Learned Behaviors

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Learned Behaviors

A Short Story by

Tamera Bodrick
Learned Behaviors
To my mother
for putting her children first,
and for being both mother and father.

It’s because of you I’m here now.
You’ve done your best.
When tasked with coming up with an idea for my thesis, I was met with a wall. If I was speaking literally, it would’ve been a twelve-foot wall, blocks of dreary grey cement and aggregate stacked tall, meant to intimidate and discourage me. Though my degree is a part of the creative writing concentration, I’ve only taken three actual creative writing courses. The first was a creative non-fiction class which was fun and one of my favorites for the semester, but I quickly realized my life too uneventful and my memory too faulty for me to be able to write anything worth being read. The second I took was a playwriting class, which I took because I thought it would be like screenwriting which I had a vast interest in. It wasn’t. The third class I took, finally, was a fiction writing workshop. My professor was one of the best people I’d ever met—unabashed, inspiring, and unafraid to be unapologetic of her own work—and the four or five months I had in her class were entirely too short.

One thing that professor taught me was that I was good at working under prompts and utilizing them to refine my own ideas. The ten-minute exercises she gave us at the beginning of class inspired me to come up with some of my most unique characters and interesting set-ups. I had a habit, you see, of defaulting to the same three people and scenarios anytime I decided to write something new on my own time. I always went with what was familiar, what was easy, and what I knew I could do but, in that class, every time class started, I was challenged. Even though the helmet and kneepads and training
wheels were taken off, I never felt like I was being tossed to the dogs. I was being supported and encouraged every step of the way, even when what I wrote was bad.

So, when time came to sit down and decide on my thesis, I was met with that wall. The wall, for me, symbolized not just my own indecision and lack of confidence, it also symbolized academia. My thesis is meant to encompass my entire four years of my degree and this is when I’m meant to show off what I’ve learned, how I’ve grown, and what I can do and there was no one to give me a prompt. No one to hold my hand and encourage even my worst sentences.

My biggest struggle with my thesis was following through with my original idea. This was apparent from the beginning. My thesis, a short story about a trio of siblings who return to their mother’s home after her death to confront their previous years of abuse, originally started out as a story about a haunted house. A house whose hauntings reflected the mother’s own disastrous behavior and two siblings who disagreed on their own perception of the events that happened. The problem wasn’t that the idea wasn’t good or that there was no story there—the problem was with my own lack of confidence in the work. I drudged through it and didn’t know what I’d done or where I was going, and the idea ultimately failed.

Failure, as a writer, can be seen as a great opportunity to grow or it can be horribly demotivating. For me, it was the latter. I struggled with seeing myself as a writer comparable to my peers and kept trying to box my writing into a specific style that would lend itself to being worthy of an academic product as opposed to just writing something I
would enjoy. It was difficult to put myself into that mindset: to write for a purpose, to write to be seen. A wall.

But I started again, and this time decided to shape the story more around the family than the house, deeming the setting an unimportant background detail. Writing character driven stories wasn’t my forte—I tended to write novels, expansive and packed to the brim with plot—and knowing I only had twenty pages to tell a story, I knew plot would have to take the back burner but. even knowing this, my thesis advisor kept pointing out where there were questions unanswered. The questions were about the root of my characters that I hadn’t answered in favor of moving the plot along. She told me to stop working on the plot entirely and to only focus on my characters. So, I did. I started digging into them, trying to get to the root of them, of who they were beyond just words on a page, mere visages of defined hair color and shaped eyes with nothing beyond the surface.

For a while, it was hard because I couldn’t handle the most basic question: what does my main character want? I kept thinking he doesn’t want to be home. He wants to leave as soon as possible—as in the start of the story, he’s only just arriving there. But I knew it wasn’t a strong enough desire and I kept questioning why this was the story I wanted to tell.

Eventually, I realized I wasn’t writing a character, I was writing myself. A person who didn’t want to go home not only because of what it took from me, but because of what it didn’t give. For Tommy, the primary narrator, his biggest problem in the novel isn’t just fearing the home he’d lived in for six years and the trauma he’d accumulated,
but the image he’d built up of his family, the people who were meant to be his security and comfort and love, and the perception and perfection they couldn’t live up to.

Throughout the story, Tommy doesn’t acknowledge his own family for what they are. He’s hesitant to call his twin—Ren—*brother*, such as in the line:

“*Brother,*” Tommy says, as Ren turns to go. He’s not calling him; *Ren knows that. He’s trying the word on for size*. . .

“*Yes,*” Ren says, neither a question or an answer, but hope and the *ache of desire linger in his chest. But Tommy must not like the way brother sounds because he doesn’t say anything more.*

He’s even more resistant to acknowledging their adoptive sister as family.

“*Where do you think Freya is?*” Ren asked instead, not wanting to *talk about their mother anymore.*

“*Probably dead somewhere,*” Tommy said.

“*Don’t say that.*”

“*She didn’t come for us.*” He took another drink straight from the *bottle, welcomes the scorch straight from the source. “That’s all the matters.”*
Something must’ve shown on Ren’s face. Something Tommy didn’t like. Dubiety or dissent or desire. “She wasn’t family,” Tommy said and it’s final.

But Ren has a bit of a listening problem. “She was our sister.”

“They people weren’t our family.” He said, angrily. “They were signatures on a piece of a paper.”

At its core, though, Tommy’s denial of his siblings stems from the root of their problems—their mother. Their mother, as all parents are, is the glue that holds together the makings of a family, and throughout the novel each of the siblings have made attempts to distance themselves from her. Though given the name Freya as an orphan, the twins’ adoptive sister changed her name to Soyeon as she learned of her ethnic heritage and sought to remove herself from the life she had as a child.

Tommy reprimands his siblings for kneeling in a way reminiscent of the way their mother used to make them as children. They destroy the things in the house they grew up in, removing all physical ties to their childhood.

Tommy retained such an idealized version of what family is, and what it’s supposed to be, that once his siblings made a small mistake, it was hard for him to see them as family anymore. His complicated relationship with family at the start of the story is the byproduct of his mother’s abuse and his sister’s disappearance, all of it coming to head with Ren leaving him before the start of the novel. Tommy has to come to grips
with this idealized version of the people he loves not existing and that there was no way for them to go but down.

One work I’m inspired by consistently is Celeste Ng’s *Everything I Never Told You*. Similar to my own work, *Everything I Never Told You* starts with a dead family member, but the story isn’t about the mystery, the whodunnit, but rather about the interconnectedness of the family and how their relationships change in the aftermath of a death. Death can bring people together or it can drive people apart.

There’s this one line in the novel that always stuck with me in all of its raw truthfulness and one that I hoped to carry over into my own writing. “What made something precious? Losing it and finding it (Ng)”. Tommy loses his brother, his sister, his mother, and himself and though there’s no set conclusion, at the end, there is a promise of finding something he’d once lost. Maybe a brother. Maybe a sister. Or maybe even a family.
Home is where the heart is and when Tommy steps onto the threshold between safe and home, he feels his heart for the first time in two years. It kickstarts in his chest, vicious against his ribs, too fast and stuttering. It’s a learned behavior, he knew that. He’d spent months squatting in homes just like this one—counterfeit cabin homes hugged by conifer and bramble and lakes dug by man. They were harmless; the only thing dangerous about them were the black widows, nests like tacky Halloween decorations, that holed up in corners and doorways, but Tommy spent enough nights sleeping in basements to prefer arachnids to people.

But his mother fucking Pavlov’d him. Conditioned him to associate this doorway—the sight of ragged, moth eaten curtains hanging crooked from the windows, indefinitely drawn shut, the outgassing of old, rotting furniture—with fear. If he closed his eyes, he’d be fifteen again, standing in the corner of the living room until the days began to blend together, until the sheer weight of his body felt like someone tied bricks to
his knees and pushed him into the water and he had to fight to keep his head above water. Until the strain on his bladder hurt more than trying to keep himself held upright and after a day—maybe two, he couldn’t remember—someone had to carry him to the bathtub, because he had been in too much pain to sit on the toilet.

That was before Mother conditioned him to fear bathtubs.

He could feel it creeping up on him, panic biting gnats stuck in his esophagus, buzzing against his throat and struggling to get out but no matter how many times he swallowed, he couldn’t get it down. He was about to turn to go when it shifted. Something was burning, and a sour, acrid smell drifted across the room. He was about to run, this time for a different reason, when someone stepped out of the room. He didn’t recognize Freya at first. It’d been two years and family wasn’t exactly a word he’d use to describe them. They looked nothing like—her skin was a milky pale and his a dull, earthy brown. Her hair was pin straight, falling past her shoulders and longer than it had ever been before, their mother choosing to crop it just under her ears to keep vying eyes from tempting, corrupting her only daughter. The only thing they shared were the battle scars, unmistakable reminders that they were their mother’s children.

She had a scar under her eye, Tommy knew, from the whip of a belt. It was only a mumble under her breath, the small complaint of a teenager growing into a world built too small for her, and then leather cracked and mother got too reckless—too angry—and the prong caught the delicate skin under Freya’s eyes and tore it open. All that’s left there now, though, is a scar and a memory.
She was wearing a navy-blue pullover too big for her, covering half of a black, pleated mini skirt layered on matching stockings. She wore steel-toe boots, and she had a nose ring. Her eyeliner was as thick and dark as her hair, and in her hand, was a bundle of dried white leaves bundled with twine that she waved around the ceilings of the room. It burned a red orange at the tip, and it reminded Tommy of the cherry of a cigarette.

“Someone’s funeral?” he asked.

She didn’t turn nor greet him. Just said, “No one important.”

That was their reunion.

“Why the hell are you saging?”

“It’s called smudging—and if I’m going to be here for the next two days, I need to do something about the negative energy...and the smell.” She turned then, sweeping the sage across Tommy’s form, smoke curling into his nostrils and he grimaced, swatting her away.

“Where’s Ren?” he asked, eyes sweeping the room. Nothing had changed in the last two years since he left. The walls were still frigid and bare, beyond the occasional crucifix or generic, Goodwill Jesus painting, void of any kind of personality or pictures that might have hinted that a family once lived here. If what they did could be called living. A place where the children weren’t meant to be seen or heard doesn’t make a home. Twenty-five cent ramen cups snuck from the cupboards in the middle of the night doesn’t make a meal. The ghost of a mother—in the fear of a key in a lock, in the dread of a heavy foot on the stair—no, those ghosts don’t make a family.

“He’s not with you?”
“No,” he starts, already irritated. “If Ren was with me, I wouldn’t have asked.”

“I thought it was, like, against the laws of mankind for twins to be separated. Don’t you feel him missing? Phantom pain or something?”

“That’s not what phantom pain is, and no. I’m not going to waste my time caring about someone who doesn’t want to be around.”

That pauses Freya, pulls her to a familiar and aching stop. “He’s your brother,” she says. “Family.”

“You don’t know what family is, Freya,” he says derisively, and Soyeon gets stuck on the way the word sounds coming from Tommy’s mouth, sneered like it was halfway between a slur and a joke and Freya was the punchline. Tommy is still small, she thinks. He leans forward hunched, more habit than action now, hands in his pockets, collapsing himself into the smallest amount of space possible. Tommy was small, but he was no longer little. She couldn’t call him little brother. She couldn’t call him little nor brother.

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“Actually,” she replies, voice too high on the end; she’d always been bad at masking her emotions. “It’s Soyeon now.”

Tommy glances with only mild interest. “Since when?”

“Since I realized I wasn’t white.” Since she was eighteen, and a kid asked her where she was from, and when she said North Carolina, the kid asked her where she was really from, and she couldn’t understand why her answer was wrong. Until she did. Since being Korean distanced her from being white, from what it means to be their Mother’s daughter.
“Wait, you’re not white?” He says it with a smirk and Soyeon just waves the sage in his direction once more before disappearing from the room. When she’s gone, Tommy pulls his hands from behind his back and clenches them tight in fists, fingernails digging into his palm. He seeks blood and when he finally gets it, the tension falls from his grip, peters out in the stretch of his fingers. His hands stop shaking. Pain, here, is familiar. Pain, here, is more welcome than fear.

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Ren arrives in the middle of the night. He is his brother’s twin, copy and pasted and printed out in ink running dry. He walks through the door and doesn’t stop at the threshold in fear. Just sets down his bag and glances to the left, where the living room is. Soyeon is there, visible due to the open floor plan. She’s passed out across the arms of a burgundy, cigarette-clogged recliner. Tommy sits on the TV-stand, where he feels safer from the asphyxiation of the smell of cigarette smoke, and from the clawing past of his bedroom upstairs. After years of learning the language of the house, every creak of every stair, every groan of a foot against the floorboard, Tommy knows when someone walks in even when he doesn’t hear the door. He understands, instead, the sound of weight, the sounds of an old house settling after being disturbed.

He doesn’t look up until he feels eyes on him, because he understands the weight of that, too. He glances up, mostly out of curiosity of if the years have been kind to his twin. Curiosity dies quick once he catches sight of the eyes he avoids in the mirror, and
Tommy only stares, unblinking and without apology, for as long as Ren dares to hold his gaze. Ren drops his eyes first and then turns and disappears up the stairs, hauling his bag fist-tight behind him.

Tommy pulls a pack of worn, unused matches out of his back pocket and runs his thumb along the cover.

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Tommy doesn’t know why his mother died, why she chose to hang chafing and twine around her neck. When the executor asks, Tommy tells him their mother was sick. The sick that clings to damp, excreting skin, sweet and cloying. The smell of her clogs his nose even now. She is suffocating even after death.

The hanging was a surprise. Old-fashioned, if you asked him now, five years removed. Impious, if you asked him then, under the heavy hand of his mother. It was more surprising, still, that the three of them, bastardized and othered, were the only names written on her will.

She claimed love for her children, because it was her duty, but she never practiced it. A hypocritical Christian was never a rarity, but their mother immortalizing the three children who abandoned her as soon as legality was no longer an issue freaked Tommy out more than anything has before. He can’t say the news of her death was a welcome text-message.

*Mother’s dead. We get everything. Come home.*

But it was a relieving one.
A fascinating one, says the executor. Estranged family is always a unique experience. Lucky, he says. For three young people like them to inherit so much property. Devisees, he calls them, because they get the house, too.

Beneficiary, the executor says. Bequeathed.

Burning, Tommy thinks. He excuses himself, thinking if he stands under the light that casts from the window into the living room any longer, he will catch on fire and he already can’t breathe.

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Ren finds Tommy in the foyer. He’s standing under the light fixture, eyes locked to the ceiling as if he could find answers in the plaster. Sometime between the passing of one threshold to the next, he’s found a beer and he holds the bottle between the tips of his fingers and dangles it precariously. He dangles, too, like he’s one whisper from knocking over. His head hangs limp from his neck and his eyes are closed.

“Go away,” he says, when he feels the weight. A too familiar weight. One that paces the halls of the second floor, deciding and abandoning decision a hundred times throughout the night, until Tommy can convince himself these footsteps are not coming to hurt him, and he falls asleep with his back against the wall, bag clutched to his chest, like he’s done so many times before. Ren ignores him, though, and Tommy wonders if he’s been desensitized to his rejection.

“What are you doing?” Ren asks.
“I’m hanging,” Tommy says.

“That’s not funny.”

“No,” he replies, both a question and an answer, but he doesn’t stop. Ren looks up to the ceiling, too. There’s nothing special about it. Weathered yellow from cigarette smoke, extruding lines branched all across it, cracks turned inside out. It looks like a ceiling, but when Tommy opens his eyes, he stares at it like he can still see their mother hanging there. Maybe he does.

“Freya’s talking to the executor.”

“Actually, she’s Soyeon now.”

“Soyeon?”

“Yeah, did you know she isn’t white?”

Ren doesn’t find the joke funny, but he was never the brother who had to have a sense of humor. Looking at Tommy was like looking at his reflection in a body of water. They shared the same ochre skin, easy to bruise but hard to break, the same deep-set eyes, lost in the years since gone. But it only took one disturbance, one ripple to break the still, and his brother was unrecognizable, twisted in all the wrong ways.

“Brother,” Tommy says, as Ren turns to go. He’s not calling him; Ren knows that. He’s trying the word on for size, swishing it around in his mouth like it’s mouthwash. Not the alcohol-free drugstore kind, too weak to do anything properly but you use it like routine because it’s better than nothing and you’ve got no time to floss. No, he says it like it’s brown Listerine, the kind that’s a match and a strike in your mouth, like it’s burning
your tastebuds off one swish at a time. He says it like he can’t bear the scorch on his tongue.

“Yes,” Ren says, neither a question or an answer, but hope and the ache of desire linger in his chest. But Tommy must not like the way brother sounds because he doesn’t say anything more.

***

Three siblings tuck themselves in a closet. They are fifteen and they are seventeen and they are too big for this now. They play cat’s cradle with their legs and the twins huddle so close, you can’t tell where one begins and the other ends. They are one brother and across from them is one sister. Freya sits with her back flat against the back of the closet, long nightgown pulled down over her knees, stretching it in a way that’s gonna get her hit by Momma when she finds out, but she doesn’t care. Tommy and Ren are fifteen and Freya is seventeen and they are scared.

“I’m gonna get out,” their sister says. “Next year. I’m gonna get out of here.”

Last year it was in two years and the year before that it was when I’m eighteen and the twins listens like it’s a prayer they’ve never heard before. Not one of Momma’s prayers, which are accompanied by rulers against bruised knuckles when your joints get tired and your arms fall, and Momma sees you aren’t praying anymore. This prayer isn’t cruel. It doesn’t hurt. It’s one the twins love to hear. It’s one they make Freya recite whenever they can.
“Gonna get my own apartment, I swear. A job in New York City, far away from here.”

“Far away from here,” they repeat.

“Yeah, far away from here. Mother can’t get me when I’m eighteen. I’ll be an adult. There’s nothing she’ll be able to do.”

“Nothing she’ll be able to do,” they repeat.

“And I’ll come back for you,” their sister promises. She promises it so easy, so certainly, it’s hard for the twins not to believe her. She’ll come back for us. “I’ll get permission from the court or something. You can come live with me.”

“We can come live with you,” the twins pray.

“We’ll be a family.”

A family, they pray. But family is a concept. It’s theoretical. Mother makes them write it one hundred times in practice for their spelling tests and it loses all meaning. They learn about it in their schoolbooks. Families are nuclear, they learn. Mother teaches them about Nagasaki and Hiroshima and says they are wars men who don’t find God wage among themselves. Families, they learn, exist to punish, to wound, to mass destruct.

Freya leaves and never comes back, and the twins don’t cry. They are fifteen and they are a family. Freya leaves and never looks back, and their mother makes the twins kneel in her place.
The twins turned eighteen and they left together but together doesn’t mean forever. Together cracks under pressure and when you’re running from both god and your demons, pressure finds home in the jaws of hellhounds that nip at your heels. Mother fostered them when they were twelve and adopted them at fourteen and they were homeschooled because she didn’t believe that pressing your palm to your heart every morning before eighth grade literature meant you were under God. Mother was afraid of the influence the other children would have on them. Other children were unruly, unholy, sins leaking from their pores. Mother valued clean kids—and so, they were clean. Too clean. Home was a hermetically sealed environment and leaving home wreaked havoc on their purity, immune system collapsing from over-exposure to a million things they’d never come in contact with before. Running, as it turns out, was a lot like standing in a corner for over thirty-six hours, except when your knees collapse, your lungs do too.

Tommy grew reckless. He got tired so he slowed down, found comfort and sleep in the warmth of a drink, of two drinks, of three, of four.

Drowning comes with a cost when you do not drag your other half down with you. They watch from afar, as your head goes underwater, and Ren never learned how to swim. When you can’t swim, you have two choices. Drown, too, or don’t get in the water.

Ren chose land over his brother, but he wasn’t so cruel to stand and watch his brother sink in a brine of his own making. So, he left.

And to Tommy, that was unforgivable.
Soyeon’s ransacking Mother’s room. She’s got a dozen rings, silver and gold, on both fingers and a handful of studded necklaces sitting at her collarbone. She browses Mother’s vanity like it’s a jewelry store with a closeout sale and everything must go.

“Nothing uglier than vanity,” Soyeon says when she spots Ren standing in the mirror. She eyes the silver cross that sits at her neck. “Says the bitch with thousands of dollars of sterling in her dresser. Where did she even get this stuff?”

Ren doesn’t answer, too focused on the wood that lays across her neck. “Not that one,” he says, before he can help it. He shouldn’t have said anything, he knows that, because Tommy won’t be grateful. He won’t thank Ren for looking out for him. It’s hard to make peace with Tommy once he feels he’s been wronged. His first grudge was his mother and he held onto it, wrapped tight and secure around his fingers, until her death.

“Which? The cross?” Soyeon touches it with the tips of her fingers and examines it in the mirror. There’s nothing special about it at first glance. It’s not even a crucifix; it’s just a plain cross carved from a dull, unremarkable wood. “She always wore this stupid thing. She’s probably rolling over in her grave watching me wearing it now.”

“Not that one,” Ren says again. “Tommy will kill you.”

Soyeon just hums, like she’s only considering it to amuse him. “What’d she do with it? Try to ‘The power of Christ compels’ him?”

Ren stares at her blankly. “She used it to purify the bath water. That she then tried to drown him in.”
Soyeon drops the necklace.

It’s a gross simplification. Things with their mother was never that simple, never that morally unambiguous. She wasn’t intending to drown him. She was washing his hair and only talking to him, in quiet reprimand—for something, Ren can’t remember. He snuck out or he stole or swore, or he didn’t do his homework. Mother was being as kind as Ren would ever see her, forgiving because she had just got back from church and she was in a good mood. She brought them paper bag goodies of mints, spearmint gum, oranges, and pocket-sized bibles. Ren remembers the bite of citrus that burned at a cold sore and how he sucked in his cheeks to ease the soft burn. Then he remembers wet thudding and the rising of their mother’s voice and he carried his orange to the bathroom to find his mother holding her brother’s head underwater, quiet reprimand turned to angry admonishment. He remembers Tommy didn’t struggle but his fists tightened against the edge of the bathtub, gripping it so hard his knuckles turned white and then purple until mother finally let him go with a promise of lashings more.

Ren dragged Tommy back to their room and into clean clothes and mother made Freya be a good girl and clean up the mess. When Ren asked Tommy why he had to gain mother’s ire, Tommy wrenched the orange from Ren’s hand and threw it at the ground as hard as he could. It took him until later that night that he realized he took their mother’s side before he took his brother’s. A side effect, he thinks, of the oranges. A gift-wrapped blindness.

“So not that one,” Ren says, for the third one.
“Not this one,” Soyeon agrees and rips it off her neck, the clasp breaking at the nape. “Let’s burn it.”

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Soyeon goes outside to chop wood, because it’s a man’s job she says, and Mother would never let me do it. Ren hunts down Tommy because he remembers Tommy keeps matches in his back pocket. Not because he smokes; none of the siblings could pick up a cigarette without shaking hands—a side effect, he thinks, of their mother—and whenever Tommy’s around smoke, his lungs decide to put in only half the effort and Ren has to shove his head between his knees and remind him how to breathe. Ren doesn’t know why he keeps the matches on him at all times, or why matches instead of a lighter, because addictions that required fire weren’t his choice poison.

He finds Tommy in the foyer again, but this time he’s lying flat on his back, a box by his head and piles and piles of discarded paper surrounding his head like a halo. He’s reading through a packet of papers that with legal jargon Ren can’t make sense of and doesn’t really care to. Tommy doesn’t turn to look at him when he enters but Ren knows he knows he’s there. He holds out his hand.


“I don’t believe in God anymore.”
“You have to believe in something,” Tommy says, unbothered. “Do you think we’re products of some fourteen-year-old that God inseminated without consent? And that’s why Agnes took us in? Do you think God just goes around and just inseminates fourteen-year-olds?”

“That’s blasphemous.”


“Give me your matches.”

“No.”

Tommy’s no is as familiar as bruised knees, as familiar as our father who art in heaven, as familiar as the echo of empty homes, the biting cold of refinished hardwood floors and the hollow quiet of one’s thoughts when there’s no longer a reason to pray. No, when they’re sixteen, and Tommy’s got angry lashes on his back, twice too many, and Ren asks Tommy to let him take his own punishments. No, when they’re eighteen, and Ren asks Tommy if he can go with him when he sneaks out in the middle of the night. The halls of this house are deafening, and he doesn’t want to be alone. No, when they’re nineteen, and Ren tells him to stop hurting himself, that he doesn’t need to keep doing this. They’re free and they’re safe and Ren doesn’t want to be alone. No when Ren asks him to choose, when Ren asks Tommy to choose him.

Ren turns and leaves Tommy by himself for the second time.

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Soyeon returns with a lighter and an armful of bibles. She smiles and Ren stares, blindly thinking this is the first time he’s seen her smile like this, full teeth and with no pretense of kind and sensitive and silent. He sees, instead, a girl who’s grown sick of being the perfect girl. He likes her better this way.

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They sit in front of the fireplace and they open the bibles with familiarity, flipping past the pages with a speed that doesn’t leave room for glancing at the headings for book names, or looking at footers for page numbers. The bible’s open where they will them to and not a page before and behind. The first one is Proverbs. Not a verse their mother made them recite but one they grew to resent through exposure.

*Proverbs 13:24. He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.*

They rip that one out first, in every single bible they can find. They shred it into strips, each rip the sharp strike of a leather belt against naked skin and shove it between the gathered bark.

Soyeon finds first Timothy 2:12 and recites it by heart. *But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence* and remembers what it means to be seen but not heard. She rips it out, crumpling it into a ball, and tosses it in with the rest of the wood.
There’s a flick of a lighter and an inferno casts between them. She’s about to lean down to light the one of the crumpled-up pieces of scritta paper when Ren the atmosphere thickens, and the air feels heavy. Ren stops her with a hand on her wrist and looks up. She follows his gaze to where Tommy leans against the doorframe, staring at the bibles spread out among them, an unreadable expression on his face. Ren thinks he’s back to offer his matches, to offer his apologies, but he doesn’t remember hearing Tommy ever apologize to anyone since they were seventeen and Mother asked for another day of repentance.

“Romans,” Tommy says, without looking at his siblings kneeling in front of him. “1:27. And get off your knees.”

He disappears before either of them could reach for a bible to read the accompanying verse and its accompanying sin. *Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.*

Ren stared at the verse and wondered when that happened and when Mother found out. He wonders if he’ll ever stop wondering about his brother, who kept quiet when he wasn’t provoking their mother, who never shared more than fraction of a feeling between them. Even after nineteen years of being by each other’s sides, there was a vastness between them. He wondered what it was to be a twin, to look in the mirror and see someone who you knew more than yourself. He wondered what it was to have a brother. He finally looked up, lost in words he’d never himself known. Soyeon was already two bibles in, tearing out the papers with a vengeance he’d never seen in her before.
They both knew what it meant for Mother to give you a verse. It meant repentance until your voice was hoarse and you couldn’t pray no more.

As it turns out, bibles make very good kindling.

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They were nineteen, a mouthful of whisky deep and one year removed. It burned down Ren’s throat and it reminded him of their mother. Tommy drank it without a wince, like the alcohol was a familiar taste, a familiar pain, but it was his first-time drinking, too. He had a habit of looking at the bottle a little too long after he took a drink, and it took Ren nudging him more than once before he finally handed it off. It felt like trouble.

“What does mother do to you?” Ren asked, hoping to bring his brother’s attention from the drink. “When you ask to repent for me.”

It started when they were sixteen. Freya was gone and it was just them two, and with her pride and cultivated joy gone, their mother got more heavy-handed with the twins. Hitting them with the back of her hand, utilizing her knuckles more than the belt, like she needed to feel the blood she drew to the surface of their skin. She’d make them kneel and hit them depending on the severity of the crime. Ren mostly got caught for stealing—they were getting taller and getting hungrier and dinner was never enough so after he was sure Mother went to sleep, he’d sneak down to find a couple slices of bread or a pack of crackers or, if they were really lucky, leftovers from dinner. Mother always
found out and Ren always had to pay the price. Until Tommy caught her wrist one day and brought the backhand on himself. He started taking every backhand since then.

On the truly awful days, Mother would shut him in her bedroom for hours and she didn’t come out again until Tommy was broken on the floor, still sitting on his knees, and all Ren could do was drag him back to their room and into bed. For all their mother did to them, for every painful lashing that Tommy knew was coming, he always walked into her bedroom with his head held high—something Ren knew drew mother’s ire...and the heat from her palms.

“Did,” Tommy replied, “and nothing she’ll ever do again. We got out of there. She can’t hurt you again.”

Ren didn’t miss the way he said hurt you and not hurt me, and he didn’t miss the way Tommy cradled the bottle, barrel brown, against his chest like he was still repenting.

“Where do you think Freya is?” Ren asked instead, not wanting to talk about their mother anymore. He couldn’t tell Tommy, but he still thought of the sister who left. Her existence flared only at the very edges of his memory and sometimes he worried he’d forget she existed.

“Probably dead somewhere,” Tommy said.

“Don’t say that.” But Ren’s thought it, too. He’s thought everything. Death. Jail. Kidnapping. Anything other than the truth that Tommy tried to shake into him.

“She didn’t come for us.” Tommy took another drink straight from the bottle, welcomed the scorch straight from the source. “That’s all the matters.”
Something must’ve shown on Ren’s face. Something Tommy didn’t like. Dubiety or dissent or desire. “She wasn’t family,” Tommy said and it’s final.

But Ren had a bit of a listening problem. “She was our sister.”

“Those people weren’t our family.” He said, angrily. “They were signatures on a piece of a paper.”

“What makes family, then? What makes us family?”

“Family doesn’t hurt.” Tommy said. “Family doesn’t leave. Freya made a promise she couldn’t keep. She chose a life without us. She doesn’t care about you, Ren, and she never has, and you shouldn’t care about her either. You have me. Right? And I wouldn’t leave you.”

Tommy replaced the lid on the bottle and set it out of Ren’s reach. He pulled his backpack, the one carrying only a spare change of clothes and a couple of essentials, protein bars and packaged snacks and toilet paper, and propped it under his head. He closed his eyes, and it was the end of discussion.

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Ren wonders now if that is why Tommy said the word brother like Mother’s standing over him with leather wrapped around her palm and is forcing him to recite. Ren left, in the cover of night, while his brother drowned himself. He wonders what verse he is, which sin of his brother’s.
They start with what’s in reach. The executor said it’s all theirs. Mother didn’t have any other surviving relatives, none that they knew of, so everything falls to her children. Ren started with the crucifixes in the wall, and only stops for half a second to wonder if burning Jesus nailed to a cross was sacrilegious but then remembers they’ve already burned bibles and they were going to hell anyway.

Soyeon disappears out of the room as Ren tears them from the walls and then she reappears with the wood axe in her hands. She swings it once in her hand and then again aiming for the coffee table that sat between them and the fireplace. It sticks with a loud *thunk*, but she tugs and pulls it free. Ren wanders around as she keeps hacking at the table, pulling paintings from the walls. Tossing them at the floor until the frames break and the protective glass shatters. Soyeon finishes hacking the table into two and leaves the room to find something else to break down enough she can throw it in the fire to keep it going.

Ren wanders into the foyer and Tommy isn’t there, as he expected, but the papers were left where they were. He kneels down and picks up one of them, the one he recognized as the one Tommy was reading earlier. It was their consent to adoption forms. He remembers the day they signed them, thinking they were being adopted because Mother loved them. Before Mother, Soyeon was an orphan with parents who existed nowhere on paper and the twins’ parents had given them to the state to handle. Mother, he remembers, was their saving grace and the two years of fostering in her home were
blindness gift-wrapped. Before she locked them in her home, she took them to church. She taught them hymns and her favorite verses and introduced them to the pastor, an older gentleman who would sneak them chocolate when Mother wasn’t looking. During service, they got to go play with the other kids on the playgrounds, and make makeshift, personal bibles from folded construction paper and purple glue that contained the commandments of yourself. He never remembered what his was. It was probably dumb like playground rules and how he should always get to be King in Four Square. Whatever twelve-year-old’s came up with.

He remembers Tommy’s though. Tommy’s read Thou shall not be mean to my brother, and while all the other kids had multiple pages of things they thought other people should follow, Tommy only had the one.

It’s dramatic irony, now, looking back and knowing that the honeymoon period between Mother and children would only last six months after adoptions, when the social workers stopped checking in, and Mother would be the first to hurt him.

Ren stares at the papers now and he feels a rage build in his chest, so he gathers the papers and the other documents, too—dental and hospital records, newly drafted birth certificates, social security cards, everything that cemented their identity as the children of Agnes Windham—and tossed them to the fire.

Then, he went to go find Tommy.

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For the first time ever, Ren didn’t help his brother stand. Instead, he sits down next to him. Tommy doesn’t open his eyes or shift where he sits, but Ren’s eyes catch on him anyway. His hair is shaved to the scalp unlike his own, which he let grow out, rough and unruly as thicket. He hands rested on his knees, palm up, as if asking for deliverance. From the angle he’s sitting, Ren can see the softest maroon that hugs the joints of his fingers. Tommy doesn’t speak so they sit in a silence that sits heavy between them. It’s quiet, too quiet, and Ren thinks he should be grateful for the silence, to help him keep the blade of guilt resting against his gut at bay, from cutting him open, but he feels the threat against his skin.

“Tommy,” he says, suddenly, breathlessly. “I’m sorry I left.”

Tommy stays silent and he feels that, too. The ache of it.

“I was scared, and you were drowning. Drinking so you wouldn’t—couldn’t—feel.” The correction was significant, and they both knew what Ren meant by it. Tommy became an alcoholic to take away the choice—of feeling or forgiving. He let it settle him into the coldest version of himself, to calm the nerves, the jumpiness, the fear. “I thought you would protect me like you’d done all those years before. You wouldn’t let me leave. I thought you would come after me—I left because—because I thought it’d wake you up. You spent so many years protecting me, Tommy, you didn’t even know how to protect yourself. You wouldn’t even if you could. I wanted you to see that. To stop putting me first. I’m sorry.” Tommy still doesn’t speak but he slips his hands from his knees and Ren knows he’s listening, but he doesn’t know what else to say. He doesn’t know how to
do this, how to ask for forgiveness in its sincerest form. So, he does what his mother taught him. He gets to his knees.

Tommy opens his eyes. “Stop.”

Ren doesn’t. He feels this, too. The rage in the tightening around his eyes, the flex of his vein in his arm, the tight swallow. He knows it’s the wrong thing to do but it’s the only way he knows to get his brother’s attention. To be victim to the failings of their mother.

“Forgive me, brother,” Ren breathes.

“Stop.” Tommy gets to his feet then, grabbing Ren’s arm and yanking him up beside him. His voice is so raw, it startles Ren into forgetting to fight back against the strength his brother has built over the years. He feels it, though, in the way Tommy’s grip on his arm feels like their mother’s—harsh and bruising and bone-crushing—but Tommy is family. Ren is not scared. “You don’t kneel for anybody; do you hear me?”

Ren hears him but he is helpless. “I don’t know how else to talk to you.”

“Not like this,” he says, and it sounds like he’s begging. “Not like you talk to her.”

“I don’t know anything about you, Tommy. I don’t know the Tommy that doesn’t live under Mother’s arm.”

“Then ask.”

“Okay. Why do you keep matches in your back pocket?”

Tommy lets Ren’s arm go, finally, when he notices the red that rings his fingertips and stares at the place he’d held too hard. Ren’s a second from telling him it’s okay, it
doesn’t hurt, but he doesn’t want to deflect, doesn’t want to turn away from this conversation.

“It was the first thing you bought when we left,” Ren presses, trying to wring an answer—a truth—out of his brother for the first time. “The first thing you didn’t steal. You stole food, toothpaste, cell-phone charges—but you bought matches. Why?”

Tommy looks away from his arm, blinking as he registers what Ren is saying to him. “They’re just matches, Ren.”

“You’re terrified of smoke, Tommy. Years of abuse immortalized, symbolized in Mother’s smoking habit. Do you still have the panic attacks?”

Tommy just shakes his head again but Ren notices how his nostril flares, how he rubs his fingers against each other, a fidget trying to figure out if it wants to be a fist or not. “They’re just—”

“If they’re just matches,” Ren says, “then why didn’t you steal them, Tommy?”

And it’s not about the matches, not really. The matches are a curiosity. One of the many itches of his brother that Ren can’t reach far enough to scratch, and it was hard enough to reach the brother himself.

“It’d defeat the purpose if I stole it,” Tommy finally says, resigned. He reaches behind him and pulls the matches out of his back pocket. They’re flattened and the name of the brand that used to be on the front has since faded into unreadable blocks of ink. He hands it to Ren and Ren takes it, brushing his finger along the front before he uses the corner of his thumb to flip it open. In blue pen, scrawled on the cover is a verse. It doesn’t have the book or the chapter or the line number, just the words:
Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with the everlasting burning?

It’s not a verse Ren recognizes. “Hellfire?” he asks, touching the scrawled, indented words of an eighteen-year-old boy, on his own for the first time of his life, terrified.

Tommy shakes his head. “God.” He reaches for the matches back. “Guess I still believe.”

It took a minute for Ren to realize it’s not just a verse, just a question. It’s a question Tommy’s asking himself and has been asking himself his entire life. Four years of unrelenting repentance and Tommy still asks for more, still believes that in a world out there, God—if not his mother, if not his brother—still loves him.

Ren understands, then. What his brother had meant in the hallway. “You have to believe in something,” he says quietly, and the reason hangs quietly between them. Cause what else is there?

Ren thinks of Tommy, an eighteen-year-old boy fresh from years of torment and thrown into a world with no mother or father figure to guide him, a society that doesn’t welcome him, and a brother—a responsibility bigger that he should have. He thinks of a boy he dared to hope for a mother, and then for the sister who promised him a better life, and he thinks of all the lashings he bore and how many it took to turn him into who he is now.

Ren always wondered how it was so easy for him to have faith after the way they grew up. He guesses it’s easy to have faith when you have nothing else.
Soyeon stands in front of an all-consuming fire. She’s tossing in picture frames, long white candles and smaller votives, jewelry from their mother’s room, and papers by the handful when the twins walk back in. She turns and looks back at them for half a second, the way they stand shoulder to shoulder, so close you can’t tell where one begins and the other ends. She wonders what it is to be a twin, to look in the mirror and see someone who you knew more than yourself. She wonders what it is to have a brother.

She reaches towards the mantle and pulls off the one item she didn’t throw into the fire and tosses it towards the brothers. Tommy catches it but doesn’t look. He knows what it is, and he knows what it means for Soyeon to let him decide what to do with it. He knows what an olive branch looks like.

“You left us,” he says, “You’re not family.”

Soyeon looks towards Ren, but the softer brother’s eyes are downturned, set on the floor. There is no saving her from this conversation.

“I promised I would come back,” she says, shoulders set. “I never said when.”

“You lied.”

“Yes,” she admits. It’s not an apology. She adds, “No. Not on purpose.”
“A lie by any other name,” Tommy drawls, and Soyeon knows the boy isn’t cruel purely out of spite; he is cruel out of necessity. He is thousand miles high of brick wall and wire barbed to keep people out.

“It’s not that I didn’t want to come back for you,” she said. “But I was a kid, and I was scared, too. We all know how terrifying and unwelcoming the world is when it’s not washed in stained glass. And we all know how it pales in comparison to home.”

“You let fear drive you,” Tommy says and it’s both a question and a realization.

“Don’t you?” Soyeon says and it’s both a question and a plea.

Neither needs an answer, and neither pries, and Tommy finally glances away from Soyeon. Soyeon’s unsure if it’s because he’s through with the conversation or through with her, but when she looks over, the softer brother is looking at her again.

“Where are you sleeping?” She asks him.

Ren hesitates, shooting a look at Tommy before back at her. “Nowhere permanent.”

“I have a place. One bedroom, but there’s a futon in the living room. The cushion is pretty shit, and you’ll feel the bars for hours after you get up, but you can share it. Both of you,” she adds, looking over at Tommy, who she’s decided is through with the conversation and not yet her. “You can come live with me. About an hour from here.”

Tommy doesn’t answer, just puts the necklace Soyeon gave him in his pockets and leaves his hands there. Ren doesn’t answer either. He’ll go where Tommy goes and not a step behind. Soyeon must realize there’s a conversation there that she won’t be a part of, a seat at the table she hasn’t earned back yet.
She turns back to the fire. “There’s too much stuff. We can’t burn it all.”

“Fireplace seems pretty confined,” Tommy says, finally, dragging his eyes back to hers, “if you’re trying to burn it all.”

It wasn’t what Soyeon meant and it wasn’t what either Ren or Soyeon had in mind, but when they glance at Tommy, he’s replaced the cross necklace with his matches, and he’s flipping the book over and over in palm, considering.

Soyeon smiles.

“Let’s fucking burn it.”

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They are twenty and twenty-two and they stand in front of an everlasting burning. The house is in flames and Tommy has nineteen matches in his back pocket. They watch as it burns inside out, as the flames eat at the window frames, and they watch until the roof caves in.

Tommy stays until the smoke starts to billow out and he remembers what it feels like to not be able to breathe and he turns to go. Before he can get far, Soyeon stops him and says, “I have a futon.”

Tommy stops and looks back at her, consideringly. “You are not family,” he says, and it’s not final. He says it like trying the word on for size.

Soyeon smiles.

“Oh, Thomas, you don’t know what family is.”