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# What We Could Do: Stories

Jacob D. Ferguson  
*University of Mississippi*

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WHAT WE COULD DO: STORIES

by  
Jacob D. Ferguson

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

Oxford  
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Approved by

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Advisor: Professor Beth Spencer

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Reader: Professor Tom Franklin

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Reader: Debra B. Young  
SMBHC Associate Dean, retired

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ABSTRACT

JACOB DEASON FERGUSON: A collection of fiction and creative non-fiction—short stories and personal letters—exploring the lives, fears, anxieties, and joys of characters who grew up gay in southern, religious families. (Under the direction of Beth Spencer)

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“...I have learned that sometimes the hardest and most important work I’ve done has meant turning a story I couldn’t tell into one that I can—and that this practice on its own is one not only of discovery but of healing.”

Lacy M. Johnson, “The Reckonings”

## Introduction

My parents are devoutly religious members of a southern Baptist church. Dad is a second-term deacon and a substitute Sunday school teacher. Mom works in the nursery every week during the early service, and she spends her Wednesdays in the church kitchen planning, preparing, and cooking the weekly fellowship meal. My sister is a few years older than me, my only sibling. She teaches a children's Sunday school class at a different southern Baptist church, the one she attends with her husband. He's the part-time youth pastor and full-time music minister. They married a few months ago and have settled into a comfortable routine revolving around work and church and family.

Dad is finishing up his first term as Pontotoc County's chancery clerk. He ran as a Democrat, but in small-town Mississippi, "Democrat" can mean a lot of different things. Four years ago during his campaign, he gave speeches to small crowds sitting on metal bleachers and in foldable lawn chairs and told them that his faith and his family are the two most important parts of his life. He said they'd always be most important, but his job—taking care of the people who walk into his office and count on him for help—would fall in line right behind faith and family. This year he's campaigning for his second term. He has one opponent.

When I was little, Mom led Vacation Bible School, first at the small church by my house and then at the big church with two services instead of one. She helped decorate the sanctuary and classrooms, plan arts and crafts, and coordinate snacks and activities, but she also brought each day's lesson home with us. She asked what I'd learned. She made sure I'd been paying attention. She talked with me about the

meanings of the songs we sang each morning. She smiled when I recited the memory verses we'd studied.

My sister asks every now and then whether or not I go to church when I'm at school. I tell her I do, sometimes. She asks why I don't just come home on Sundays. It's not a far drive. I could go with my parents. I could even go to church with her. She doesn't understand why I like to travel or how I could ever study abroad for a semester. She thinks I spend too much money and let our parents give me more than I need. She says my jeans are too tight and usually hugs me with one arm instead of two, but she cares about me. She shows it by asking whether or not I've been going to church.

My brother-in-law plays the guitar and sings praise music every Sunday. He gets up early for band practice and then leads worship on a stage and in a sanctuary he helped to renovate himself. The rest of the week he works hard as a manager at a factory that produces furniture for hotels. He tweets Ole Miss sports stats, pro-life articles from Fox News, and golf updates. When he studied abroad in Costa Rica, he brought me back a fútbol jersey from a local team. I haven't ever worn it, but I took it with me when I moved into my college apartment.

I hope I haven't gone on for too long. This is the part I always struggle with. How much is too much? Do people need to know every detail about my family, what they believe, and how they view the world around them? Does it all matter, or is "My parents are devoutly religious members of a southern Baptist church" enough?

I'm just trying to explain why I've become a *problem*.

19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century sociologist, activist, and writer W.E.B. Du Bois writes about being a problem in *The Souls of Black Folk*. He was considered a problem because he was a black man, born at the end of the Civil War and dead before the passing of the Civil Rights Act. In every way, Du Bois' environment was not built for him to prosper and succeed. To graduate from Harvard, to research and write, to publish scholarly work, and to advocate for change and equality were all actions and accomplishments considered beyond his position and outside society's expectations for him. So he was a problem to the world because he possessed a predetermined and "undesirable" characteristic—blackness. In describing the strife, pain, and bitterness of black boys in America, he writes, "Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all..."

I am a gay man. At the time of this writing, my family doesn't know I'm gay. At least I haven't told them. They don't understand why I can't marry my ex-girlfriend. They don't know I have a boyfriend. They don't really know why I come home less often than I used to. They don't know about the picture frame in my bedroom that I hide in my sock drawer when they visit. Or maybe they do know. We don't talk about it.

I'm a gay man, but when I do go home for the weekend, I attend the big southern Baptist church with my family and sit in the class for college-aged kids and wonder if the teacher, who is an Oxford police officer, has ever seen me drunkenly kiss my boyfriend as we leave the Library bar late on a Saturday. There is a gap

between my world and the world my family thinks I occupy. The gap grows wider every day. This thesis is an attempt to pull the two parts of my life together, to pave a way forward for the day when the gap is gone.

In his memoir *Boy Erased*, Garrard Conley details the pain and grief he experienced growing up gay in a religious family. He alternates between adolescent stories about his growing awareness of his sexuality and the narrative of his time spent in Christian conversion therapy. Throughout the memoir Conley emphasizes the trauma he experienced trying to reconcile his religious beliefs—as well as his parents’ beliefs and expectations for him—with his same-sex attractions, which he considered sinful and shameful. Though his faith and religion remained important to him in college, he also enjoyed the freedom of education, expression, and exploration that college offered. As he relished a new kind of intellectualism and also began acting upon his same-sex attractions, Conley felt a growing divide between the life he lived at school and the life he lived at home. He writes about this gap: “With each pilgrimage to and from home, the boundaries between the two territories grew weaker, and I grew more terrified of what would happen once I finally lost my footing. Both sides seemed to suggest the same efficient solution: cut ties. Either abandon what you’ve known your entire life and your family, or abandon what you’re learning about life and new ideas.”

This is the same kind of gap that exists in my life, and while the gap is destructive in its own way, to cut ties with either my family and my upbringing or the life I’ve made in college would be devastating. The heart of who I am rests in

both of those identities. To cut one away is not an option. Instead, I must eliminate the gap and reconcile those two worlds. As Conley writes about the emotional toll of conversion therapy—of trying to fit a religious and familial mold that he couldn't shape himself into—he says, "I knew I had to do something or we would continue to live the same way we'd always lived: a life full of secrets, full of unsaid words." The gap is full of lies and secrets and failed communication. A year ago I didn't know what I was capable of doing to repair the damage I was causing by lying, but I knew I had to do *something*. So I started writing.

This is a collection of short stories that represents the culmination of those efforts. These stories are fictional in the sense that all fiction is at least half truth. How could it not be? Life inspires art inspires life inspires art, etc. One story is set in a realistic but fantastical world where secrets manifest as physical entities and haunt secret-keepers. These manifestations linger, waiting to be acknowledged, waiting to be solved like a jigsaw puzzle left out on the kitchen table. Another story details my sister's wedding as it actually happened, for the most part. I narrate it from my perspective standing on the stage as a member of the wedding party. One story is magic, and one story is mostly real. I see them both as equal parts honest and fabrication. All fiction is at least half truthful.

This is also a collection of letters. Before and after and sometimes in the middle of the stories, I insert personal letters to my family. If my memory has served me well, they are wholly honest and factual, bona fide non-fiction. They are memories from my childhood, flashes of time I had forgotten about until I sat in

front of my computer and typed, “Dear, Mom and Dad.” Though these letters are truthful, they are not The Truth. The truths in the letters are strong enough to create words but not sentences, or maybe sentences but not paragraphs. There are some things I didn’t know how to say in a letter addressed to my parents, to my sister, to all of them.

The whole truth is both the best and the hardest to tell. That’s why I wrote the stories and then the letters and then put them together, letting each say what the other could not. I am trying to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so...help me, God. I am just trying to tell the truth.

I hope that with both the stories and the letters, this collection can communicate everything I haven’t been able to say. I hope that it can bridge the gap between who I am at school and who I am at home. In doing so, this becomes more than just a collection of letters and stories. It’s not just a confession of truths, and it’s not just a statement. It’s a question, an answer, and a challenge. It says, “This is where I’ve been. This is who I am.” It asks, “Where do we go from here?” Then it creates a path and dares the reader to take it. Ultimately, this is for my family. I don’t know if or when they will read it, but this is *What We Could Do*.

However successful it is at being all of those things, know that it has helped me to write this. Know that it’s helped me to try.

This thesis began in Edinburgh, Scotland, during my spring semester abroad junior year. In the fall prior, I’d settled on writing a history thesis under the guidance of Darren Grem. In March, I was consciously ignoring Dr. Grem’s Christmas

break request that I send him topic proposals in the next few weeks. Then I found myself sitting in a particularly boring lecture for my first-year history course when I realized that writing a history honors thesis was the last thing I wanted to do. I panicked for a week, and then I decided to pursue a lifelong passion and write creatively.

I knew I wanted—needed—to write about being gay, about what it meant to be gay in a household that didn't have space for that, about how scary it is to approach that kind of forbidden reality. The challenge of writing the *Gay, Southern, Religious Family Experience* seemed daunting, so I realized my work would have to be on a micro, not macro level. It would have to be personal. It would have to both directly and indirectly address my most intimate fears and anxieties: telling my family, and the various life-changing reactions that confession could elicit.

In the following months, I read three books that captured my attention and imagination and, though I didn't fully realize it at the time, significantly influenced the direction this thesis would take. The first was *This Is How You Lose Her*, a short story collection by Junot Díaz. This book captivated me because it used the entire collection to tell a larger story about a central character, Yunior, and his experiences regarding his romantic relationships, family ties, and culture. I've always loved short stories, but I was accustomed to reading single stories or collections of seemingly random stories. *This Is How You Lose Her* is the first collection I remember reading that offered the individual joys of short stories with the satisfaction of a full journey usually reserved for novels. After reading it I began to think about the different ways in which I could use multiple short stories—maybe about the same character,

maybe just about related ideas and themes—to convey something greater, something that one story alone could not accomplish.

Next I read *Heating & Cooling* by Beth Ann Fennelly, a short collection of fifty-two micro-memoirs. Though I'd read personal essays and memoirs, this book was unlike anything else I'd picked up, and it allowed me to think about creative nonfiction in a completely new way. One micro-memoir, "Returning From Spring Break, Junior Year at Notre Dame," has only one more word than its title: "Swapped the rosary on my bedpost for Mardi Gras beads." This collection made me wonder how much substance and emotion one could pack into a single paragraph. What stories—real, true, non-fictional stories—can be told in just a page, and how can they be presented beautifully, almost like poetry? Could short flashes of non-fiction help me say just as much—or even more—than 30-page fictional stories?

Lastly, I read *Heavy* by Kiese Laymon. This memoir is not epistolary, but it is a novel written entirely to Laymon's mother. He speaks directly to her throughout the book, and he talks about his personal baggage, his mom's baggage, their family's baggage, and the oppressive weight of carrying all that baggage around—hidden, heavy, and unspoken. In this memoir, that baggage and those secrets are put out into the open, not only for his mom and his family but also for the whole world to read. Laymon says that writing it all helped he and his mother talk about things they'd never been able to talk about, never known how to talk about. He says that writing it all was a terrifying and freeing act. I couldn't stop reading *Heavy* because the exploratory, confessional nature of the language gripped me tighter than any writing I'd read recently. I began to wonder what it would feel like to write the

things I could not say to my family in the form of both fiction and non-fiction, not as a novel but as stories and letters.

The first idea I had for a story to put into this collection came while I was reading *More Than This* by Patrick Ness. In one scene, two teenage boys are talking about being gay and keeping it from their families, and one of them says, “Imagine there’s this thing that always sits there in the room with you. And everyone knows it’s there and no one will ever say a single goddamn word about it until it becomes like an extra person living in your house that you have to make room for. And if you bring it up, they pretend they don’t know what you’re talking about.” When I read that, I pulled out my phone and copied the quote into a note. Over the next few months, an idea about a boy with a secret in a world where secrets beg to be acknowledged began to take shape. I spent the entire summer figuring out the rules of this world and plotting a young boy’s development into adolescence and self-awareness. The story came together slowly and then all at once. I originally titled it “The Bedroom Bordering My Own,” but as I worked it down from forty pages to thirty, I decided to simplify it to “Stranger.” This story, the longest of the collection, contains a multitude of characters and narratives, but it was written to explore two central questions: what are the consequences of our secrets, and how do families operate with secrets when honest communication doesn’t feel like an option?

I wrote “Sanctuary” for Tom Franklin’s advanced fiction workshop, but I wrote the first line a few months earlier, the night before my sister’s wedding. That line remains as the opening of the final draft: “I want to ruin my sister’s wedding.” I

didn't, of course—ruin it or want to—but I felt *something* strong and strange. This story is the most inherently personal story because it is ripped directly from my own life. In it, a brother stands in his sister's wedding party and imagines all the improbable and impossible ways it could go wrong. He needs it to go wrong, because how could his gay wedding ever live up to his sister's perfect day? Though that feeling alone made for an intriguing story, my thesis director helped me mold this story into an exploration of southern, religious, and familial traditions. How important is the tradition of the large community church wedding? Of baptism? Of simply having a "church home"? Ultimately, how does it feel to sense or expect exclusion from those traditions, and what kind of resentment can that foster toward those who have uninhibited access to traditions of importance?

"What We Could Do" also began in Tom Franklin's class, originally in the form of a two-page scene. In that scene, a male and female couple in their mid-twenties is looking for a house to buy, but the option their realtor presents to them is falling apart in every way imaginable. For some reason, the woman is immediately enamored. The young man, on the other hand, feels nauseous and tries to make his girlfriend understand how hopeless the house is. I took inspiration from Maggie Smith's poem "Good Bones": "Any decent realtor, / walking you through a real shithole, chirps on / about good bones: This place could be beautiful, / right? You could make this place beautiful." I wanted to write about a couple, one of whom looked optimistically at the good bones of the house and of their relationship while the other seemed to have lost all hope in both. A few weeks after having the scene workshopped, I realized I'd subconsciously written about a closeted gay man who

cannot reconcile the love he has for his girlfriend with the impossibility of their relationship. I sat up in bed and audibly gasped when I realized this. In expanding that scene into the story it is now, I wanted to address the feeling of being trapped beneath a pile of rocks that's trapped beneath another pile of rocks. How does one come to accept the consequences of one's reality not only for oneself but also for those whose roles contradict one's reality? Essentially, how does a boy in love with a girl tell the girl he can't *love* her? Can he pretend? Does he want to?

"Extraction" is a story born from real and persistent anxieties I've had the last few years about having my wisdom teeth removed because of what I might say under the influence of pain medication while in my mother's care. It's the kind of realistic fear—what does my mom not know about me, what secrets do I have that she doesn't need to know?— that almost anyone can relate to. I wanted to build upon a theme starting in "Stranger" and present in every story in this collection, the theme of familial communication and the importance of families actively striving to communicate honestly and openly. In this story, however, the lack of communication boils over into a confrontation between a boy and his mom. He wants her to ask him questions, to take information he knows she knows and use it, acknowledge it, say *something* meaningful about it. The mom has a different perspective on what healthy communication requires. Where do those two perspectives meet? In a less-than-sober fight in the car? What obstacles prevented that conversation from happening sooner and under different circumstances?

In a different lecture for the same first-year history course that made me abandon my history thesis plans, I found inspiration for "Desire Lines." The best

lecture of the entire semester was about a history of mapmaking, of how maps have changed over the course of history, and how those changes have then influenced history. The lecturer spoke extensively about desire lines, unofficial paths that humans collectively create and follow in any given landscape. As other artists and writers before me have proven, the idea is an easy metaphor to mine—look no further than Richard Long’s “A Line Made by Walking” and his subsequent performative works, which assert the simple act of walking as a form of art. I tucked this story away for a few months and finally wrote it at the end of the summer. The first draft was short, sentimental, and flawed in a few obvious ways, but at its heart was a story of nature and natural longing and defiance against norms. I revised to expand the story and cut back on sentimentality, trying not to kill the spirit the first draft possessed. “Desire Lines” is the final story in the collection, and as such it works as a statement, naturalizing gay lives and gay stories and asserting their profound resilience. The other stories in this collection are filled with anxiety and worry and uncertainty and grief. “Desire Lines” takes a painful present and pushes it into a joyful future.

And the letters: they were both the easiest and the hardest to write. They came about when I had the idea of interrupting a story with another, shorter story. It was an intriguing concept, but I knew that a tremendous level of desperation would be necessary to make that kind of narrative intrusion feel earned and effective. When I was first toying with the idea, I couldn’t figure out what the intrusion point would be and how that point could be significant enough to warrant an interruption. When I got too frustrated to think about it anymore, I sat down and

wrote the story I wanted to be the interrupter. Though I had envisioned it as a real story spanning a few pages, it came naturally in the form of a letter addressed to my parents. I liked what I'd written and knew it needed to be included, but I worried that this one letter might seem like a random insertion to the collection. So I wrote more letters. I wrote letters to my sister, to my mom, to my dad, and to all of them. I wrote about memories that stuck out to me and conversations that I regret, about vacations and traditions, and about moments in time that I haven't thought about in years that now seem important and formative. After I wrote the letters, I looked at them juxtaposed with the stories, and then I rearranged the stories and scattered the letters throughout the thesis, between the stories. I found where the interrupting story belonged and realized how it needed to be presented.

My hope is that these letters can take the emotions, themes, and conflicts of five unrelated stories and weave them into a larger narrative of fear and love, worry and hope, pain and joy. Like I said before, they are personal and non-fictional in a way that terrified me to write them, but they are essential to the truth this thesis tells. They are essential to opening pathways of honest communication between my family and me. They are essential to bridging the gap, to eliminating the gap entirely.

They are as honest as I can be. This thesis is as honest as I could possibly be.

*Hey, Shea—do you remember when Mom and Dad told us the hills around the farm were Indian mounds, and every time it rained they took us across the pasture in Dad’s green pickup to hunt for freshly resurfaced arrowheads? Do you remember that time Mom’s boot got stuck in the mud and Dad had to carry her on his back to the truck? Do you remember how important we felt riding home, holding our plastic bags of arrowheads up to the window so sunlight could catch their polished surfaces, slick with time?*

*Did you know the hills around the farm aren’t Native burial grounds? Did you know Dad woke up an hour early those muddy mornings to plant our recycled collection of relics just so we could feel like explorers uncovering history? You probably knew that. I didn’t. I was angry when I found out. What a lie I’d been living. What a lie I’d been told.*

*Hey, Shea—I understand now. I wanted to believe discovering worlds was as easy as walking through the backyard pasture. They let me.*

## Stranger

When I was six, I knew a few things. I knew the alphabet. I knew the sound that each letter makes, and I knew how to put them together to make words, as long as the words weren't too difficult. I knew how to tie my shoes, although my fingers were slow and fumbled with the knots. I knew how to count to 100. I could add and subtract too.

I knew that my dad liked cows, and although I didn't like cows I knew that taking care of our cows made him happy. I knew that my mom was a schoolteacher, and I knew that she never left teacher mode because she was always trying to teach me things at home. I knew my cat was a stray and couldn't come in the house because he might have fleas. I knew I loved him anyway.

I knew the president was George W. Bush, and I knew my parents liked him. Some people didn't, but I wasn't sure why. I knew there was a war. I knew this because it was on the news before and after Wheel of Fortune, which I knew came on at 6:30. I knew people died in this war. And I knew about death—not a lot, but a little. I knew that a soldier from my hometown died, and for weeks there were yellow ribbons tied around every tree trunk. I also knew that my grandfather died, but he was sick and had been for a long time.

I knew happier things too. I knew my aunt was having a baby. I knew my dad had recently gotten a promotion at work, which meant we had more money because afterward he took us to that restaurant whose prices he'd always complained were too high. I knew what it felt like to wake up in the summer to the smell of Mom's

coffee—which I knew tasted gross—and fix myself a bowl of Lucky Charms and eat it while watching Scooby-Doo, sitting crisscross applesauce on the living room rug.

I also knew that a stranger lived in the bedroom bordering my own. I knew he was there because I could hear him. He wasn't loud, but the walls were thin. He paced, shuffling back and forth across the carpet. Muffled steps and then a pause. A turn. Muffled steps and then another pause. Sometimes I fell asleep to the sound of his pacing.

I'd never been in that bedroom. I'd never seen the door open, either. It was the stranger's room. He lived there, and I guess he always had. Maybe he came with the house when my parents bought it right before I was born. I didn't know if that was normal, if houses came with people preinstalled like stoves and dishwashers and furniture. Or maybe my parents bought the house from him and just decided to let him stay. Maybe it had always been his house and he wasn't ready to let it go.

So the stranger lived in the bedroom bordering my own, and he never left. I guess he had a bathroom? And a kitchen? Or maybe he ate those military packs of food. Or the food that astronauts eat. Maybe he had an infinite stash of dehydrated food and he never had a reason to leave his bedroom. Maybe he had a washer and dryer for his clothes too. Maybe he didn't wear clothes because he lived in a locked bedroom that nobody had a key to.

I knew the bedroom was locked because it always had been, at least since I'd grown tall enough to reach the knob and tried opening it.

I didn't know why my parents never talked about the stranger living in our house, but they knew he was there. I knew they did. Sometimes we could hear him

from the dinner table. We'd be eating in silence and then hear a loud thud from above, like he'd dropped a hardback from his waist or jumped down from his bed. My dad's eyes would flash upward for the briefest of seconds and then return to his lasagna. He'd look mildly annoyed, like he was imagining the tractor he could buy if he charged the stranger rent. Mom never looked up. She'd just clear her throat and purse her lips and raise her eyebrows slightly, shooting shifty glances at my dad from behind her can of diet Dr. Pepper.

When I was six, I knew a few things. I knew there was a stranger living in the bedroom bordering my own, and I knew nobody in my family, maybe in the whole world, had ever seen him, and I knew it was something we just didn't talk about, like the hairs on Grandma's mole or the weight Uncle Robert had gained since last Thanksgiving. And I guess I didn't really forget about him, but I didn't really think about him either. Except when the house was the special kind of midnight quiet and I could hear his muffled pacing through the thin wall that separated us.

Sometimes I fell asleep to the sound of his pacing.

\* \* \*

The winter I turned seven, our heating shut down for five days. Winter isn't Mississippi's specialty, but when she decides that it's winter, it's *winter*. At least for a little while. At least for that week. We bought space heaters, but the cold slipped in around the windows and drove the heat to the top of ten-foot ceilings. Hardwood floors turned icy while the carpet felt like walking barefoot over 6 a.m. frosted grass. Twice while Dad was at work, Mom and I sat in her cranked car and turned the heat up to ten to get warm.

The third night of the Great Heater Crisis, I lay in bed under the weight of my comforter and three extra blankets, which kept me from freezing but didn't completely drive the chill away. When I stopped adjusting the blankets and sat still, I could hear the stranger pacing in the next bedroom over the hum of my space heater.

Was he cold? He had to be cold.

But he'd always been fine, hadn't he? Always had what he needed? Surely he owned blankets. Besides, he wasn't a prisoner. The door was locked from the inside. If he *really* needed something, he'd get it. Right?

His pacing continued.

I peeled the top blanket off my bed as I slipped out from under the sheets, the cold ignoring my socks and sweats and sweater and finding its way through my skin, straight to my bones. Shivering, I folded the blanket up nice and neat like my mom always did. Then I ripped a piece of paper from a notebook, grabbed a pencil, and drew a plain stick figure because I wasn't sure what the stranger looked like. I scribbled another stick figure beside the first. This one had a swoop of yellow hair and two blue dots for eyes. He was holding a blanket, his arm extended, offering it to the first figure.

I walked the few steps from my bedroom door to the stranger's. I placed the blanket on the hallway floor and did something I'd never done before. I knocked. Three taps, knuckle to wood—gently, hoping my parents wouldn't hear because I felt like I was violating an unspoken household rule. Then I slipped the paper under the stranger's door, into the sliver of light that spilled out onto the hallway floor.

I didn't wait to see if he answered. I ran back into my room and closed my door with enough force that he'd hear it and know I wasn't waiting on him outside. I escaped beneath the warmth of my comforter and two extra blankets and listened. His pacing continued. His door stayed shut. The next morning I found the blanket where I left it. I threw it into my room so that Mom wouldn't see.

\* \* \*

When I was nine, I was playing Super Smash Brothers on the old Nintendo 64 in my grandmother's den while she and Mom sipped decaf coffee on the screened-in porch at sunset. I wasn't doing well, but I was distracted. Mom and Grandma's half whispers swam through the humidity and floated into the den through the cracked door. They were talking about the stranger.

"It's still there?" Grandma asked.

"Yes, Mom..."

"Well they do just go away sometimes, ya know? I've heard of plenty that have just gone away after a while."

"Ours hasn't," Mom said.

"Do you and Bill ever talk about it?"

"Every time I try and bring it up, he brushes it off and acts like it's nothing serious."

"It might not be serious. They're not always serious!"

"It's been there since we moved into the house. Don't you think it would've gone away by now if it wasn't anything serious?"

I sacrificed one hand to grab the TV remote and turned the volume down a few notches. Bowser hit me with a burst of fire I could've avoided, and my fighter fell off the platform and disappeared for a moment.

"You never know, baby. Just keep prayin' about it. It could go away any day." She sounded reassuring.

"Nine years, Mom!" She didn't sound reassured.

"You think it's something of Bill's, don't you?" Grandma asked, her voice low and slow.

"What else could it be? It's not mine!"

"And Dean?"

"Good grief, Mom. How could it possibly be Dean's?"

Cicada singing grew louder in the background. Mom poured more coffee into their mugs. Toad floated back onto the screen and began mounting a comeback against Bowser.

"Mom?"

"Yeah?"

"Well...I mean...*she* didn't go away randomly, did she?"

Grandma paused and then said, "No, she didn't."

"Then how'd you get rid of her?"

The cicadas quieted—barely—like they were leaning in to hear Grandma speak.

"Well...your father stopped hidin' her, I guess."

"What do you mean?" Mom asked.

“He stopped thinkin’ up believable excuses, stopped changin’ his shirts before he got home so I couldn’t smell her. Eventually he wouldn’t even say anything when he left. And he’d walk back in a few hours later and wouldn’t say anything then either. I got so tired of it. It made me feel like...excuse me...but it made me feel like shit.”

My comeback had hit a plateau. Toad jumped and missed his target, flying off the screen again. I waited for the parachute to drop him back in.

“It wasn’t fun when he was tryin’ to hide it, but when he stopped—I just. It hurt. Hurt worse than knowin’ what was happenin’. So one night when he was gettin’ his keys and wallet from the counter, I just said it. I said ‘Tell her I said hi.’ We’d never acknowledged it before. He stopped in the doorway. I wasn’t lookin’ at him, but I heard him stop. Then he walked on out. Didn’t come back that night.”

“You both stopped pretending,” Mom said.

Grandma set down her mug, the ceramic clinking softly against the glass tabletop. “Next day I walked by the door and it was cracked open. It’d always been locked before, but it was open, so I pushed it in and there she was. Skinny. Black hair. Not as young as I’d imagined. I guess it was her bedroom, her furniture. I don’t know. I’d never seen any of it.

“She didn’t say anything, just looked at me. So I walked over to her and slapped her across the face. She reacted like normal. Sat down on her bed and started cryin’ a little. I was satisfied knowin’ she could feel it. That she could hurt too.”

“Did you tell her to leave?” Mom asked.

“No, and I don’t guess she would’ve listened anyway. I walked out and shut the door. Sat on the couch the rest of the day and waited for him to come home. When he walked in, I stood up and told him I was leavin’ if he didn’t quit. He started cryin’ and got on his knees in front of me and hugged my legs and...you know how men are. He said he’d stop. He said he’d stop right then.”

Toad was on his final leg. I halfheartedly dodged an attack from Bowser but didn’t go on the offensive, didn’t take the opportunity to strike.

“Did he? Just like that?”

“I don’t know. I think he did. The next day she was gone—the room and the door and everything. Just an empty hallway like it was when we built it. We had you a few years later.”

Inside the den I watched as Bowser unleashed a stream of fire on Toad, but my fingers sat motionless on the controller. The damage counter climbed higher and higher until it maxed out. Toad exploded, and he didn’t have any more chances to float back in and try again. Game over.

My mom sighed. It was a long sigh.

“It doesn’t have to be serious, honey. They’re not always that serious.”

\* \* \*

When I was ten, I sat at the kitchen table and wrote the names of my classmates on Harry Potter-themed valentines. “What ya doin’ bud?” Dad asked.

“Making valentines for tomorrow!”

“Is that tomorrow?” He winked at me from behind the fridge. Across the table Mom looked up from her book and glared at him over her bifocals. “Sorry, honey,” he said, walking over to her. “Forgot to buy you a present. We’ll improvise later.”

“Hush!” she said, laughing and smacking his shoulder with her paperback. He kissed her on the nose and gave her a spoonful of yogurt.

Dad knelt down beside my chair and looked through the cards I’d already signed. “Making one for anyone special?” he whispered in my ear.

“These are just for everyone.”

“Well don’t be afraid to go the extra mile for a special friend, if you know what I mean.” He stood up, patting my head the way he always did. “They love it when you make them things.”

I glanced up at Mom as he left the room. “Should I really make a special card?”

Her eyes flashed, the corners of her mouth curling upward. “Of course, sweetie. If there’s someone you want to make one for?” I considered it for a moment and then nodded. She grabbed construction paper and a pack of Crayola’s from the cabinet. “I love you,” she said, kissing me on the cheek and handing me the supplies.

“I love you, too.”

The next day at school, my class exchanged cards. After the class settled down and everyone sat talking and eating the bags of chocolate Mrs. Moody brought, I slipped my homemade card out of my backpack. It was blue construction paper, and I’d cut out pink hearts and glued them to the front. Inside, I drew a lone stick figure with scribbled brown hair and two black dots for eyes. I wrote in letters as

neat as I could manage, “Simon, my most special friend. Love, Dean.” He was sitting at the back of the room, so I took the seat beside him and passed him the card. “I made you something,” I said. Simon opened it, and his face flushed pink.

“The hearts look cool,” he said, his dimples growing wider, pushing his freckles up toward his eyes.

“Thanks. I cut them without a stencil.”

“Sweet.” Then Simon reached into his own backpack and pulled out a red construction paper card a little smaller than the one I’d made him. He handed it to me. There weren’t any hearts, but on the inside he’d drawn both of us—real people, not stick figures. He’d found a crayon that matched my blonde hair instead of using the yellow like I always did. On the back he’d written, “To Dean, from Simon.” I tried not to smile too big, to show my crooked front teeth and the gap where I’d pulled a tooth last week. We sat in the back of the classroom splitting heart-shaped Reese’s until Mrs. Moody ended the party and told us to take out our math binders.

That night my mom was asking about my day and looking through the cards I’d received. When she saw the red construction paper, she said, “Oh! Did someone make you this!” and then she opened it up and said, “Oh. Okay.”

“I made my friend Simon a card, and he made that one for me!”

“Okay.” She folded the card closed and then opened it again. She examined Simon’s drawing through the bottom of her bifocals. “Come here, baby.” I walked across the kitchen and stood beside her seat at the dinner table. “Why did you make a card for Simon?”

“Because you and Dad said I should make a special one for someone if I wanted to.”

“Okay, but why did you choose Simon?”

“Because he’s my favorite person in my class,” I said.

She paused for a second. “It’s just, I think your dad and I were talking about a girl.”

“Okay?”

“You know, like a girl you might like? Or one you think is pretty.”

“But I don’t like any of them like that.”

She smiled and put a hand on my cheek. Her palm was warm. “That’s okay. You don’t have to yet. I just want you to understand what your dad and I meant.”

I nodded, unsure if I was in trouble.

“Okay, good.” She stood from her seat and began searching through the rest of my backpack. “Where are your spelling words for this week, huh? Have you learned those yet?” A few minutes later, I was in the middle of spelling “predator” when I heard a thud from upstairs and looked toward the ceiling. “Dean,” Mom said, her eyes glued to the spelling sheet in front of her. “Focus.”

\* \* \*

When I was eleven, I spent the night at my friend Tony’s house. Tony lived in what my dad called a mansion. He had two living rooms and a sitting room, and the couches in all of them were uncomfortable. He had a maid. She dusted furniture that didn’t need to be dusted and turned all the bed sheets twice a week. There was a

pool and a pool house behind it. They hung expensive art on the walls, but there were very few picture frames.

Tony and I spent most of the afternoon in the pool. His mom watched in silence from the shade of the porch. Tony dove and flipped and twisted like a trained sea lion, maneuvering effortlessly through the water as I struggled to stay afloat in the deep end. When Tony started complaining about being hungry, his mom sent us inside to dry off and change clothes. In his upstairs bedroom, Tony stripped off his swimsuit and began rummaging through his drawers in search of dry underwear, talking the whole time about how he hoped his mom would cook chicken nuggets. I turned away from him, embarrassed. Mumbling something about needing to pee, I grabbed my towel and clothes and slipped into his bathroom.

As Tony and I sat in the kitchen eating dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets, his dad came in from a day of golf, ruffled Tony's hair, and handed his wife a small box with blue ribbon tied around it. She didn't ask whether he'd bogied the fourth hole, and he didn't ask if she'd had a nice day at home, but she did smile as she pulled a diamond necklace out of the box, and he did kiss her on the cheek after he took the necklace from her and fastened it around her neck. Tony and I ate in silence as his dad left to shower and his mom, holding the necklace up, admired her reflection in the microwave door.

That night, Tony and I climbed into his four-poster bed and watched movies. Tony fell asleep halfway through the second one, but I was still awake an hour after I'd fished out the remote from under Tony's pillow and flicked the TV off. Through Tony's cracked bedroom door, I could hear someone snoring down the hall. Tony

didn't have any siblings. His parents' room was downstairs. I elbowed Tony in the ribs. "Who is that snoring?" I whispered.

"Wha...?"

"Wake up!" I elbowed him again. "Who is that snoring?"

Tony sat up and listened. He fell back onto his pillow. "It's my dad."

"Your parents' room is downstairs on the other side of the house."

"Yeah, it's...it's the other one," he said.

"What?"

"There's...well..." He sighed. "I don't think I'm supposed to talk about it."

He was biting the inside of his lip. "You can tell me, Tony."

"It's going to sound really weird."

"I won't think it's weird," I promised.

He took another quick breath and then exhaled the words: "In our old house there was a room that was always locked. I could hear people inside. Moving and snoring and whatever. I asked my parents about it until I was five, and then I stopped asking. They never answered me."

I digested the information and then asked, "Is there a room like that down the hall?"

"When we moved into this house, it followed us. I remember coming here before we bought it. The room down the hall wasn't there. Then we moved in and it was. Dad kicked the door and cussed over and over until Mom came and stopped him. Neither one of them ever looks at the door. I think they try not to walk past it."

"Tony, you said your dad was in there."

“Yeah, the other one.” He picked at his fingernails and then rubbed his eyes with white-knuckled fists. “If I show you, you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“I promise.” We locked pinkies and shook.

So we got out of bed and crept down the upstairs hallway to the room that shouldn't be in Tony's house. The sound of snoring—a deep, guttural snore—grew louder as we approached. “Don't talk any. They're sleeping,” Tony whispered as he turned the knob and eased the door open.

We stepped inside. It was only one bedroom, but it might as well have been two. On the left the walls were painted a dark navy blue, and thick gray curtains hung in front of a window, blocking out the moon. A bag of golf clubs sat beside the window. The floor was carpet, and the wall closest to the door housed a massive bookshelf, completely full and neatly lined with books of every kind. Their spines were worn. A stack of books, one of them lying open, sat on an end table. Beside that was a bed. It was small, only big enough for one person. Tony's dad was sleeping in it. He was still snoring.

The other side of the room was painted a brighter yellow, and through an open window moonlight flooded in and spilled across dull hardwood floors. Stacks of clothes, kind of folded but not too tidy, lined the three walls. There was no furniture. Just a hammock hanging from the ceiling. It was a real hammock, woven from thick cords of cotton that stretched under the human weight they held. Tony's mom was in it, curled up in a ball. She was naked except for a necklace hanging down over her shoulder, its diamond twinkling in the moonlight. She looked a little like an angel, laying there on her back, her pale skin illuminated, the hammock

cradling her and then rising up on either side of her, reaching up to the ceiling like wings.

A thin white curtain separated the two sides of the room.

I looked at Tony looking down at his feet. When he turned and held the door open for me, I followed him back down the hall and into his room. We sat cross-legged on his bed. I waited for him to talk first.

“A few months ago, I heard them yelling. The real ones. They don’t really fight at all. Never have. I mean they don’t always talk that much, but fighting isn’t their thing. But they were yelling, and I wasn’t trying to listen but I couldn’t really help it, and I don’t even think they knew I was in the house. I just heard my mom say ‘Then we never should’ve gotten married in the first place!’ and my dad said ‘Your parents didn’t really give us a choice.’”

Tony picked at his fingernails some more. “I’m not in the room. They’re both in there living together but not really, and I’m not there,” he said.

“Your mom was wearing the necklace your dad gave her today. I saw it around her neck.” That seemed lighter. That seemed positive.

Tony nodded. “And all those books are the ones she’s bought him over the years, a lot of them before they even got married. I’ve seen them all in my dad’s office.” He uncrossed his legs, lay down on his back, and hugged his chest. “When I came down the stairs an hour after the yelling stopped, they were on the couch. Mom had Dad wrapped up in a hug, and they were just sitting there. When they saw me, they knew I’d heard them fighting, but we didn’t talk about it.”

I thought about the way my mom smiled when my dad kissed her and how much they made one another laugh. “Do you think your parents still love each other?” I asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t think they ever wanted to be together.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I didn’t.

“A few days after the argument, I noticed the door down the hall was cracked open. I went in and saw them. It was the afternoon so they weren’t asleep. They didn’t talk to me, just to each other. About books and music and their friends they had in college. Then they stopped talking, and when Mom went to her side of the room, she closed the curtain in the middle, and they...were just there. Not really by themselves. Still alone though.”

Later that night after Tony had fallen back to sleep, I lay in his bed and thought about the stranger that lived in the bedroom bordering my own, and I wondered what the hell it could be, and why it was there, and why it had always been there.

\* \* \*

When I was twelve, I asked an innocent question: “Mom, can I have a girlfriend?” She was driving her old beaten up Ford Taurus home from school. I was sitting in the passenger seat, though I’d had to beg for permission—my dad still made me sit in the back, always. I was watching her as I said the words. Her cheeks rose half an inch, emphasizing the crow’s feet that had landed—only lightly—above her cheekbones and around her eyes. I think she was trying not to laugh. She said, “You’re a little young for that, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know. Everyone else has girlfriends.”

“Girlfriends, plural? As in more than one? How brave of them.”

“Everyone else has a girlfriend,” I corrected.

“There you go.” Teacher mode. She never turned it off.

“At recess today all the guys kept telling me that Casey thought I was cute and that we should go out.”

“Do you think Casey is cute?” she asked.

I thought about it for a second. “She’s not *not* cute.”

She couldn’t help it this time. Mom burst into laughter like she did when Dad made one of his corny jokes, like I did when he pinned me to the ground and wouldn’t stop tickling me. “I think you’re a little young for a girlfriend anyway. Wait a few years and then we’ll talk.” I nodded, a little relieved I couldn’t date Casey. “Are there any girls at school that you think *are* cute?” she asked, smirking in my direction.

“No, I don’t really like any of them like that.”

“That’s alright. Like I said, we’ll talk in a few years.”

The conversation could’ve ended there, but I said, “Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“Do boys have to marry girls?” I wasn’t nervous asking because I didn’t know there was any reason to be nervous. But I’d been thinking about it all day. The mood in the car shifted; Mom’s knuckles tightened around the steering wheel, and she slowed her driving, though I don’t think she meant to.

“Well, yes. Boys marry girls, and girls marry boys.”

“Okay.”

“Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know if that was a rule or if people did it just because.”

“It’s a rule,” she said. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, the plants and animals, and Adam and Eve. And do you remember what God said about them?”

“It was good.”

“That’s right. It was good. Adam and Eve lived together and were married and had children. It’s how God planned the world,” she explained.

“But then they messed up,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“They messed up. They ate the fruit.”

“Well, yeah. They sinned.”

“So why were they still good?” I asked.

“They might’ve sinned, but God still made them for one another. Nothing is perfect except for God.”

I thought about that for a second and then asked, “If God created Adam and Eve and then they sinned, how was God still perfect?”

“He just was, honey. It was all part of His plan.”

“Okay.”

“Do you understand?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think so.” We were silent for a minute. Then: “What happens if someone breaks the rule?”

“Like, if a man marries a man?” I could hear her voice going higher at the end of the question. I nodded yes.

“Well, it’s a sin. It’s a really big sin.”

“Didn’t Jesus die to forgive everybody’s sins?”

“Yeah, but some sins are different, honey. Jesus will forgive you for lying or disobeying me or being mean to a friend, but some sins are different.”

“So it’s like a really really bad sin.”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

“Do you understand?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think so.” For a minute, the clicking of the motor filled the silence.

Then: “Do you think any of the boys in your school are cute?” She said it calmly. Like she’d asked if there was any milk in the fridge. Like she’d asked if I wanted hamburgers for supper.

“No, I don’t think so,” I said.

But I’d never thought about it like that. The other boys didn’t call each other cute. They just called girls that. Simon had a nice smile. I liked it when he smiled, but I’d never thought about him being cute. I’d never assigned that word to any boy I knew. I didn’t know I could.

“Would Jesus forgive me if I thought a boy was cute?” I asked. The question worried me. My voice wavered as I said the words, and Mom clenched her jaw and stayed quiet. She was trying to turn left into heavy traffic, trying to find an open window through which she could accelerate and continue home. Her fingers

drummed on the steering wheel, tapping out a haphazard beat that clashed with the steady rhythm of the blinker.

Finally she turned right and into an empty parking lot.

“Listen, honey,” she said, shifting into park. “Some sins *are* different. Some are really big, and Jesus doesn’t forgive those. But look at me. Do you think any of the boys in your school are cute?”

I thought about Simon and how warm his smile was and how he had more freckles on his nose in the summer than the winter. The back of my throat started to burn.

She’d just said Jesus would forgive me for lying. “No, I don’t think so,” I responded.

“Then don’t worry about it,” she smiled weakly. “You’re not gay.”

“Gay?”

“That’s what it’s called when a boy likes another boy, but you don’t have to worry about it,” she said.

“Okay.”

Before she pulled out of the empty parking lot, I looked over at her and started crying, the burning in my throat spreading to my eyes. “I’m sorry, Mom. I’m sorry.”

She reached for my hand and held it tight. “Oh, baby, don’t be sorry. You’ve got nothing to worry about. There’s nothing wrong with asking questions. Now you know.” With her other hand she grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me into her chest, resting her chin on top of my head. I folded into her and let the thick cotton of

her sweater absorb the sounds of my sobbing. I felt guilty for lying, so I pulled back, steadied my breathing, and looked up at her.

“Mom, Simon—“

“Shhh, honey. It’s going to be fine. You’re fine.” Her eyebrows met over her nose, and her voice became less soft.

“But what—“

“Don’t worry about it right now,” she said. She let go of my hands, patted down her hair, and then put the car in drive. I didn’t fight to tell her—I let it go. She reached for my hand again and held it for the rest of the drive home. When we pulled into the garage, I hopped out of the car and ran upstairs to my room. Before I could close my door, I noticed the other door. The one to the bedroom bordering my own.

It was cracked.

I stared at it. Then I took two quick steps toward it, grabbed the knob, and pulled it shut.

\* \* \*

When I was fourteen, I played basketball on the junior high team. I wasn’t great, but I wasn’t bad either. My coach said I was consistent, which was something I guess.

Simon was on the team too. He was new that year. He hadn’t tried out the year before, and we didn’t have any classes together anymore. Simon was in Algebra I a year early with a few other kids our age. I was making good grades and solving simpler equations in pre-algebra. Simon and I were still friends, kind of. We laughed

at each other's jokes and shared a Gatorade bottle during practice. But it had been a long time since we exchanged valentines. Since we'd saved one another swings on the playground.

Two years. My voice was an octave lower.

After practice one day, everyone was in the locker room getting cleaned up and changed. I stood in my usual corner, away from the circus that took place in the middle of the room where two long benches housed a congregation of hormones and testosterone. Conscious of my bony hairless body, I changed quickly and quietly.

Simon floated in and out of the circus with ease. Every day he walked into the locker room, stripped down, took his shower with a businesslike efficiency, and then dried off and dressed at the end of one of the benches, joking and laughing and teasing with everyone else.

Boys snapped wet towels. Trapped one another in headlocks. Compared the number of hairs under their arms. Shoved shoulders. Threw underwear across the room.

It looked dumb. It looked fun. It looked like something I couldn't be a part of.

It was okay if they did it, but they'd be suspicious if I joined in. I'd give something away—I just knew I would. I didn't want them to be suspicious.

Tony—several feet taller and just as athletic as he'd been in fifth grade—was a hero that day, at least for half the team. In the scrimmage between the black jerseys and the yellow jerseys, the black jerseys were down by two points with five seconds to go. Tony stole the ball from a yellow jersey, took a step over half court,

and launched the ball into the air with a hopeful and hopeless desperation. It went in.

Now Tony stood in his towel on the benches in the middle of the circus. The other boys who'd been wearing black jerseys circled around him, some of them bowing down to him, some chanting his name, others facing outward and pushing back the yellow jerseys who tried to plow through and knock Tony off his pedestal. From his position of power, Tony directed his teammates, pointing out where his protective wall was in danger of being breached.

Simon, whose sweat-soaked yellow jersey still clung to his skin, managed to duck between two black jerseys. I watched, expecting him to jump onto the benches, to steal the basketball Tony still held from the scrimmage, maybe to push him gently backward and to the ground. But instead, Simon went for the kill. He grabbed Tony's towel from around his waist and yanked it off, leaving Tony exposed.

"What the hell, man!" Tony yelled as the others hooted and laughed. He covered himself, leapt to the floor, and lunged for his towel. But Simon dodged, extending his arm and holding it out of Tony's reach. Simon jumped up onto the benches where Tony had stood celebrating moments before. Tony followed him. He forgot about covering himself. Both hands grasped for his towel.

Simon tossed it into the corner, and Tony scrambled after it. As Tony bent down to pick it up, his back to the room, Simon whistled. A wolf whistle. Up and then down. High and then low.

Tony snatched his towel from the floor with a crack and wrapped himself in it.

Simon roared, his laughter echoing around the cramped room, which had otherwise gone mostly quiet. I watched Tony's anger leak into my teammates' blank faces, which slowly came to mirror his expression, brows furrowed and jaws set. I was aware that at some point a line had been drawn regarding acceptable circus behavior and that Simon had crossed that line.

Holding the towel around his waist with one hand, Tony looked at Simon, pointed a finger at him, and growled, "Don't be a fucking faggot." Then he hobbled off to his bag and got dressed. Simon chuckled, but he gathered up his bags and left without showering.

The next day Simon came into the locker room just like he always did. Carefree and confident, ready to rejoin the circus. They didn't let him. When he dropped his bag at the end of the bench, Aaron, the tallest and strongest player on the team, kicked it away from the middle of the room and held out his arm, pointing to a sign secured to the wall by two pieces of clear tape.

It read: "No fags allowed."

"Guys, come on. I'm not... It was just a joke." Nobody budged. Aaron crossed his arms, and Tony stood up beside him. "Alright, alright." Simon picked up his bag and walked toward my corner, toward me. He looked flustered but a little amused, like it was part of the fun, just a part of the circus. He dropped his bag beside mine and looked at me. I could feel the rest of the room watching. Waiting to see what I'd do. Waiting to test my loyalties.

Avoiding Simon's eye, I picked up my own bag and took his usual position in the middle of the room. In the circus. Nobody said anything really, but I heard a few grunts. They sounded like grunts of approval.

I still didn't look at Simon, but I wonder if he was thinking about the Reese's hearts we shared in fourth grade. I was thinking about them.

That night I sat in my bedroom, unable to focus on homework or the movie I was trying to watch or the album that played through my headphones. Without much thought, I ripped a blank piece of paper out of my English notebook and began writing a letter.

"Dear Stranger who lives in the second upstairs bedroom: This is your eviction notice. Please empty your room and move out as soon as possible."

I read it over again, and then I added another sentence: "You are not wanted here."

I folded the paper in half and then halved it again. My parents were probably asleep, so I moved on my toes. Out my bedroom door, two steps to the other door, and then down to the crack between the wooden door and the carpet. My ankles popped as I squatted to the floor.

The light was on in the bedroom bordering my own.

I slid the paper under the door and went back to my room.

\* \* \*

When I was sixteen, the seniors on the basketball team paid their older brothers to buy them bottles of Everclear so they could mix it with Hawaiian Punch and pour it into red Solo cups and get drunk at the new guy's house while his

parents were out of town for vacation. I rode there in the passenger seat of Tony's orange Jeep. We'd spent an hour removing the roof and doors earlier that afternoon, and the almost-summer night air settled over us like a blanket at each stop sign. When we reached the highway, I felt like we were sitting in front of an industrial fan in a stuffy gym. The wind dried the sweat on our brows but was a far cry from cold.

The new guy Jeffery had moved in halfway through the offseason and was still trying to solidify his place on the team—not his playing position, he'd definitely move me down a spot on the bench next season. But most of us had been playing basketball together for at least four years. He had a lot of catching up to do, hence the booze and end-of-the-school-year party.

Jeffery's house was a red brick two-story with twin columns on either side of a white front door. Several cars I recognized sat parked in the driveway and along the street, and as we walked up to the front door, Tony slipped me his keys. I'd be driving us home.

We let ourselves inside and were greeted with shouts from half drunk teammates. Aaron stumbled forward, put an arm around each of our shoulders, and led us to the kitchen where the drinks were. As Aaron poured Tony a cup, I caught a whiff of rubbing alcohol. I stopped him before he could pour some for me.

For the next hour, I watched Tony down cup after cup of the punch and dance to a rhythm completely separate from that of the music playing over Jeffery's sound system. He lost two games of beer pong and then asked me to be his partner for a third game. "No thanks, man. Don't think I'll improve your chances," I said.

He lumbered over in my direction and poked a finger in my chest. "You are a shit shooter." He laughed, and I could smell the alcohol on his breath even after he returned to the ping-pong table, new partner at his side.

"Hey, Jeffery," I shouted over the music, "where's the bathroom?"

He pointed to the hallway behind him. "That one's full right now, so go upstairs. There's one up there. My brother won't mind." I nodded thanks and took the carpeted steps two at a time. At the top was a simple hallway with a door at the far end and two doors on the right. The second door was open to a sink and mirror, so I bypassed the first and was about to go in when I heard my name.

"Dean?" I turned around. The first door was open about a foot, and a warm light from inside made the wooden doorframe glow. I walked back down the hall and pushed the door inward.

"Simon?" He sat at a metal desk with a computer and a stack of books in front of him. He'd aged more than me in the past two years. His black hair had grown into locks that fell over his forehead, and dark stubble shadowed his chin and jawline, making him look more serious than the circus performer I remembered from the eighth grade locker room.

"It's been a while," he said.

"Yeah."

"You can come in." So I took a step inside, leaving the door cracked behind me. Simon's room was small. The walls were bright red, but he'd mostly covered them with posters: Harry Potter, *Star Wars*, NBA basketball teams, Kings of Leon tours. His bed was a twin, and across from its foot a TV sat atop a wooden dresser.

There was a single window with its black curtains drawn. I picked up a basketball from the floor—which was neat and uncluttered with no dirty clothes thrown around—and tried to spin it on my middle finger. It wobbled for half a second then fell into my left hand.

“I didn’t know Jeffery was your brother.”

“Yeah, I just got him a few months ago,” he said. “Found him on Craigslist. The ad didn’t say he’d play basketball and invite my old teammates to the house for a party.” He took a sip from a solo cup that looked like it was full of the punch from downstairs. “Mom got married.” His walnut eyes shone brighter when he said it.

“How’s that going?”

“It’s nice having a dad for once. And Jeffery’s cool. I like having an older brother.”

“I wish I had one sometimes,” I said.

The conversation lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, and Simon downed the contents of his cup. I hadn’t spoken to him since what happened in the locker room. Basketball season ended a few weeks later, and then Simon quit the team. Then I only saw him in passing. We stopped saying hi to one another.

I tossed the basketball into his lap and asked, “You still play?”

“Only in the driveway. Jeffery is a lot better, but he goes easy on me.” He picked up the ball, palmed it, and let it drop to the floor. It bounced a few inches and then settled into the carpet.

“Would you do anything differently if you could go back?” he asked, staring at his blank computer desktop instead of looking at me. “I thought you were going to

defend me, you know? Because you know..." Simon slurred the last three words. I glanced toward the door and thought about leaving, wondered why I'd come inside in the first place. Simon shifted in his chair and picked up his empty cup then set it back down.

"I'm sorry I didn't." My voice cracked, and I coughed to cover it up.

"But would you change it? Go back and do it?"

"I don't know." Because I didn't. I wished I could say yes, definitely, that I'd defend him if I had the chance, but I knew I couldn't. Because Simon had been confident and funny and relaxed and a part of the circus, and they'd still thrown him out. I'd been me—short and pencil-armed and quiet in the corner—and they could've crucified me if they'd known I had a stranger living in a bedroom bordering my own, if they'd had any suspicions about why it was there, if they'd had any reason to associate me with anything queer.

"If I were anyone else, I could've defended you."

"It's okay, Dean." Simon cleared his throat and with his palm wiped the cheek that faced away from me. I thought about the valentine I'd given him, the one my parents told me to make for someone special. I thought about the conversation I had with my mom on the ride home from school. I thought about the first time I put a name to that feeling I had when I saw Simon's smile, and the first time I put a name to that other feeling I had when he directed his smile at me. I needed him to understand.

I stepped toward Simon's bed and sat on the floor, leaning back against the gray comforter. I closed my eyes. My stomach felt like I'd drunk some of the

Everclear straight. “Simon, there’s this room in my house that I’ve never gone into.” I took a deep breath, held it, and let it go. I wasn’t watching Simon, but I heard him move from his desk chair to the carpet beside me. His bedframe squeaked as he leaned against the mattress.

“My mom and I got rid of ours when I was eleven,” he said.

My eyes snapped open. “What?”

“Locked room in your house that’s not supposed to be there? Hear someone moving around in it sometimes?” He raised his eyebrows. I nodded. “We had one, too. Mom said it showed up as soon as I was born.”

Simon looked at me like he expected a response. I stayed quiet and listened to my heartbeat thumping in my ears. He continued. “She told me later she thought it had something to do with my not having a dad, so we talked about it all the time. About how we’d be fine with just the two of us. It never went away though. The door stayed locked. When I got older, we quizzed one another. I’d say ‘Mom, have you done anything you regretted? Have you kept anything from me? Have you lied to anyone about anything?’ She’d sit there cross-legged with her eyes closed and say that she hadn’t. Then she’d do the same to me.”

I thought about the way my family never talked about the stranger that lived in our home. I saw my dad look at the ceiling and look back down. I heard my mom say, “Dean, *focus*.”

Simon kept going. “But one day I came home from school, and I guess I couldn’t stop smiling, and she kept asking me why, and I kept telling her I didn’t know why, I was just really happy, and then it hit me. You know that feeling you get

when you're on the swings and you've gone all the way back and then you look up before you fall down? And then it's like your stomach gets caught up there and you leave it behind? I loved that feeling. And I came home from school that day, and I still felt like that. And I couldn't stop smiling."

I remembered the playground and the swings. I remembered saving a swing for Simon. We liked the two at the far end. I remembered the way Simon's face split with joy every time he'd leave his stomach, the way he'd shout every time he fell and swung forward.

"So I told her about you, and I told her about our valentines in fourth grade, and I told her you were my best friend. Then I realized that you were something more than that. I was eleven, so I didn't really get it. But I got it enough.

"She told me that most boys like girls, but not all boys like girls, and that was fine. And I said okay. And we sat on the couch all night, ended up falling asleep there. The next morning that room was gone." I remembered what Grandma said. That woman, that room—they'd just disappeared.

"But...I mean...you're...you were so young. It's not like you were lying. Why was there a room because of you?"

Simon pulled his legs to his chest and hugged his shins. "Gay people are born a secret. The world doesn't expect it. At least our world doesn't."

Downstairs, the music thrummed louder, the bass vibrating the walls and pulsing through the floor of Simon's room. I wished I could be down there, drinking and shouting and helping Tony lose another round of beer pong. A part of the circus.

A part of something that felt easy. I turned to face Simon. "Does Jeffery know? Does his dad?"

"Yeah, they know. Mom said we had to talk about it. That I had to feel like I could talk about it."

"Yeah."

"Dean," he said, looking up from the floor, "you need to talk about it."

"I tried. When I was younger. My mom's not like yours. Dad's the same." Mom had been clear. The world worked a certain way, and there wasn't room for another option. "I can't talk about it." I tried to hold my lip steady, hung my chin on my chest, and turned away from Simon.

"That's the only way it'll get better. That's how you make it go away."

Simon leaned into my shoulder. I could feel him holding back, could feel his arm itching to reach up and wrap around my neck, to hold me close and tight.

"I can't." I stood and crossed the room in three steps. I pulled the door open, letting the sounds from the party fill the room. "Goodbye, Simon."

\* \* \*

When I was seventeen, I pushed al dente linguine around my dinner plate and nodded along with the conversation as my mom described how a group of boys had cornered Simon at his car in the school parking lot and beat him until he stopped moving because someone had found and copied and shared a picture of him kissing a boy from another school. Mom was thankful the boys had only been suspended instead of expelled. Dad drummed his fingers against the dinner table and said Simon was just getting what a father should've given him.

Later that night I crept across the upstairs hallway, stood outside the bedroom bordering my own, then twisted the knob and pushed the door open. I took a step inside.

It wasn't my room, but it was. The bed was the same, tall with a dark wooden headboard. The desk was the same, and my silver laptop sat in the middle, decorated with the same Harry Potter stickers. The rug was an identical navy shag, the walls the same color gray. The same pictures, the ones I'd printed just a few weeks ago, sat encased in the same frames. My books were on his bookshelf, though their spines looked more worn than my own copies. Also on the desk were the two notes I'd slipped under the door: the drawing of me giving him the blanket, and the eviction notice I'd scribbled with a younger hand.

It was three in the morning, and the stranger was asleep in my bed. I took a step closer. He lay on his back, the blanket my mom crocheted for me four years ago pulled up to his bare shoulders, his arms resting on top of the red and blue yarn. His head fell sideways on my pillow, facing me with closed eyes. His hair was mine—the blonde that's not yellow and not white but somewhere in between, messy and wild like when I shower and don't comb it. He breathed in through my stubby nose and exhaled through a slim part in my chapped lips.

I thought about all the nights I fell asleep to his pacing when I was a kid. I thought about all the nights he'd kept me awake the past three years. I thought about my dad kicking Simon in the ribs until warm red sticky blood ran from his mouth onto cool hard gravelly pavement. I thought about my dad kicking me in the ribs until warm red sticky blood ran from my mouth onto my bedroom carpet.

Just like me, the stranger slept on the right side of the bed with an unused pillow on the empty half. I reached over the stranger, still sleeping, and picked up the other pillow. I held it tight between two fists and lowered it over the stranger's face. His head jerked, his arms stiffening over the blanket and then reaching up to the pillow, clawing at my hands with untrimmed fingernails. He thrashed his legs under the covers, but he was trapped beneath the weight of himself and the anger of the world. I held the pillow steady and knew I was making the right choice. This was how to fix it. This was the way to fix it.

The stranger's movements slowed, weakened and then stopped, and I stood over him, gasping for air I didn't know I needed so badly. I released the pillow from my fists. I left it there covering his face. I walked away from him, out of his room. I shut the door behind me.

*Hey, Shea—do you remember how we used to sleep together when we were kids? Sometimes it was my bed and sometimes it was your bed, but it was almost always together. How old was I when I decided I was too old for it, that I could sleep by myself? I remember you cried that first night I told you to go to your own room. Why did you cry? Were you scared of the dark? Were you afraid to sleep alone? Were you just sad that we were old? Were you thinking about me drawing pictures on your back with my finger so you could guess if it was a house or the sun or maybe your name? Were you remembering the prayers we said together and wondering if God would pay attention to your voice alone? Were you thinking about the year after you learned Santa Clause wasn't real, the year I thought I heard Santa downstairs and you played along? You asked if I heard those bells. I didn't but you said, "No, listen. Can't you hear them? They must be on the roof with the reindeer." I believed you, and you told me we had to stay in bed so Santa could finish. I believed you.*

*Is that why you cried? Or was it because when I told you I wanted to sleep by myself and you didn't move, I pushed you out of my bed? Was it because I told you to grow up when you tried to climb back in? I'm sorry I pushed you. I'm sorry I pushed you away.*

## Sanctuary

I want to ruin my sister's wedding. Well, *I* don't want to ruin it. A man can't ruin his older sister's wedding. It can't be *my* fault. Listen. I just want it ruined. And not a little bit—a lot. I want it to be the wedding everyone talks about for years to come. I want the pastor to have a stroke mid-vows. I want the balcony to cave in and kill everyone sitting in and below it. I want a meteorite to shatter stained glass and behead the pianist. Every time someone else in town gets married, I want the little old ladies who meet for Bible study at Happy Day Café to critique the bridesmaids' dresses or the flower arrangements or the reception location and then, opening their Bibles to Acts, to say, "Well, at least it wasn't as bad as *Sidney's* wedding. At least *that* didn't happen again."

Sidney looks nice though. Doesn't she deserve that—to look nice? Her hair, the color of toasted meringue, is pulled back and woven into an intricately braided bun. A few curled strands fall in front of her ears and brush her bare shoulders. The neckline of her dress is lace, which extends around her shoulders and all the way down her back. White cloth buttons secure the dress along her spine. The skirt flares out from her hips only slightly, and the train trails behind her on green carpet. Cameron's suit is dark gray and slim, and he's wearing a navy bowtie that matches the groomsmen's ties and the bridesmaids' dresses. The boutonniere pinned to the left side of his jacket is a miniature version of Sidney's bouquet.

I stand on the stage, on the first of three tiered portions where the choir usually sits. Their chairs have been moved, and we stand with the baptistery at our backs, the couple and the preacher in front of us at the edge of the stage, the

congregation beyond them. Sidney and Cameron are facing one another, her hands in his. Her breaths are shaky. He adjusts his feet at frequent intervals.

Every windowsill is full of white hydrangeas and pink roses, purple baby's breath and light blue snapdragons. Similar arrangements hang from reserved family pews and adorn the steps leading up to the stage.

Everything looks nice. Really fucking nice.

It's five o'clock. The sun isn't setting yet, but it will soon. Sunlight falls through six tall stained glass windows on the right side of the church, painting the congregation with a palette of watercolors. I see red, orange, green, and blue on the side of Sidney's dress.

My family moved to Grace Baptist fifteen years ago because the pastor at our other church cheated on his wife with a deacon's sister. I was six and didn't want to leave the only church I'd ever known, but my parents didn't forgive like Jesus did. We moved to Grace Baptist, which is much larger with a basketball gymnasium and a fellowship hall. There's an elevator and a library, even a separate wing for the nursery. I don't remember what the preacher talked about the first Sunday we went to Grace, but I do recall the windows.

I sat at the edge of the pew closest to the wall and looked up at them the whole sermon. They start a few feet from the floor and extend to where the wall curves into ceiling, which seemed as tall as the Empire State Building or Mount Everest or the Eiffel Tower—whichever one was tallest. Sidney sat to my right, my parents on the other side of her. Since she was a few years older than me, she was expected to listen more closely to the preacher's words, but I caught her looking up

at the windows every few minutes. Once, I turned back from admiring them and found Sidney and both my parents looking up at them too. I don't know if they were struck by their height or the colors or the stories they told—Moses on the top of a mount, Mary and Joseph in a stable under a star, Jesus dying on the cross—but for at least a minute, we all looked up.

As we drove home later, Mom talked about the sermon and how inviting Sunday school had been and how she'd really felt at home there, and then she said, "And I couldn't get over the windows—all that light streaming in! Imagine a wedding in that sanctuary. It'd be gorgeous."

Almost every seat is taken. Jesus Christ, the sanctuary is only this full on Christmas and Easter. The people in the balcony are up there because there is no space downstairs, not because they enjoy the view. My mom sits on the first row beside my dad, Cameron's parents beside them. The grandmothers fill half of the second row. My dad's dad is the only grandfather still alive. The rest of my family sits on the right side of the church, aunts and uncles and cousins—Mom's side mixed with Dad's—all staring up at us in pleasant, patient expectation. What will happen next? their eyes ask. What pleasant, perfect thing happens next?

David is not here. There is a man in the balcony with the same curly, one-shade-away-from-black brown hair, but it is not David.

I want to ruin my sister's wedding because my parents can't have *this* as a point of reference. There are groomsmen on either side of me. Maybe one of them is locking his knees like they warned us not to do. Maybe one will pass out soon. Maybe it will be the best man, and maybe when he falls, the wedding band in his

pocket will roll out and across the stage toward the air vent on the floor, and maybe it'll fall between the slots and slide deep into the recesses of the church's ventilation system. And maybe between the fallen best man and the runaway wedding band, the ceremony will have to be postponed until further notice, and the crowd will boo and throw their dress shoes onto the stage because this is not the performance they came to see.

Maybe the little old ladies at Happy Day Café will talk about that before diving into Luke's book of Acts.

After "we are gathered here today" and a few minutes of talk on the Biblical definition of love, Brother Brian moves on. "Sidney and Cameron have decided to participate in a foot washing ceremony," he says. "In John 13, Jesus washed his disciples' feet as a commandment to love and serve one another with humility and generosity. In washing one another's feet, Sidney and Cameron pledge to humbly serve and generously love one another every day of their marriage."

Cameron leads Sidney to the side of the stage, where a short bench, a pitcher of water, a ceramic basin, and a few towels have been set out. As Sidney sits, the pianist begins to play Pachelbel's *Canon in D*. Cameron kneels, removes Sidney's heels, and places them to the side, guiding her feet into the empty basin. He pours water from the pitcher over her feet. I can see his hands shaking from the weight of the water in the pitcher. As he massages her feet, kneading the skin around her ankles, he glances up at her and smiles. She looks down and smiles back. She holds her dress at the middle of her calves to keep it out of the water. She closes her eyes

and laughs a little as he rubs between her toes. He smiles again, showing his teeth this time. He looks relieved. He looks more relaxed than I've seen him all day.

I peer into the crowd. Friends of Cameron and friends of Sidney and friends of friends of friends watch them with subconscious smiles. Dad removes his glasses and wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. Cameron's mom is nodding, her palms together and fingers interlocked over her mouth like she's praying. My grandmother is blowing her nose into a handkerchief.

The last time my grandmother was at Grace was ten years ago, the day of mine and Sidney's baptisms. Sidney hadn't wanted to be baptized when we moved to Grace because it was so much bigger than our old church. I'd never done it because she'd never done it. But my mom sat us down one day and told us that she wanted us to be baptized before we got too old. I'd never seen an old person baptized, so I figured she had a point. Besides, I thought it wasn't a bad idea for me to do it just for good measure. In case I hadn't gotten my prayer exactly right when I asked Jesus to let me into heaven. In case Jesus hadn't fully saved me and there was more sin that needed washing away. Mom called the church and then our grandparents and then our aunts and uncles, and they all came to watch. Sidney and I took off our church clothes and put on bathing suits in changing rooms on opposite sides of the baptistery. Mom helped us pull oversized choir robes over our heads, and Dad sat in the congregation with a camera and the rest of the family.

Sidney went first. She walked into the baptistery, which looked like a humongous bathtub with steps on either side leading down to the center. She stood there beside Brother Brian, who faced the congregation and spoke about Sidney's

commitment to the Lord and to this church. Then he placed one hand on her back, the other over her nose, and gently lowered her into the water. She reemerged with her eyes closed, hair wet and clinging to the back of her neck. She wiped her eyes, looked around at the congregation, and smiled as all God's people said "Amen."

It was my turn. The water was warmer than I thought it'd be, and my foot squeaked against the blue plastic as I stepped in and walked toward Brother Brian. He put a hand on my shoulder as I struggled to keep my chin out of the water. He blessed me and my walk with Jesus and my place in Grace Baptist, and then he covered my nose with his hand, and I looked up at him and the domed ceiling of the baptistery high above me, and I took a deep breath before he dunked my head under the water. He pulled me back out, and all God's people said "Amen," and Dad's camera flashed in my direction, and my grandmother and my aunts and uncles all smiled as I half swam, half tiptoed back to the stairs and out of the baptistery. My mom was waiting there for me, towel in hand. She pulled the soaking robe over my head then towel dried my hair so I could change back into my khakis and polo for Sunday school.

Today, there is water in the baptistery, and I wonder if someone forgot to drain it or if it's there for someone to use tomorrow. I wonder if it's warm, if the church puts holy oils in baptizing water to make it holy, and I wonder what would happen if the water started to leak down onto the top tier of the stage, where the baritones stand in the choir. And what if the giant, backlit cross that hangs on the back wall of the baptistery somehow fell into the water below, and what if the electric current followed the leaking water out of the baptistery and onto the top

tier of the stage where the baritones usually stand, and what if the bridesmaids and groomsmen who are standing up there on that top tier got electrocuted. In the middle of the foot washing ceremony. Imagine the discussion!

Cameron removes a navy towel from the stack and wraps it around Sidney's feet, taking care to dry the skin between each of her toes. Finished, he sets the towel aside and holds out one heel at a time, helping Sidney back into her shoes.

They swap places. Sidney sits at the top of the steps leading up to the stage, and her maid of honor walks over to adjust her dress, throwing the train down the steps so that it looks like a frozen waterfall. Sidney repeats the process for Cameron, removing his shoes and washing his feet and drying them with a new towel. When she finishes, Cameron helps Sidney stand, and they walk back to the middle of the stage.

The sun has lowered a little more, shining through the windows on the right of the sanctuary and illuminating the muted stained glass on the left side. Six gold chandeliers hang from the ceiling that I once thought was as high as the highest mountain in the world. They glow in the sunlight. Cameron and Sidney face the preacher and the wedding party. Their pinkies are linked. Their eyes drift to the side toward one another, drawn together like magnets. My throat tightens.

Three weekends ago I drank a double bottle of Barefoot Moscato and then threw up on myself in the passenger seat of David's car because he couldn't pull over fast enough. It was just the two of us, so nobody else knew. We'd been headed to a birthday party for a friend. He turned around and drove back to my house.

I'd been so humiliated that I thought I'd just sit there in my own sick until I starved to death or something. But David coaxed me out of the car and guided me to my front door with a firm grip on my elbow. Under the stone archway that enclosed the door and the welcome mat, he helped me kick off my shoes and socks, lift my shirt over my head, and unbutton my shorts. We left them all in a pile beside the door. Upstairs, he pulled the shower curtain out of the tub, closed the drain, and started to run a bath. I approached the tub and made to get in.

"You might want to take those off first," David said.

"Right." I exhaled and removed my underwear. The hot water stung as I eased into the bath.

"I am embarrassed," I said as he turned the handle ninety degrees to stop the flow of water.

"Don't be."

"I am," I repeated, allowing my head to slump back against the cool tile that covered the shower walls. With my eyes closed, the room began to spin even faster, so I forced my eyes back open.

David laughed, gently. "It's okay, babe."

"I am a twenty-one-year-old man. My boyfriend should not have to bathe me."

"But here we are," he said. He dipped his hand into the tub, cupping his fingers and pouring a handful of water over my chest. He ran his fingers through my hair. Massaged my feet.

"Will you still marry me one day?" I asked.

He put a finger under my chin and lifted my face until our eyes locked. “Yes.”

A minute or so later: “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Okay.”

Sidney and Cameron are exchanging vows. Cameron says that marriage was created by God and for God, and that in marrying my sister, he wants to honor God, to lead her closer to God, to lead their family down God’s path for them. Sidney says that marriage was created by God and for God, and that in marrying Cameron, she wants to honor God, to submit both to God’s will and to Cameron’s guidance, and to serve them both—God first, then Cameron—for the rest of her life.

Next, they exchange rings.

Nobody faints.

Nobody drops a goddamn thing.

Cameron slides a ring onto Sidney’s finger, and she does the same for him, and they both look like they could cry or shout or turn their joy into helium and float up to the chandeliers.

“If anyone knows some reason that these two should not be joined in marriage, speak now or forever hold your peace,” Brother Brian says. I look around the sanctuary and wait for something, for anything, for a man to burst in through the back door sweaty and out of breath and tell us all that Sidney can’t marry Cameron, she simply can’t, because Cameron slept with his wife, and he would’ve come sooner but he’d only just found out, and he’d been stuck in a traffic jam, and there was an earthquake and a terrible flood and locusts, and he was sorry everything had to go

down this way, but he couldn't let them marry without Sidney knowing. He just couldn't.

The little old ladies would never let that one go. "I heard she slapped him and ran out crying," one would say. "I heard he punched the guy and she passed out," another would add.

But the sanctuary doors stay shut, and I get more desperate. The little old ladies need something. I need something. Of all the people here—and there are so many people here—nobody has an objection?

Brother Brian's pause only lasts a few seconds.

I almost send up a prayer. I almost ask God to stop this wedding, to end it. But I remember the last time I prayed was when Dad was in the hospital for a hernia surgery, and I feel bad only praying in my times of greatest need.

Besides, Sidney deserves this.

My eyes are wet and overflowing, but I don't think anybody is looking at me right now, and if they are, I don't think they will know if my tears are happy or sad. I don't think I know either.

Brother Brian tells Sidney and Cameron to kiss, and they do. Someone starts cheering and then everyone is clapping, and I'm laughing because I've only seen them kiss once before and Sidney looks embarrassed, but she's also looking at Cameron and I can tell that she is happy, that this is everything she's ever wanted—him, and everyone here, and this place, and this day.

My last chance to ruin it. The last opportunity for something catastrophic to happen and overwrite all of the nice, perfect things. But no meteorite makes an

appearance. The water in the baptistery is still in the blue plastic bathtub, and the backlit cross hangs securely above it. Brother Brian remains in perfect health, besides his diabetes.

I am still laughing, but I don't see Sidney and Cameron anymore. I imagine standing where she is standing, and I see David beside me. I am wearing a navy suit, and he is wearing an emerald green blazer. The sun has set even further, and shadows of color sprawl across the entire arched ceiling, which doesn't seem quite so high anymore. The chandeliers spin slowly in the current of the air conditioning, the light dancing across their golden curves.

But Brother Brian has shut his Bible and walked off the stage. My aunts and uncles and cousins frown, and then they are gone. My grandparents start shaking and then pass out from shock. My grandmother's head rests on my grandfather's shoulder, and his jaw hangs open, his dentures threatening to fall from the roof of his mouth.

My mother is crying and pressing her fingers into her lowered forehead. My dad's brows meet in a line, and his neck turns red. He opens his mouth but no sound comes out. Sidney is beside them, but she isn't wearing her wedding gown. She's in a simple, gray dress, and she stands with her hip cocked to the side, her arms crossed, her jaw set. They all disappear.

The balcony crumbles, but there's nobody in or below it, so it doesn't matter. The stained glass windows shatter outward, their colors exploding into pieces too small to put back together. David and I stand where my sister and Cameron stood, and we are holding hands, and I am thanking him for loving me, and there are still

people standing on the stage behind us. There are some people in the pews, too, but I don't know them all. David's family is there in the front, his mom crying and laughing and holding his dad's elbow on her right and his sister's on her left.

The rest of the church fades. The baptistery disappears, the backlit cross going with it. There are no more people, and the pews are gone. No chandeliers hang overhead. There are no walls. No more green carpet. There's no ceiling. I don't know where we are. It is dark. I hear the faint rustle of wind through leaves grow into a howl. I hear a distant rumble and then a sudden clap of thunder. I feel raindrops—first light and then heavy, full—fall onto my skin. My suit is soaked. Lightning illuminates David's face in front of me.

I am kissing him, and it is all that I have.

Cameron and Sidney make their way down the steps and out of the sanctuary as husband and wife. The song from the end credits of *The Parent Trap* remake plays over the speakers, and this, finally, is something the little old ladies might judge, but I sing along with the lyrics. I remember when I'm supposed to leave the stage and escort my grandparents out, and I smile while I'm doing it.

Later, as I stand in a corner at the reception holding a plastic cup filled with sparkling grape juice, my dad walks over. He exhales. It's a heavy, satisfied breath.

"It's been a long day," he says.

"Yeah, it has."

"But everything was perfect. It couldn't have been more perfect."

I nod. "It's exactly what she wanted."

He bites down on the inside of his lips, takes a quick breath in, and lets it out slowly. His voice is lower than usual. "Your wedding will be, too," he says.

"I don't think that'll happen anytime soon."

"That's okay," he says. "You'll meet the right girl someday." He puts an arm around my shoulders and looks to the dance floor where Sidney is crouched down, holding one of my little cousin's hands and twirling her around in circles. Their laughter reaches every corner of the room. A bright flash emits from the photographer's camera.

I wait for him to leave, to pat my head and tousle my hair like he does and then make his way to the cake table, but he stays beside me. His arm is heavy on my neck. It pushes me down a few inches, and I lock my knees trying to stand up straight beneath his weight.

I remember I'm not supposed to lock my knees, but nobody would care if a groomsman passed out at the reception. It's not the same. People have already started leaving anyway.

Dad's arm is still around my neck. He covers a cough with his other hand.

I down my sparkling grape juice.

*Hey, Dad—do you remember our trips to the Indiana pig show? Mom and Shea came to the ones in Iowa and Illinois, but Indiana was ours. Do you remember when you took me to the hotel's indoor pool and I was in the shallow end counting how long I could hold my breath underwater? You were in the hot tub watching me. Then that woman came in and started flirting with you, and I popped my head out of the water and she ran away. We laughed about it the whole eight-hour drive home. Do you remember Arby's curly fries? We didn't understand why all fries couldn't be curly. I still don't understand why all fries can't be curly. What else is there? I'm trying to remember. What about when that old man let me show his pig for him, and then it won and I got to keep the blue ribbon? Did he know it would win? Did you? Is that why you asked him if I could show it?*

*The Indiana show was my favorite. Did I tell you when I was little it was my favorite? I don't know if I did.*

## What We Could Do

“This one’s the one. I just know it.” Ruth let go of the steering wheel, reached over the middle console, and grasped Jesse’s knee. He turned and admired how certain she was, how her jaw was set and her eyes were bright. He envied it, really. Jesse readjusted his legs, inching closer to the passenger door, and leaned his head against the cool glass.

The white house in front of them looked a little like the house Ruth had grown up in. It had the same box gable roof, same four-pane windows on either side of the door, same white, wooden columns supporting a shingled awning. Jesse had visited that house many times in the six years they’d been dating. This house looked smaller and less manicured. The grass in the front yard grew up past ankle height. There were no potted petunias on the porch.

To the left of the door, a light—a single, naked bulb in a black iron fixture—glowed through the rain, creating streaks of gold racing down the windshield. Every ten seconds, the wipers stuttered across the glass and brought the light into a soft focus, but the house remained blurry, ghostlike, in the space between two worlds. Ruth and Jesse sat in silence and listened to the rain falling onto the car’s roof, to the clacking of Ruth’s acrylic nails tapping the leather steering wheel, to the soft hum of the engine, to the whisper of radio station 97.8 set to volume level three.

It was still raining five minutes later when Elijah pulled up in his Prius. He waved through the window as he parked beside them in what was supposed to be a driveway. The concrete connecting South 2<sup>nd</sup> and house 316 was barely a car’s length and just wide enough for Ruth’s compact sedan and Elijah’s Prius to sit side

by side. Jesse couldn't decide if Elijah banged his door against the side of Ruth's car when he jumped out into the storm or if that was just the thunder. It had been rolling consistently and growing louder since he and Ruth had woken up in their hotel that morning.

The three of them met on the front porch, Ruth laughing and smoothing the rain out of her hair. She shook Elijah's hand while Jesse examined the rusted gutters that were spilling water across the front of the house, drowning a row of pink rhododendrons. Elijah, his black hair neat and unbothered by the rain and wind, extended his hand to Jesse, who clamped his teeth and lips together in an almost-smile and nodded in Elijah's direction. Elijah's grip was firm, his hand warm in the misty breeze.

Jesse couldn't quite meet Elijah's eye. Elijah looked too familiar.

A year ago Jesse had sat alone in a dingy bar with a bar top made out of fake IDs. The place sold one-dollar PBR tallboys on Tuesdays. He thought PBR tasted like dirty water, but if he drank enough of it he'd start to feel like things made sense, like his future was more his than not. He sat in the dingy bar and drank PBR tallboys on Tuesdays because Ruth worked on Tuesday nights, and grad school was stressful.

Then a man had sat down beside Jesse, who didn't look to his left to acknowledge the man but instead glanced in front of him at the mirror covering the wall behind the bar. In the mirror, he could see the man looking in his direction. Jesse turned his nose down to his beer, but after a minute or so he got curious and took another quick look. The man had brown eyes and a beard that Jesse had tried

and failed to pull off. He wore a leather jacket that hugged broad shoulders and a thick neck, and his black hair was short on top and buzzed on the sides. He seemed older than Jesse, but not by that much. When the man looked back up into the mirror, Jesse averted his eyes.

Finally, the two men looked up at the same time and locked eyes in the mirror, and though they were sitting a foot and a half apart, Jesse had felt as if the man existed in a different world, a world behind the mirror.

Jesse remembered meeting Elijah the realtor for the first time. He hadn't been able to comment much on the houses they visited. He'd been too distracted by Elijah's appearance, by how much he looked like the man from the bar. Now, Jesse's stomach rumbled uncomfortably, and he thought back to the burrito he'd had for lunch and wondered if the previous owners had thought to leave toilet paper in the bathrooms.

Elijah pulled a single, golden key out of his pocket and jimmied it into the deadbolt on the wooden door, whose paint was peeling off in strips, revealing a layer of green beneath faded white. Ruth caught a hanging strip of white paint between her middle and index fingers and pulled it away from the door, letting it fall to their feet. "We had a green door when I was little girl. Jess, how do you feel about a green door?" Ruth asked as Elijah pulled the key from the deadbolt.

"I think it'd be great," Jesse said.

"That's an easy enough project." Elijah's voice was deep and confident. He turned the knob and pushed the door open. "Come on in."

They followed him inside, and the smell hit Jesse immediately. Mothballs and dead mice, earthy dust and mildew heavy and wet in the still air. Jesse could also smell Elijah's cologne. He took a step away from Elijah, putting Ruth between them.

She grabbed his hand, squeezed his fingers between hers, and looked up at him. "Smells like my grandma's house," Ruth said.

"Here we've got an excellent living space. It's a great size, and this window lets in tons of natural light! Ruth, I know you said all the places we looked at last time were too dark and cramped, so..." Elijah's smile was wide and expectant.

"Look, babe!" Ruth pointed to a built-in bench under the window. She pulled him over and sat down. "Imagine sitting here in the morning and drinking coffee and reading the paper. Imagine the sunrise..." As she trailed off, sweat collected in Jesse's armpits and on his brow. He swiped the back of his hand across his forehead and stood from the bench.

For weeks they'd been talking to Elijah on the phone, running through a checklist of must-haves and want-to-haves. Ruth's list was long. Plenty of windows, a back yard, and at least two bathrooms. One bedroom was fine but two would be better. She wanted something affordable but in a nice neighborhood, preferably somewhere with sidewalks. If there were sidewalks, there would probably be trick-or-treaters on Halloween. "Ruth, are you going to go trick-or-treating?" Jesse had asked.

"Big picture, Jess. Big picture."

She wanted somewhere her parents could come and visit and be impressed. "On second thought, I really would love two bedrooms." She wanted something

quaint, something with charm and character. Nothing too modern, nothing sterile. Some renovation was fine—“We love a project!” She wanted a place where she could come home at the end of a long day of teaching and talk to Jesse about how much harder teaching was than they’d imagined. She wanted Jesse to tell her about his rookie mistakes—maybe he’d forget J.D. Salinger’s name when a student asked who wrote *The Catcher in the Rye*—so that his mistakes would make her feel better about her own—maybe she’d misspell “Pythagorean Theorem” when she wrote it on the dry-erase board in blue Expo. She wanted a place where she and Jesse could make a life together, a place to build a future off the past six years.

Jesse wasn’t too demanding. He favored one bedroom over two because he was more concerned about price than longevity—or her parents visiting. “Think of first year Alabama teacher salaries, Ruth...” He did want a nice neighborhood, but he didn’t like the idea of trick-or-treaters bothering them. He wanted something newer because he wasn’t very handy, but he and Ruth had helped her parents rip up their old kitchen tile and put down bamboo hardwood, and she’d gotten ideas. He didn’t mind old, though. He didn’t mind charm. He didn’t mind letting Ruth take the reins.

They’d let Elijah look around and then catalogued some possibilities, but when Jesse and Ruth had finally driven five hours east to meet Elijah and begin the real search, none of them had checked all the boxes. Elijah—young like them, eyes dark, hair short and neat and painfully familiar—was full of enthusiasm that began to leak out like helium in an aged balloon. “Too modern,” Ruth said about one house. “Too expensive,” she’d said of another. “Too boring, too dark, too secluded.” Elijah deflated. “It just doesn’t feel right,” she’d said, buckling her seatbelt in the driveway

of still another underwhelming possibility. Jesse, facing forward in the passenger seat, had only nodded.

“Ruth, come on into the kitchen. It’s got so much character—I think you’re going to love this one.” As they walked through the open doorway, they left behind the linoleum floors of the living room and stepped onto wide, wooden planks that creaked under the weight of their steps.

Jesse avoided looking at Elijah as he described the retro appliances—the stovetop with the spiral, iron eyes and the faded white Crosley refrigerator with the broad, curved edges and the metallic handle, the freezer shelf on the bottom. “You just can’t find these anymore, not in this condition,” Elijah said. Jesse moved toward the fridge and pulled the heavy latch to open it. He felt a rush of cold air on his arms, noted that the fridge was clean and in working order, and then closed the door.

Elijah led them down a narrow hallway plastered with yellow wallpaper, into a small pink-tiled bathroom, and then toward the two bedrooms at the end of the hall, one across from the other. “The master is on the left. It’s bigger and has a bathroom attached,” Elijah said. Both bedrooms had two windows each, and there was another one at the end of the hall. Jesse watched Elijah and Ruth move out of the master and into the other bedroom, disturbing the dust particles floating in the hallway light.

Ruth’s eyes grew wider with every low-ceilinged, baseboardless room, at every window that threw the sun onto the house’s austere features, at every object that checked off another box from her wish list. He could see it in the way she kept fidgeting with that naked finger on her left hand. She was sold. She was planning.

Jesse thought about their first anniversary. They'd been dating for a year, so he wanted to do something special. He'd taken her to a drive-in movie. She'd never been before, and neither had he, but there was one still open just across the state line. They watched a superhero movie, the sounds of villainous threats and heroic battles blaring through his car's busted speakers, their fingers intertwined and resting on the console.

In the light of the moon and the projected movie screen, and in the warmth of his car with the heat on low and her hand in his and her head resting against his shoulder, he felt content. Her breaths were deep and steady, and her hair smelled like vanilla and hair spray, and she looked peaceful. It was the first time he'd thought, *I could marry this girl.*

He'd believed himself—really, he had—and he'd felt relieved.

A year ago, the man in the bar with the fake ID bar top had looked at Jesse in the mirror and smiled at him. It was a warm smile. He laughed when Jesse broke eye contact to sip his beer.

"What's this man drinking?" he asked the approaching bartender, nodding toward Jesse.

"PBR. One dollar each tonight."

"Disgusting," he said. "Get us both something that costs more than five dollars." The bartender disappeared below the bar and reemerged with two Coronas, a slice of lime stuck in the top of each.

“None of our beers are more than five dollars,” the bartender said, taking his money.

The man slid a bottle over to Jesse. “What’s your name?” he asked. Not to the Jesse beside him—to the other one. The one in the mirror. Both men looked straight ahead, talking to reflections.

“Jesse. You?”

“Saul.”

“Thanks for the beer, Saul.”

“No problem. You look fucking miserable. PBR couldn’t have been helping.”

The two men talked about politics and how the Electoral College makes no sense, about football and the Patriots and Tom Brady and last year’s super bowl, and about climate change and how the world is done for. The bartender brought them another round of Coronas, and then another. They talked about the instruments Saul played—drums, guitar, and harmonica—and how Jesse had tried and failed to teach himself a few basic chords on the guitar. It was F major that had really given him trouble. And he didn’t know how bar chords were even slightly plausible. Saul offered to help him out if he ever felt like picking it back up.

Saul still hadn’t looked over at him, but Jesse felt him inch closer. He’d felt the soft denim of Saul’s jeans brush against the skin of his exposed knee. He didn’t mind all that much.

As Ruth asked Elijah whether he thought they could fit a queen-sized bed in the second bedroom, Jesse felt nausea bloom in his stomach. Again, he thought back

to his lunch and wondered if the chicken had been spoiled. He inhaled and exhaled. His eyes darted to the cracked bathroom door down the hall.

Elijah led them back down the hallway, out the rear door, and onto a screened-in porch. There were long tears in parts of the screen, the polyester hanging like a wilted flower, petal edges curling in. Beyond, the yard lay empty except for a pile of discarded furniture—a TV stand, a coffee table, a crib. They seemed to melt with the rain, legs bending closer and closer to muddy earth.

“Peaceful, isn’t it?” Elijah asked.

“Jess, can’t you see us sitting out here at night? Listening to the record player and grilling out with neighbors?”

“Sure,” Jesse said. He felt a chill. The screen blocked most of the mist, but there was still a crisp wind blowing in with the rain. His head throbbed, and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He craved a drink of water.

He’d bought her the record player for their third anniversary. She’d mentioned wanting one a few times in the weeks prior. He listened to her, he really did. That night they combed through dusty cardboard boxes stacked five high in her parents’ attic. She pulled out the music she’d grown up with, the same music her parents became adults with: Bowie, The Who, Fleetwood Mac, especially *Rumours*. They danced to “I Don’t Want to Know,” jumping around the attic trying not to knock anything over, Jesse stealing a kiss during the instrumental.

Ruth went back inside to check again that the closets were big enough, but Jesse didn’t move. Elijah asked, “How do you feel about this one? Is this the one?”

“I think she loves it,” Jesse said, staring ahead of him.

“What about you?” Elijah asked.

Jesse thought for a second. “We’ve been together for a long time. I try and make her happy.”

They hadn’t had a fourth anniversary. She’d broken up with him the week before. They ‘d just graduated with plans to stay where they were and get another degree, to live in their same two apartments and buy groceries at the same Kroger and take different classes in the same buildings. But he’d decided that’s not what he wanted to do. Instead, he told her he was going to take a year off. Find a job in town. Maybe two jobs. Save some money. Read more books.

“But if you take a year off, I’ll be a year ahead of you,” she’d said. “That just won’t work.”

“What about our futures?” she’d asked.

“What about *our future*?” she’d asked.

A week and a half later they were back together, buying textbooks at the campus bookstore, about to start a two-year masters program with plans to teach after graduation, to go wherever they could both find jobs, to move in together probably, to buy a house together if it made sense. By then, it’d make sense. They’d get married eventually.

Elijah turned toward Jesse, brows furrowed. “You alright, man?”

Jesse looked at Elijah, really looked at him for the first time since they’d arrived at the house. He’d grown out his beard, and his button-up was still a little wet from his jog to the porch—he hadn’t worn a coat. He’d unbuttoned his top button and cuffed his sleeves, and he stood with his hands in the pockets of navy

slacks. He was taller than Jesse, and thicker, too. He looked solid, strong. He carried himself the same way Saul had.

Jesse looked away. "I'm good, thanks," he said, bringing the back of his hand to his mouth and swallowing. He walked through the door and back into the kitchen. He wandered over to the sink, placed a hand on either side of it, and leaned forward, his head hanging low. Ruth appeared beside him and hopped onto the Formica countertop.

"What do you think?" she asked. Blue light from the window over the sink fell onto her hair, highlighting her blonde curls and her brown roots. Her face was shadowed, but there was a glint in her eyes. She glanced at Jesse, waiting.

He reached and turned the faucet on. For a second, nothing happened, and then brown water gurgled out. He let it run. "Honestly, it's a shithole."

"What? No! It's amazing." She twisted the knob and turned the water off. "Think of what we could do here!"

"I don't think this is the right one for us, Ruth. There's too much to fix. It's too far gone."

"No no no, it's not. It's *rustic*. What's that they always say about old houses? Good bones? It's got good bones."

His stomach turned over, and he closed his eyes, waiting for the feeling to pass. She didn't seem to notice the pained expression on his face. "But Ruth, it would take us forever, and we're not going to have that much extra money. Not with our first year salaries and a mortgage."

"Think about it, Jess. Good bones!"

For their fifth anniversary, he'd bought her a Polaroid camera. Not one of those new ones with the tiny film. It was an old one. He'd found it on E-bay.

She took pictures of him, and she took pictures of them, and she waved them around the room to speed their development so that she could see her life in a white frame. She'd tape them to her wall, mail them to her aunts in Michigan, paste them into a scrapbook she'd pass down to her and Jesse's kids.

Ruth liked old things, the stuck-in-time things.

A year ago at the bar with the bar top made of every fake ID they'd ever confiscated, Jesse had felt Saul's knee against his and leaned into it. He'd pulled out his wallet to pay for more beers—they'd started alternating rounds—and found one of the polaroids Ruth had given him. It was a picture of the two of them from their senior year of undergrad, and she'd folded it into a smaller square so he could carry it in his wallet. He slid the picture into the pocket with his ID and pushed the wallet back into his shorts. Then, looking up at Saul in the mirror, he'd asked Saul, "Saul, you ever felt stuck?"

"What do you mean stuck?"

"You know, just stuck?"

"One time I got in a real bad car wreck."

"Uh, huh?"

"Wasn't drunk, wasn't texting, wasn't doing a damn thing wrong. This car just pulled out in front of me on the highway, and I jerked the wheel to the left and ended up in the median, upside down in the grass. I was wearing my seatbelt, so I

stayed put, but everything crunched into me on every side. Steering wheel was in my chest, my head was up against the roof, and my door was pressed against my arm. I couldn't move." Saul paused for a second and took a swig of his beer.

"Shit," Jesse said.

"Yeah. I just had to sit there. People came and checked on me and made sure I was alive, and I wasn't even bleeding or nothing, but they couldn't get me out. I heard some sirens and saw some lights. I kept thinking I was smelling smoke and the car had caught on fire and it was gonna blow. I started screaming once or twice, started screaming my head off. This woman was on her stomach on the grass beside my window trying to get me to calm down. She reached in through the window and rubbed my cheek so I'd stop screaming."

"How'd they get you out?" Jesse asked.

"Had to bring in the jaws of life. They had to rip apart the whole fucking car just to drag me out." Saul downed the rest of his beer. Jesse did, too.

With Ruth in front of him and Elijah probably listening from the screened-in porch hoping to finally sell them a house, Jesse thought about the jaws of life and good bones and polaroid pictures.

"Ruth..."

"We could fix it up all by ourselves. Our little project, one room a year. We'll start with the living room since that's what you walk into first. Then our bedroom. Then the kitchen. Then after a few years, maybe we could do something more creative with the guest bedroom?"

She grabbed his hand. She placed it on her stomach. She smiled up at him.

“Ruth, I don’t—“

“Jess, come *on*. This place is perfect for us. Can’t you feel it?”

Jesse couldn’t feel what Ruth was feeling, but he could feel warmth creeping into his esophagus, could feel saliva drowning his tongue.

He swallowed. “Oh no,” he muttered.

Jesse lurched out of the kitchen, down the hall, and into the bathroom. Gripping the edge of the vanity, knuckles white, chest heaving, he looked up at himself in the mirror.

In the mirror from the bar a year ago, Jesse let himself do something he’d always tried not to do, something he’d always told himself he couldn’t do. He looked at Saul in the mirror and noticed how his smile was slightly crooked, the right corner of his lips rising a quarter of an inch higher than the left. He noticed how smooth his hands were and how his beard had been neatly trimmed and combed. He noticed the gold necklace Saul wore around his neck, and he noticed there were two charms—a cross and a crescent moon—hanging from the chain. As Saul removed his leather jacket and placed it on the bar top, he noticed how Saul’s t-shirt clung to his chest and his arms and that he wore his watch on his right wrist, the same way Jesse wore his.

In the mirror, he didn’t have to feel bad about thinking Saul was a handsome man. In the mirror, he didn’t have to avoid looking at handsome men, the way he always had.

A different world had existed in that mirror. It seemed like a better world. He thought maybe he could live there.

In the mirror, Jesse watched Saul turn to his right. He felt Saul's hand on his back, its touch light and inviting.

*Look at him.*

Taking a deep breath, Jesse turned.

Saul was sitting there beside him, his jaw resting in the palm of his hand, his smile crooked and warm, and his knee still against Jesse's. But seeing him in person, face to face instead of through the mirror, was different.

*What are you doing?*

*What the hell are you doing?*

Jesse felt nauseous and tried to go back to the place he'd just been, the place where he'd felt lighter. He looked back toward the mirror. It might as well have been shattered.

*Ruth.*

*Breathe.*

*Get his hand off your fucking back.*

*Ruth Ruth Ruth Ruth—*

In the mirror, they'd been in a different place with different rules, a world in reverse. That place was gone now. They were sitting in the dingy bar with the fake ID bar top and dim, orange overhead lights.

"I'm sorry," Jesse said, standing, almost knocking over his barstool. "I need to go."

“Wait, what’s wrong?” Saul asked, crooked smile falling away.

“I’m sorry.”

He’d run out of the bar. He’d run back to his car at the edge of the parking lot. He’d sat there crying until the rest of the parking lot gradually emptied out. He’d slept in his car, too drunk to drive home. The next day he’d called Ruth and asked if she’d had a good night at work.

Back in the bathroom of the little white house, Jesse vomited into the sink. Once his stomach stopped convulsing, he wiped his mouth on his sleeve and looked up at himself in the mirror. There was still a piece of corn on his chin.

Elijah whispered something in the living room, sounding concerned.

“Oh, I think he’s fine,” Ruth said. “I love it. Don’t you?”

“Yeah, I think it’s everything you two have been looking for.”

“Can you imagine what we could do here?” Ruth asked.

Jesse reached up and placed a hand flat against the mirror. It was cool to the touch.

*Can you?*

With his other hand, he wiped away the corn on his chin, flicking it into the sink.

*Can you?*

*Hey Mom, do you remember when I told you that when I grew up I'd make sure I saved enough money so that my kids could go to whatever college they wanted and you started crying? I don't remember when I said that. It must've been before the expensive schools mailed me rejection letters. I don't think I would've said it if I'd known I hadn't gotten into any of them. Do you remember throwing your chair back and running from the table and slamming your bedroom door behind you, leaving me there feeling like shit? I didn't understand that I'd basically said you and Dad hadn't done enough for me. Dad watched the whole thing. He didn't yell or cry, but he did look sad. I remember sitting in my room later that night and hearing your house shoes clapping against the wooden stairs. I remember you telling me how much I'd hurt your feelings, how you and Dad had always made the choices you thought were best for Shea and me, how you would always make the choices you thought were best for us. You told me you'd tried to give me everything I ever wanted. "Look around," you said. "Look at everything you have." I think it was the first adult conversation we ever had. Do you remember after the first adult conversation we ever had when I started crying and you held me in your arms on my bedroom floor? I was thinking about all the times I've ever disappointed you and I was crying because I knew I'd never stop disappointing you in some ways. I don't want to disappoint you. I'm not trying to disappoint you.*

## Extraction

I feel slow and everything is soft. I close my eyes and rub my fingers in circles over the cloth seats of Mom's Altima. The fibers are short and smooth and bristly and warm from the sun shining through the windshield. She wanted leather. Why didn't she get leather? She'd also wanted a sunroof. I open my eyes and glance upward. No sunroof! Why not? The roof is cloth too, so I reach up and touch it. It's not as soft as the seat, but it is soft.

"Charlie, what are you doing?"

"Mom, did you know everything is soft?" I say through a mouth of gauze.

"What about the windows?" she asks. I reach for the glass beside me and tap my knuckles against it. Then I spread my fingers like I'm going to trace a turkey onto a piece a paper, and I push my palm into the glass, waiting for something to give. It doesn't, but the window is cool against my skin. Cool is a kind of soft.

"You're drooling again." I lower my brows and look to the left. She reaches over and wipes my chin with a wad of toilet paper.

I appreciate my mother for accompanying me on this journey. She's very nice. She understands insurance, which I believe to be an admirable quality in a person. She also knows how to order prescriptions and remembers which pharmacy to use and knows how much everything is supposed to cost, and if something costs more than she thinks it should, she argues about insurance. And she has a debit card that takes money out of a bank account that is not mine! Sometimes she uses that card to buy me food, and get this: the card knows that the food is for me, but it still doesn't take money out of my account. Amazing. She doesn't mind wiping drool from my

chin because I am her son and she gave birth to me. My mom is nice. I bet she's soft too. I almost reach over and touch her cheek. It's got more wrinkles than it did a few years ago. I bet they make her cheek even softer. I don't reach over and touch her cheek. That might be weird. I reach up and touch my cheek and can only kind of feel the weight of my fingers.

"Where are my teeth?" I ask because I feel like that's something I should know.

"The surgeon kept them."

My mouth drops open, and I stop myself from saying "what the fuck" because my mom is in the car and she's never heard me say "fuck" so for all she knows I don't say "fuck." I've never heard her say "fuck" either. My dad says "damn" and "I don't give a rat's ass" sometimes. I remember Jarvis telling me, "Keep your mouth closed, man. Just keep it closed." Jarvis didn't tell me it'd be impossible to close my mouth because of all the gauze the nurse stuffed in there.

"Excuse me?" I say instead. "Call 911."

"Why?" she says at the end of an exhale.

"There's been a theft."

"Honey, nobody gets to keep their wisdom teeth after they're removed."

"Nobody told me that." Theft is not soft. Theft is hard and rough.

Mom sits erect behind the wheel, not leaning into the back of her seat, holding tight to ten and two. Her lips are thinner than usual. She keeps glancing at me from the corner of her eye and breathing in irregular patterns. I wonder why she seems so tense when everything else is soft and warm. I wonder why she reaches to

adjust the radio volume every minute or so when I know she isn't listening to the NPR broadcaster droning on in his important old white man voice. Is she okay? Is she annoyed? Am I bothering her with my gauze and my drool and my questions and my touching?

"Where's Jarvis?" I ask.

"We told you, honey. It wouldn't have made sense for Jarvis to take you to your surgery. There's no reason I can't take care of you."

"Jarvis is a very capable young man who would have done a fine job of—" I stop because the gauze is trying to fall out of my mouth and I think that would be bad and gross for everyone.

"There was no reason for it. Sit back and be quiet. I don't want you to start bleeding again." I cross my arms over my chest and blow air in and out of my mouth, tasting the soggy sterile slightly metallic cotton.

I want to tell her Jarvis was just trying to be a good friend that he was just trying to make me feel better about the surgery I'd been putting off for three years that could not be put off any longer those were strict orders from my lifetime dentist/orthodontist who spent a significant amount of my childhood and a large chunk of my dad's wallet straightening my teeth in the first place and I could not continue letting my wisdom teeth mess it all up just because I was afraid of surgery which is a dumb fear anyway why didn't you just call the oral surgeon the first time Dr. Rowan gave you that referral form that last part was my mom.

Jarvis told me last week, "It's not as bad as you think. I was nervous too, but you'll have control. You won't tell her anything she doesn't need to know."

But I'm mad because Mom told me to stop talking and honestly I do a lot of not talking around her. It's turned into a thoroughly exhausting exercise. "Who are you going to Nashville with?" she'll ask, and I'll respond, "Oh, you know my friend so and so I've told you about him." And I don't want her to push the questions further because that would make things more difficult, but I do want her to push the questions further because shouldn't she care? Shouldn't she be more curious? I can tell she has more questions, but she never asks them. "You and so and so went and saw that movie with Lucy and Ethan?" she'll ask, and I'll say, "Yeah, it was a really good movie. You should go see it." I won't bother tacking on any extra information like "we're all just good friends we've been seeing movies together since way before Lucy and Ethan started dating," because that's just a defense to a question she won't vocalize. She won't ask if it was weird that we kind of went on a double date because, well, that's what she's thinking, and it's the kind of thing that exists only as a thought because in any other form it is too dangerous. Kind of like how my thought—"tell her Charlie go on just tell her"—has existed only as a thought for several years. Several years of dangerously important thoughts contained in cells in our brains in our heads on our bodies in the same car in the same house when at one time my brainheadbody was inside of hers! There's a lot of not talking between my mom and me.

"How much did I weigh when I was born?" I ask. I know I've seen the number before. Somewhere on my laminated birth certificate held onto the refrigerator door with a pig-shaped magnet. The magnet pig is pink and has a curly tail. Real pigs don't look like that.

“Seven pounds, nine ounces.”

“Now I weigh 140 pounds after I eat.” Mom turns the NPR man up a little and keeps her eyes on the road. “Secrets weigh a lot,” I whisper through the gauze. I don’t know if she heard me. She doesn’t act like she did.

There was one time when I sent my mom a text message that read, “Can I go on a spring break trip to Chicago with Terrence?” Terrence was my best friend and roommate who dated boys, and my parents disliked him because he was rude to his mom and sometimes didn’t pay our bills on time, and probably because he dated boys. My mom replied to that message with a question she must have dug out of her cell of thoughts: “Did Terrence have anything to do with you and Sofia breaking up?” At last! A daring question! Something honest and direct. This was uncharted territory. The bravery it must have taken! The courage she must’ve summoned to type the letters one by one with her index finger, poking at her phone screen, holding it close to her face and looking over the rims of her turtle shell glasses. The consternation that must’ve consumed her lips as she bit them from the inside and pressed send. The relief she must’ve felt when I replied, “No?” and the doubt she probably smothered somewhere deep, deep enough that she could tuck it safely away back into its cell with all the other hazardous thoughts, where she could forget about it and feel proud that she’d asked, that she’d confronted the elephant in the room, that she was a mother who knew how to talk to her son. Had she felt proud?

I’d been scared. I’d said no because it was half the truth. Why hadn’t I told her the other half?

Jarvis said he remembers the drive home after his wisdom teeth surgery. Sure, he laughed at how aggressively red stop signs are and asked his mom why traffic lights weren't green for everyone always so that people could get around faster, but he knew where he was and whom he was with and what could and couldn't be said in the context of the situation. I know too. But I also know what my mom knows she knows and doesn't want to know.

"Mom, do you remember that year for Christmas when you got me the box set of Harry Potter books that came in the cardboard trunk?"

"I remember. You were in fifth grade. It was hard to wrap because it was so heavy."

"I really loved that present. It was a good present."

"Good, I'm glad." She smiles a little at the car in front of us.

"Mom?"

"Yeah?" she says, looking over at me, probably to check that I'm not drooling again.

"That trunk is still in my closet. It has vodka bottles in it from high school. That's where I hid them."

"Okay." Her tone is steady. She doesn't sound angry or surprised or cheated into believing her son's innocence had been protected while he was under her roof.

"They're Smirnoff brand. At least four empty bottles."

"Okay," she says.

"Did you know about that?" I ask.

"No."

“Don’t you have any questions about it?”

“Not really,” she says. “Is there anything else you’d like to say about it?”

“Yes, Mom.” I sit into the vowel a little, let it roll off my crowded tongue and fill the empty space between us. “There’s a lot else I’d like to say about it. Don’t you wanna ask when I started drinking? Who I had my first drink with? How often I lied to you about it? Isn’t that stuff you’re s’posed to know?”

“I’m not sure, Charlie. I try not to get too much into your business. I’d rather you come to me.”

“Frankly, that’s just inconsiderate of you,” I say, and then I hold my mouth open a few inches to squeeze the gauze back into place.

“How is that inconsiderate of me?” she says, her voice rougher, hard unlike everything else which is soft.

“It just is, Mom.”

“Nope. You wanted to talk, Charlie. Let’s talk. What do you want to say?”

This is what I’d been afraid of. This is why I’d asked if Jarvis could take me to the surgeon and drive me home and administer my pain medications and watch over me during my state of vulnerability. This is what I’d tried to avoid. But Jarvis told me this wouldn’t happen. He said I’d know when to shut my mouth. He said I’d know.

I don’t think he was wrong. I just think that maybe the cages containing all the scary words in my brain unlocked and swung open a long time ago. Those words haven’t been trapped in there like they once were. They just hadn’t wandered out yet. Maybe they drifted through the opening in the bars sometime while the surgeon

was cutting into my jaw. Maybe they're running through my insides right now. Maybe that scratch in the back of my throat is one of them scaling my esophagus with a pointed grappling hook planted in my tongue.

"I just...why don't you ever have questions, Mom? Huh?"

"I ask you questions all the time, Charlie."

"Not real ones! You don't ever ask me the real ones! The ones you want to ask me. The ones we're both thinking about all the time. I know you think about them all the time!"

"Charlie, I don't—"

"What about every night before you go to bed when you pull out your phone and you open that app that shows you where me and Dad are and Dad's blue dot is right over yours and my blue dot is not at my apartment and sometimes when you wake up at three a.m. and can't fall back to sleep you pull it up and check again and my blue dot is in the same place which is still not my apartment. Why don't you ask? Why do you never ask?" I feel a sharp pain in my jaw and take a deep breath through my nose.

"It doesn't work like that. That's not how communication works."

"Don't talk to me about communication, Mom. What about when you asked if Terrence had anything to do with me and Sofia breaking up and I just said no and you never asked me about it again? Why didn't you keep asking? Why won't you ever fucking ask me!"

Mom makes a right turn up a small slope, and I realize we're pulling into our driveway. She eases to a stop in front of the carport and pushes the Altima into park.

The sun still shines through the passenger window onto cloth seats that absorb warmth and push it into my skin through my jeans. My face is wet with salty tears that run down my cheeks and burn my cracked lips. Drool slides down my chin into patches of stubble I trim to the shortest length possible. Mom unbuckles, turns in her seat, and grabs my hand. Her gray eyes are wide and wet.

“Baby, why did I have to ask? I didn’t think you wanted me to ask.” She wipes at my face—careful, gentle—with her other hand. “But I’m listening. I’m listening. I’ve always been listening.”

*Hey Mom and Dad and Shea do you remember when I asked if I could go to New York City for two weeks for a special leadership program you thought was too expensive and I'd never been on a plane before or gone that far away alone and Dad you always said I wasn't going anywhere that you couldn't hop in your truck and drive to come get me and there are bridges to Manhattan but you saw the word island and said, "I can't drive out there if you need me." You didn't want to let me go. Do you remember? Mom you looked at me and said you didn't know if Dad could handle me being gone for that long and Shea you looked at me and said why do you wanna go to New York anyway? Dad I didn't see you cry but whenever the topic came up you got misty eyed and stopped talking for a while before you eventually walked out of the room. Finally one night you called me down and held a quarter in your palm and told me to pick heads or tails and if I got it right then you'd let me go. I hated you for it because I thought it was dumb and I didn't want to say neither heads nor tails because who flips a coin to make that kind of decision? You closed your palm and said well then you're not going and I said heads and you threw it in the air and I whispered a prayer and it bounced around our red brick floors that were always so cold and it landed on heads and I couldn't believe it I really couldn't. Then you said you were gonna let me go regardless of what it landed on but I should keep that quarter cause it must be lucky.*

*Yeah. I kept it.*

## Desire Lines

We are walking through the woods. It seems like we are always walking through the woods. The air is thick and soupy, almost like you could scoop it with a ladle and pour it out into bowls, divvy it up into breath-sized portions—

*wait mom and dad do you remember ellie, you know, the girl in my grade who went to that baptist church in town where the preacher tells the families if they should take a promotion at work and whether or not they can marry this person they might love? do you remember how ellie could never come to our senior parties because they were called parties and there was always music and dancing and at that one before spring break there was alcohol but I don't think you knew that but that's why I kept going outside to my car. do you remember me telling you that ellie met a boy and wanted to date him but wasn't allowed even though she was almost twenty and she dated him anyway and then her parents kicked her out? I don't know if they made that choice or if the preacher did. remember when you asked where she was living and what she was doing and I told you she'd been staying with her grandparents until she and her boyfriend found a place together? you asked if she ever talked to her parents or if they ever talked to her and I said I don't know but I don't think so. do you remember what you said next? do you? dad you spit out air like you do when you're disgusted and you said no no that's not what parents do that's not what we're here to do and mom you shook your head and said there's nothing you or shea could ever do that would make us put you out there's nothing in the world more important to me than having a relationship with my kids do you remember? do you? I do. I think about it sometimes.*

*I think about it a lot.*

## Desire Lines

We are walking through the woods. It seems like we are always walking through the woods. The air is thick and soupy, almost like you could scoop it with a ladle and pour it out into bowls, divvy it up into breath-sized portions. It hangs heavy under the branches of elm trees and over a dense layer of greenery and fallen brush. We tread a familiar path through dead leaves and around rotting logs.

“Did you know William Faulkner didn’t want to be remembered?” It’s a question, but it’s not. Micah doesn’t ask it like it’s a question. He says it like a statement.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“All that great American author, Nobel Prize-winning BS didn’t mean anything to him. He said he wished he’d never put his name on anything he wrote. ‘He wrote the books and he died.’ That’s what he said he wanted.”

I’d visited him at work before. I’d read the quote. Faulkner actually said “made”—he made the books and he died. I don’t correct him.

“But instead he got his house turned into a museum,” I reply.

“Can’t always get what you want.” I can see his grin out of the corner of my eye.

We’ve walked this path almost every day this summer. It connects his childhood home with my childhood home, the pair of them separated by half a mile of wooded land.

“Did you know that in theaters the trailers used to play after the movie? That’s why it’s called a trailer,” he says.

“Do you know how big a difference there is between a million seconds and a billion seconds? A million seconds is only eleven days, but a billion seconds is like 31 years,” he says.

Micah isn't showing off—he's pouring out all the information he thinks is worth remembering. He has a bad memory, so I absorb the knowledge he imparts. He leaves it hanging in the muggy wilderness, and I collect it for him, file it away for safekeeping.

Micah bends over and removes a limb that's fallen onto the path. He lobs it into a patch of thorny undergrowth to our right and then wipes his hands clean against the legs of his faded jeans.

When we were kids, the stretch of woods separating our houses was our kingdom. We ruled it together. At first we fought over who would be the king and what that would make the other, but then we decided the kingdom needed two kings. Why not? I ruled the animals—all of them except for the birds, which flew and nested in his territory. Micah ruled the trees and the air. He liked climbing, liked to be high up, liked to look down at his kingdom and make grand declarations about the state of it. “The elms and the magnolias agreed to a peace treaty yesterday, so now the northern cardinals can nest in both of them,” he'd say. “Kudzu, our most dangerous enemy, has been contained in the North. We should be safe for a while,” he'd say. Likewise, I'd fill him in on the wellbeing of our subjects. “The mosquitoes have broken their agreement to stop reproducing, but I've granted them a reprieve because they promise not to venture beyond the trees,” I'd say. “The squirrels have

completed their annual storage of nuts and are awaiting the arrival of winter,” I’d say.

We fashioned a fort out of the biggest tree in the middle of the forest. Its trunk was wide enough that Micah and I could stand on opposite sides, wrap our arms around the bark, and not be able to touch hands. The base had been hollowed out by time and animals and bacteria—my dad studied trees in college—creating a small shelter that I claimed as my chamber. I used rocks to carve words and pictures into the heartwood. Micah sat there with me sometimes, planning projects that needed to be done around the kingdom. But mostly he preferred to climb. A protruding knot the size of a softball provided him a path to the lowest branch, which he’d pull himself up to, straddle for a minute while scouting his preferred route, and then stand on to reach the next branch, to climb higher. I never followed him up the tree. My stomach flipped at the thought of looking down from that height.

“Did you know that Mississippi didn’t officially ratify the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment until 2013?” he asks.

“Did you know that J.K. Rowling lost her billionaire status because she gave so much money to charity?” he asks. File under: female idols.

When Micah and I were thirteen, I could hardly fit into my heartwood chamber alone, much less with Micah. I still didn’t want to climb the trees, but I could jump up and reach the lowest branch without using the knot. I’d hang there sometimes, swinging with the momentum of my legs, daring myself to pull, to sit up there, to be brave. I never tried it.

Micah didn't talk about the trees and the birds and the kingdom with as much enthusiasm. I guess I didn't either. We never really said it, never officially brought it to a capital "e" End, but we stopped meeting in the middle of the woods. We stopped ruling the kingdom. Instead, I walked through the woods to his house every day after school. We did homework. We played video games—the racing ones, not the shooting ones, because his parents didn't like those. We kicked a soccer ball back and forth in the front yard. His parents let me stay for dinner whenever I wanted.

My mom didn't like that I spent so much time at his house. "Do they smoke? Drink?" she asked. I shook my head no. "Are they Christian?" she asked.

"I think so."

"If you don't know for sure, then they're not the same kind of Christians we are."

"What kind of Christians are we?" I asked.

"The real kind."

In the distance, a doe slinks through the trees, closely followed by her fawn. Micah and I stop walking to admire them. The doe stops as well and turns her head to look at us. We lock eyes for a second before she bolts, her young sprinting after her on toothpicks.

"How are the deer these days?" he asks.

"There's this bobcat that keeps threatening some of their babies, so they're a little on edge."

"That's unfortunate," he says. "The trees haven't fought any wars recently, so I must've done a better job than you. Left things alright..."

I elbow him in the arm, and he pulls away laughing. Micah bends over and picks up a rock from the dust. He throws it into the air, high and straight ahead of us. I hear it crashing through tree limbs, hear a solid thump as it lands out of sight.

“Did you know that Mother Teresa doubted her faith? Like, she did all of that work for the poor in the name of Jesus, but she wrote a bunch of letters talking about how she couldn’t feel God anymore.”

“No, I didn’t know that,” I say.

“Yeah, she wanted the letters to be destroyed when she died, but the Church refused. She wrote about not feeling God for the last 40 or 50 years of her life.”

“Then how is she still a saint?” I ask.

“The Church decided that even though she doubted God’s existence, she never lost faith, and she never stopped doing the work she thought she was on Earth to do. They called her a hero.”

“Sounds sad to me,” I say.

The summer after we stopped ruling the kingdom, my mom heard a rumor about Micah. She heard that when the two of us went to a weeklong camp just across the state line, he’d been caught kissing another boy by the lake after midnight. She heard the rumor in the grocery store from her friend Anne whose sister Staci’s son Jared was at the camp with us, in the same cabin as Micah.

“Did you know this happened while y’all were there?”

“No,” I said. “We weren’t in the same cabin.”

“He’s never tried to...to do anything or kiss you, has he?” she asked me.

“No, Mom. I don’t even think that rumor is true.”

“What do you mean it’s not true? Anne’s sister Staci’s son Jared *saw* it!”

“Whatever...”

“Hey! Don’t say ‘whatever’ to your mom!” Dad said from across the room.

“You’re not going back over to his house,” Mom said, pointing her finger to the wall in the direction of the woods.

“Mom!”

She glared at my dad.

“You don’t want anything to do with a pervert, son.”

Both Mom and Dad started hovering. I kept seeing him though. I couldn’t go over to his house anymore, couldn’t play videogames or kick a soccer ball or stay for dinner. I couldn’t even go for a walk in the woods without drawing suspicion. But for the rest of the summer, I waited until I could hear my dad’s soft snores from down the hall before gently flipping the latch on my bedroom window and raising it a few feet, just enough for me to slip out and land quietly on the grass outside. We met in the middle of our path. It was hard at first because we’d never been in the woods when it was that dark. By the end of the summer, I could walk it with my eyes closed, could make out a winding trail from between the shadows of trees, could feel the difference between trampled brush and wild forest on the soles of my feet.

When we met in the middle of our woods, he kissed me. Like he did beside the lake at camp, but less nervous. Less restrained. Less worried that someone might see us, that someone *had* seen us, that a boy from his cabin hadn’t been asleep yet when Micah snuck out. In our woods, we kissed like kings, like the royalty we’d

been, like no one—not the birds not the trees not the squirrels not the air—could challenge us.

“Did you know there are more fake flamingos on the earth than there are real ones?” he asks.

“Did you know that Leonardo DiCaprio was nominated for seven Oscars before he finally won?” He won best actor on his sixth nomination, but I don’t correct him. The afternoon is too quiet, the sun too low, the sky too orange through a patchwork of branches and leaves, for his mistake to matter.

Micah convinced his parents that the rumors were false, and I convinced my parents that I had no interest in speaking to him. We met in the woods every summer night and once or twice during the week after school started again. I saw him at school, too—in the halls, during lunch, in one or two classes. When we could drive, it got easier to see each other. To eat meals together. To see a movie at the theater. To feel normal.

Even then, we’d still meet in the woods. Something about it felt special, like it was our cut of the universe and no one else’s.

The night before I moved into my college dorm, my mom found a picture of us. I’d packed it into a book thinking it would be safe there. But she knocked the box off my bed and my books tumbled out onto my floor in a literary mess and the picture fell from between the pages of *Pride and Prejudice*. It was a picture Micah had taken of us. His arm was outstretched, entering the frame from the bottom left. He looked into the camera, smiling without teeth as I kissed his stubbly cheek.

Mom didn't say anything. She put the picture back into the book and put the books back into the box and sat the box back on the bed. The next day she helped me move into my dorm, only speaking when necessary—"Which box did you put the bedding in?" or "Where do you want this floor lamp?"

Dad didn't help me move in. He walked into the kitchen that morning and locked eyes with me, a forkful of scrambled egg whites halfway to my half-open mouth. He tried to say something. At least I think he tried. He opened his mouth just enough for air to pass through his lips, but no sound came out. He turned around and walked back into his bedroom.

"Did you know the Eiffel Tower grows like six inches taller in the summer? The heat makes the iron expand," he says.

"Did you know that Venice is sinking? It'll be completely under water in about 100 years," he says. File under: places to go before they die.

My mom told Micah's mom. They cried together and tried to figure out where they'd gone wrong, what they could've done different, why this was happening to them. His mom sent him to conversion therapy, and he went because he wanted her to know that he'd tried everything and still couldn't figure out why he'd always thought a kingdom could be just fine with two kings. My mom tried to send me to our pastor's office, but I wouldn't go. She yelled about it. My dad yelled about it. They hugged me on our living room floor and prayed yelled prayed yelled to God about it. I told them I loved them. I told them I wasn't going. I told them I'd talked to God about it enough and that the two of us were fine.

My parents dropped it, and they barely talked to me for a week, and then they started talking to me again. They didn't speak in quite the same tones; they didn't look at me quite the same way. Everything shifted. It was fine though. It was easier than lying. It was easier than walking on my toes, holding my breath every time they were around.

We graduate from college in two weeks, and then we are moving to Boston because I got into a graduate program and he found a job that is kind of related to his degree. Our parents aren't going with us to move, but they both agreed to pay a month's rent to help us get settled. Last night I opened Mom's laptop to run a quick Google search and found an open tab where she'd been looking for plane tickets from Memphis to Boston in late December.

We are still walking through the woods. The orange sky is fading, losing a bit of luster, but it isn't navy just yet. Micah reaches across the space between us and grabs my hand. His thumb is over mine, but that doesn't feel right, so we untangle our fingers and rethread them the other way. We're somewhere near the middle of the woods, near the tree with the big knot in the bark, the one I used to sit inside while he climbed up, up, up until he could see all of the trees, until he could almost make out the roofs of both our houses on either side of him.

"Do you know what a desire line is?" he asks.

"No." I shake my head.

"It's a path that people create by taking it. Like when a sidewalk on campus turns ninety degrees and you can see a line of worn down grass cutting off the angle.

It's faster to walk through the grass than to follow the sidewalk, so enough people do it and make a new path."

"Interesting."

"Yeah, they pop up all over the world in parks and on college campuses and mountain trails. They drive landscapers and planners crazy. No matter where sidewalks are placed or how clearly trails are marked, people always find some way that's easier or more convenient or more welcoming. And they walk it into existence."

"So they're like paths of least resistance," I say.

"Sometimes, but not really. Like park rangers will put up signs or build a fence or place a big rock at the start of a desire line to try and ward people away from it and keep them on the official trail, but it usually doesn't work. If they close up one path, another desire line will appear. People will go where they want to go even if they have to go a different way."

I think about my old walk from one class to another across a large area of grass and trees and rolling hills. The sidewalk led me a hundred feet to the left before allowing me to take a right and head toward my next class. I never took the sidewalk. In the rain, through the mud, even when the landscaping crew put up cones, I followed the footsteps of hundreds of students before me, those who carved out a walking path through the trees where there was none, where one made sense.

The school paved a new sidewalk a few months ago.

"Not a path of least resistance," I say. "A desire line."

"Yeah," he says, squeezing my hand in his.

We stand there in our woods. The middle of our woods. Our tree, our base, towers in front of us, taller than ever. The hollow opening in the trunk is dark with shadows, and I wonder if my drawings and my writings are still there carved into the heartwood, or has an animal or water or time rotted away evidence that I was there?

He leans over and kisses me on the lips. A mosquito buzzes in my ear, but I don't bother swatting it away.

"See you tomorrow?" he asks.

"Tomorrow," I nod.

He turns and walks toward his house. The ground is dry from the summer heat and lack of rain, and as he follows the winding dirt path through a forest of dark green foliage, he kicks up a miniature cloud of dust with each step.

I turn toward my house, and I see the same path spread out before me, leading me in the opposite direction through tree trunks and wild growth. The sky is veering toward navy now, the sun drifting further and further away to spread the day to places just waking up from the night. As I walk home, something about the dirt and dust beneath my feet feels right. Like it belongs there. Like it should've been there all along.

*Hey, Mom and Dad. Hey, Shea. Do you remember driving home from Cooke Memorial Baptist Church in the maroon Tahoe and listening to MercyMe's "I Can Only Imagine" on CD? Do you remember how much I loved that song? Mom, do you remember when you came to get me from children's church because Mr. Greg was going to sing it in big church and you knew I'd want to hear? Do y'all remember singing it in the maroon Tahoe, and do you remember sitting in the driveway with the Tahoe still cranked and the heat blowing—was it winter? I don't remember if it was winter—so that the song could replay and I'd have a chance to sing it by myself and see if I could hold that note for long enough? Do you remember the note? It was the last syllable of "imagine." I don't think I could hold it then. I don't think Shea could either. We had to stop, inhale, and keep going. You let us try, though. You sat in the driveway and listened to the song for the fourth time in a row just so I could try.*

*Did you think we'd be here now? Could you imagine this, then? I couldn't.*

*I can hold the note now. I tried it a few days ago. I was probably off key or flat or whatever. But I did it. Do you believe me? Do you want to hear it?*

*Listen.*