, watching the black dog lounge in the sunlight. “Do you think I should have told Dad he was going to die?”

“No, I think he was better off not knowing.”

“Why?”

“There’s only one absolute in life, Morgen,” she said. “Death. Love, family, wealth, fame, and happiness – those aren’t guaranteed. People will die and they can generally accept to varying degrees. But imagine how intimidating, paralyzing it would be to know you’re supposed to die in less than six months? Most people are lucky enough not to have deal with that information. Even if you told your father, there was nothing he could have done and so, he didn’t need to know.”

“What good is this ability if I can’t prevent anything from happening?” I asked. “It’s not fair. I just miss him so much.”

“I know, sweetie.” She wrapped her arm around me and squeezed gently. I laid my head on her shoulder, eyes pricking with tears.

~~~~~

After Grandma Royce left, I grabbed the notebook and a pen. When she passed, I would be the head of our family and it would be my responsibility to pass on our family heritage to Alyssa. I could start by finishing the article on death omens, just in case Alyssa inherited the ability:

*Death omens are absolute. Anyone marked by Death cannot be saved.*

A soft whine startled me from my writing. The dog had sneaked onto the porch and pressed along my side. He was warm in the cool shade of the porch.

*The dying person’s appearance will appeared shadowed, as if covered in a burial shroud. This is the mark of Death. Whether or not you tell them is a personal choice. But know, sharing this information includes letting them know their death*

*cannot be avoided. Think carefully before you tell someone. It's difficult information to handle.*

“She’s going to die,” I said, petting over the dog’s head and along his back. He dropped his head onto the notebook in my lap and whined. I buried my face in his fur to hide my tears. I sat with the dog until it was time to pick up Alyssa.

## Crash Landing

“Will,” his mother whispered, stroking his cheek to wake him up. “Want to catch falling stars?” Suddenly, Will was wide awake. Her long, pencil-straight blond hair tickled his neck as she leaned over him. His mother often tiptoed into his room on late October nights, when the sky was clear and night bugs were singing in full force, to ask this very question.

He nodded and wiggled out from under the covers. She led him to the kitchen, both silent so they wouldn’t wake his father. He didn’t approve of their late-night escapades. From the cabinet above the stove, his mother pulled out two mason jars. The metal lids had holes poked into the top. She handed one jar to William and kept the other.

His mother unlocked the back door, waving William into the cool night air. The Devreauxs had a small backyard that was more hard-packed dirt than grass. Farther off, by his father’s toolshed, the fields started. The cornstalks shivered in the breeze.

Will followed his mother, bare feet slapping against the ground, to their stargazing spot by the irrigation stream. They stood side-by-side, heads tilted back. The stars glowed overhead, their light silver and ethereal.

“There!” Will said, watching the arc of light blaze across the sky. He ran forward, jar held high in his left hand and the lid in his right. He tracked its movement like an outfielder zeroing in on a pop fly. He was nearly to the rows of yellowing corn, the falling star a trail of white as it approached the earth, when *plink!* He covered the jar,

screwing the lid tight, before inspecting its contents. A firefly crawled along the bottom of the jar, its light blipping off, on, off.

“I got one!” he said to his mother when he was back by her side. The firefly had recovered enough from its crashing landing that it flitted about the jar.

“Beautiful,” she said, leaning down to examine it.

“Mom?”

“Hm?”

“Why do stars fall?” Will asked.

“No one knows for sure,” she said, eyes distant in thought. “My grandma used to say the stars got lonely up in the sky because they’re so far apart. And when they looked down on Earth, they liked what they saw. The mortal creatures living in groups and interacting and loving. So they gave up their immortality and joined us, falling to Earth. Although they were mortal, they never lost their ability to glow.”

Will watched the firefly. “But why as a bug? Why not as something bigger?”

“My grandma never had an answer for that.”

“Why do *you* think stars fall?”

“Well,” she said, face somber in the moonlight. “I think they’re dying.”

“What? But stars live for billions of years – that’s what Ms. Watkins told us.”

“But they’re not truly immortal. Nothing truly is.” She looked back at the sky and sighed.

“Mom?”

“I’m sorry, Will. I’m getting a little too philosophical.”

“Philosophical?”

“Deep thinking,” she said. “I think the stars spend most of their lives in the sky, but when they get too old and tired to hold themselves up anymore, they fall. Stars are huge, immense, but by the time they reach us, they’ve burned themselves out, mostly. And all that remains when they reach us are these little fireflies.” She tapped the glass of his mason jar, agitating its inhabitant.

“That’s sad,” Will said. He took the lid off his jar and let the firefly fly away.

“Maybe,” she said, her eyes back on the sky. “But at least we get to live among stars for a little while.” Will looked across the yard and saw the green-yellow blinking of the fireflies. As they hung in the night air, he could imagine he was floating among the vast distances of space, surrounded by galaxies of fireflies.

“There’s another,” his mother said, pointing at a streak that would land near the house.

“I got it,” he said, jar lifted high as he ran to catch it.

## Frame of Reference

*“You’ve got your sunshine, I’ve got rainclouds,  
You’ve got hope, I have my doubts,  
Oh, what would I do without you?”*

*Drew Holcomb & The Neighbors*

“Millie invited us to dinner on Saturday, which I accepted. I will never pass up a chance to eat her garlic bread – I swear her secret ingredient is crack,” said Celia while thumbing through the calendar on her phone. “Tyler? Tyler!”

Her husband, who had been staring vacantly at the road sweeping beneath the front end of the car, startled and jerked the steering wheel slightly to the left when she shook his shoulder. He glanced over to Celia who was curled into the passenger seat with her legs folded under her and frowned at her questioning gaze. “What?”

“Did you hear anything I just said? Millie invited us to dinner –”

“I don’t give a shit about Millie’s dinner plans,” Tyler said squeezing the steering wheel, his fingers curled like hawk talons.

“God, Tyler! What’s your problem?”

Tyler sighed in exasperation. “I’m just not in the mood to deal with her inane chatter. Not today, not next week, or anytime soon for that matter.”

“She’s never bothered you before,” Celia said, glancing shrewdly at him. “This’s about the doctor’s appointment, isn’t it?”

Tyler shrugged, but otherwise refrained from answering as he merged onto the interstate. Trees, sound barriers, and guard rails ran together like a messy watercolor as

Tyler weaved haphazardly through the midmorning traffic. Several horns blared their driver's indignation. Celia shrunk back into her seat, gripping the center console to keep from being flung about the car's interior like a sapling in a vicious wind.

"We need to talk about this – preferably before you send us careening off the side of the road."

"I'm not going to drive off the road, Celia," Tyler said, but he eased off the gas and merged smoothly into the rightmost lane. "And I'm not talking about it."

"We can't avoid it forever – it's best to just get it over with."

"Quit pushing the issue!" he snapped.

"Tyler –"

"Please, not right now, Celia. I'm not ready."

"But –"

"No, not yet. I need more time for this to process – at least wait until we get home."

"Fine! But you're not allowed to avoid this later," Celia said as she reached for Tyler's hand. They intertwined their fingers and he brushed a soft kiss over her knuckles.

"Fine," Tyler said before settling into a tense silence. Celia turned on the radio to drown out the rattle of wind on the car windows.

~~~~~

When Celia shuffled into the kitchen after a late afternoon nap, Tyler was chopping green peppers for dinner.

“I never understood why naps were phased out in kindergarten. I think the older you get, the more essential they become,” she said as she settled on a stool next to the counter. “Need help with that?”

“I got it.” Tyler swept the strips of green pepper aside and set to work dicing a large yellow onion.

“You sure? I know my cooking skills leave a lot to be desired, but I think I can manage slicing some vegetables. What are we having anyway?”

“Stir fry,” Tyler said, his eyes stinging from the pungent onion vapors.

“Please tell me we’re having chicken,” said Celia, wiggling happily on her stool.

“It’s defrosting in the sink,” Tyler said with a chuckle. “If you want to help, you could get the wok out.”

“And that would be where?”

“Here I thought I was giving you an easy task – what kind of wife doesn’t even know her own kitchen?”

“The kind whose husband has banned her from cooking since the Spaghetti Disaster of ’09 – totally unfair, by the way. It wasn’t *that* bad.”

“You warped two pots and broke the stovetop trying to boil water.”

“Whatever, it could happen to anyone,” Celia said. “Quit being all high and mighty and just tell me where the wok is.”

“It should be in the cabinets under the microwave.”

“Alright,” Celia said as she stood from her stool and skirted around the edge of the counter.

Tyler listened to the banging of cabinet doors and winced at the dissonant clatter of pots and pans. “You okay over there?”

“Just dandy,” Celia said, her voice muffled by another loud crash. She slammed the cabinets shut and stood with the wok raised in triumph. “Ah! Got it!”

The clash of metal on tile and a soft curse from Celia had Tyler rushing to her side, knife still in hand. Celia leaned against the countertops, breathing deeply, as the wok lay at her feet.

“What’s wrong? What happened?”

“It’s my back,” she said, her voice breathy and soft. “Caught me by surprise is all.”

Tyler swooped down to grab the wok and set it on the stove as Celia hobbled back to her stool. “I can handle dinner – you just sit down and relax.”

“I ‘relaxed’ all afternoon. I was feeling fine – I’m still feeling fine!”

“Then there’s no need to push yourself.”

“I wasn’t pushing myself – you say that like I was trying to run a full marathon or deadlift two hundred pounds,” Celia said indignantly. “I was getting a pan – that’s just helping with dinner.”

“But the doctor said you need to take it easy,” Tyler said, gritting his teeth to keep his impatience from permeating his tone. He didn’t want to snap at Celia – she wasn’t the one he was angry with.

“Are you ready to talk about it now?” Celia asked, reaching for Tyler’s hand.

“No,” he bit out mulishly, pulling his hand away.

“But we really should.”

“I know – but what do you want me to say? I just, I can’t wrap my head around it, Celia,” he said, going to fetch the chicken from the sink. He ripped open the packaging and slammed the breast fillets onto the cutting board. “Two years ago, you were in remission and now it’s back, worse than before. And Dr. Carson tosses around words like ‘metastasized’ and ‘invasive ductal carcinoma’ like it’s nothing, but really, it’s the worst news we could get.”

A thick silence filled the kitchen, broken only by the thunk of the knife meeting wood. Tyler sliced the chicken into thin strips, brows furrowed and eyes determined to only see the task at hand. After he heated the wok and dripped oil to slick the bottom, he said, “God, you did everything right and the cancer was *gone* – I don’t understand. How is it back?”

“Being cured of cancer isn’t a real thing, Tyler. You just go into remission and hope you get lucky.”

“Then where’s our luck? You had the double mastectomy and went through the chemotherapy. Why wasn’t that enough?” Tyler asked. There was a tightness in his chest he was struggling to breathe around. “How is this fair?”

When the oil started to fizzle, he laid out the strips of chicken to cook, wincing when hot oil landed on his exposed arms. “Now Dr. Carson’s telling us it’s in your bones and even with chemo, he’s giving you an expiration date, like you’re a carton of milk that’ll inevitably go sour. I don’t know, Celia – he’s not giving us a lot to hope for here, like you will die no matter what we do.”

“I will, though,” Celia said. “Die, I mean. Whether it’s a year from now or fifty, it’s gonna happen.”

“Morbid much?” Tyler scoffed, wrinkling his nose in disgust. Tossing in broccoli, carrots, green peppers, onion, and spices, he mixed the ingredients with a few deft flips of the wok and ignored Celia’s “Well, it’s true!”

“And maybe I’m being self-centered here, but I don’t think I can watch you go through chemo again – it was killing you just as much as the cancer was. You cried when your hair fell out and the weight loss basically made you a walking, talking skeleton. And there was nothing I could do to make it better – I just got to sit there and twiddle my thumbs. And *that* nearly killed *me*,” Tyler said as he pulled a container of rice from the fridge, popped off the lid, and shoved it into the microwave. He turned off the burner and pulled two plates from a nearby cabinet. “I just – I can’t stand it – I feel like someone’s kicked me in the stomach. I just want you to be healthy so we can live out some boring old life together, like we’re supposed to.”

Celia watched as Tyler dished rice onto each plate followed by a heap of vegetables and chicken. They ate quietly for a few minutes before Celia set her fork down, looking miserably at her plate. Tyler asked, “Done already? You should try to eat a little more.”

“No, I –” Celia hesitated. She clasped and unclasped her hands, staring attentively at the speckled countertop.

“What?”

“I’ve thought about it, Tyler,” she said, meeting his eyes, “and I’m not going through with the chemotherapy this time.”

“What? Are you serious?” Tyler asked, caught off guard. “It could give us extra time – it might even work!”

“I don’t think it will, not this time,” Celia said, glancing back at her hands. “Dr. Carson only talked about ways to *prolong* my life – remission didn’t really come up as a possibility.”

“How long have you even thought about this? We just went to the doctor’s today – this isn’t something you can decide that quickly!”

“I didn’t need that much time – it was just a decision I had to make.”

“Don’t I get a say in all this?”

“Tyler, this isn’t your choice – I just need you to understand.”

“How could you ever think I’d be okay with this?”

“I didn’t think it would be easy, but try to see where I’m coming from. The pain in my back and my legs, I don’t think there’s anything we can do about it. You saw the CT scans. It may have spread slowly, but the damage has been done. There’s nothing Dr. Carson or modern medicine can do to get rid of the cancer this time around.”

“Don’t – please don’t talk like that,” Tyler said, choking on his words. “It sounds like you’re giving up.”

“But I’m not giving up – I’m being realistic and I’m trying to do what’s best for me,” Celia said, sighing in resignation. She picked up her fork and poked listlessly at the cold vegetables on her plate. “I can’t put myself through chemotherapy when it’s *only* going to make me miserable. If I have a year left to live, I’m not spending it in a cancer ward.”

“How can you be so blasé about this? We’re talking about your life.”

“Yes and I refuse spend the rest of it sick to my stomach, looking more like a zombie than an actual human being – I won’t do that to myself. If I have an ‘expiration

date', so be it! I will *not* medicate myself to death when the outcome will be the same either way."

"But—" Tyler pushed his plate to the side, feeling decidedly queasy.

"Please Tyler, I really need your support on this. It wasn't an easy decision, but I think it's the best one."

"I just – I know. I'm not trying to be unreasonable. I'm really not," Tyler said, reaching for Celia's hand. She rubbed her thumb in soothing circle across his knuckles. "But I can't breathe when I think about a future you're not a part of. I want what's best for you, too, but it's so hard not to be selfish. I don't want you to suffer *and* I want to keep you with me."

"Tyler," Celia sighed, rising from her stool and walking to his side of the counter. With gentle eyes and a sad smile, she ran her fingers over his cheeks and through his hair before pulling him into a hug. "We have a ye—"

"Don't. Please. No more," he mumbled into her shoulder. "It will never be enough time."

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"Have you ever thought about the phrase 'Time is relative'?" Celia asked late that night, curled into Tyler's side and her head resting on his chest.

"Not particularly," he said as he dragged lazy fingers through her soft hair.

"Why?"

"Because time *is* relative – well, everything is relative, if you really think about it."

"You don't say," he said, letting his eyes drift close.

“We only understand the significance of something through our own definitions, which is really rather arbitrary – human measurement and all – and so, it’s relative. Like size, for example. When we compare, say a human body to the single atom, we are gigantic, massive, infinitely large. But take that same body and compare it to a star and suddenly we’re the atom. But where does that leave atoms in comparison to stars? The differences were already infinite to begin with, but when we compare the atom and the star, how does our understanding of size change?”

“Your pillow talk gets significantly more philosophical after 12 a.m.,” Tyler teased, which earned him a sharp jab in the ribs.

“You’re missing the point,” Celia chided.

“Which is...?”

“That everything is relative.”

“You’ve already said that,” Tyler said, tone verging on whining.

“But you’re still not getting it,” she said in tired irritation.

“Then try again. Why does it matter that everything is relative?”

“Because how we understand the world is a direct result of how we’re willing to see it.”

“And that matters because?” Tyler asked.

“Even stars can be small when compared to the size of the universe – you just need to adjust the frame of reference,” she responded softly as she shifted against his side.

“Ah and how does this tie back to time?”

“Well, take one year –”

“I thought we were done talking about this,” he mumbled into her hair. He wanted to physically avoid the conversation, to walk away, but her warm touches overshadowed his discomfort.

“Would you just hear me out!” she said with an impatient huff. “This is important.”

“Fine, go, no more interruptions.”

“One year, compared to billions of years, to even a hundred or fifty years, is a seemingly insignificant amount of time. But one year is twelve months, fifty-two weeks, three hundred sixty-five days or – God, I would need a calculator to tell you how many hours, minutes, and seconds are in a year.”

“No matter how you break it down, Celia, it’s still just one year.”

“A year is a year is a year. But just think what we could do with 85,000 seconds or even 3,000,000 seconds! A second can last an eternity if you’re willing to feel it, to let all the little moments carry their own weight.” After a short pause, Celia asked, “You starting to get it?”

She shifted her head back onto a pillow so that they were lying face to face. Her fingers traced the planes of his chest, the dip of his collar bones, and the roundness of his shoulders.

“I think so,” Tyler said as he rested a palm against her neck, his thumb tracing her jawline. The room was too dark to make out the curve of her eyelashes or the swoop of her lips. “Something about stars and arbitrary human measurement and how everything is relative.”

Celia let out a sleepy yawn as she closed her eyes and snuggled under the covers, hands grasping the edges of the lumpy comforter. “Specifically time – it has its own phrase and everything.”

“Alright, time is especially special.”

“Okay, smartass – did you even get anything from this?”

“Um, that a year is worth more than I think?”

“Yeah. It’s just a matter of perspective,” Celia mumbled as she drifted off to sleep. For a long time, Tyler listened to the sound of her steady breathing, wondering what he would do without her as a constant in his life and hoping the coming months would never end.

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