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These stories explore various human experiences—heartbreak, loss, grief, love, fear. While some are concretely rooted in reality, others play with surrealism, allegory, and the supernatural.

OUT OF WATER: STORIES

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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JUMP

Joyce's husband woke one Tuesday morning and couldn't make out the ceiling fan, couldn't see his hand stretched above him. He cried silently, but she was already watching tears roll down his cheeks and into his ears, waiting for him to turn and meet her eyes. When he didn't, she knew he would never find her eyes again, and she wanted to cry too.

"Don." She laid a palm on his forehead as if he was sick. "It will be ok." She'd known since they met in college that eventually he'd lose his sight due to glaucoma. It had seemed so far away for so long that when his sight left completely, she hadn't prepared herself. And he hadn't seemed to either, even as his eyes grew distant behind centimeters of glass, as everything melted into hazy shapes.

"I'm never going to watch the Masters again," he said.

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes, then realized it didn't matter. The freedom of it, of how openly her features could respond to him, made her almost giddy. "I'm sorry," she said. But maybe she wasn't.

The firm where he had worked the past three decades threw him a retirement party at a partner's house. Joyce tied his bowtie—one with silver stars she'd gotten him years ago. He'd never worn it, but she pulled it tight around his throat and said, "It's the Navy one you like."

When she finished, leaned in and kissed his cheek, he flinched. “Let me know before you touch me next time.”

At the party, he hung onto her arm. She’d never been one for these sorts of events—had a hard time slogging through talk of clients and golf courses, didn’t feel sexy in heels, accepted that Don would wave at her from across the room as he flirted with his receptionist.

Now, she poured herself a glass of whiskey and stepped out of her shoes. “Want to dance with me?” she asked Don. He looked toward her as if he was a baby bird—wide eyed and open mouthed. There were too many things to bump into, too many people talking to him loudly, like his hearing was gone too. Instead of sympathy, though, his grip on her elbow gave her a rush of satisfaction. She’d never seen him so helpless, never been so needed. Even only last month, when his world was mostly shadow, he’d refused help—left her by the bar, pathetic and overdressed.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“Fine.” She downed her glass, closed her eyes, lifted her arms, and began to rock her hips from side to side. Normally she’d be mortified to be seen this way. She imagined people sniggering, pointing. But when she opened her eyes, Don’s boss raised a glass to her. Two women she didn’t recognize kicked off their shoes and joined her. “I love your dress,” one of them said.

When Don called her name from the couch, she pretended not to hear. He gripped the armrest like otherwise he would fall off.

Joyce stripped off her clothes and ate a bagel over the kitchen sink. The pool boy Don hired last month spotted her through the window, and she let him look. His interest made her flush. Don hadn't wanted her body even when he could see it. He sat at the table, struggling to spoon the flesh out of a halved grapefruit. She pushed onto tiptoe and stretched her arms above her head, watching the pool boy watch her.

She cut 12 inches off her hair and signed up for a membership at the Planet Fitness down the road. Ordered designer jeans a size down. Started wearing lipstick, even though Don had told her once she was too old for pink. She made flavored olive oil—garlic, chocolate, lemongrass—to sell at her friend's shop downtown and came home smelling of new perfume and coffee beans.

"I'm happy," she told her daughter on the phone. "I feel good."

"Okay but what about Dad? Is he doing okay?" Nancy lived in Seattle and worked at a nonprofit for Redwood conservation. She was single, saw the world as black and white, and she'd always been a daddy's girl.

"Oh, yes. He's excellent." Joyce took a chicken breast from the freezer to thaw for Don's dinner. "I think I might go on a trip."

"A trip? If you were going to leave Dad you should have done it years ago."

"Don't be silly, I'm not going to leave him." She could. It would be easy; she'd thought about it more than once in their marriage. She could pack before Don even realized what was going on. Maybe travel Thailand for a while, or go live with her cousin in Colorado. But she thought of Don walking through the house calling her name. How

long before he realized it was empty? Besides, she'd never wanted to start over without him. Even when he got fat, stopped kissing her good morning, set reminders on his phone to CALL WIFE when he was away on business. Even when their daughter left for college, and their conversations that had mostly been about her became stilted. Even then, she loved him. Or parts of him—the blonde hair on his calves, the way he looked with his sleeves rolled up, the strength in his voice when he spoke to a client. Maybe parts were enough, and what is a person if not a bunch of parts?

And yet, her life felt like her own for the first time in years, or at least not like it belonged to him. Like some karmic scale was finally balancing. Did Don feel it too? The great shift of power in their marriage?

“Maybe I’ll just have an affair. Go pick up a man at the supermarket.” She smiled, but she knew the joke wasn’t funny.

“Ha ha. Love you, Mom.”

They hung up, and Joyce thought of the pool boy, whose name she’d finally learned was Jake. In the few times she’d spoken to him, he’d mentioned summer break from college, a major in business. He’d laughed generously at her attempts at humor. He was kinder than Don ever was. Not as handsome or clever, not nearly as intimidating. That had been part of Don’s appeal, how easily he could make her nervous, how much she wanted to impress him. She’d never cared so much what a man thought of her. She remembered the rush of making him smile in their early years, of telling him something he didn’t know. Like a puppy doing tricks for its master—god, it made her cringe to think

of now. Don would be totally unimpressed by her attraction to the pool boy. Not because it would hurt him; because it was so unimaginative.

But the cliché was part of the appeal. She could be part of another story, instead of the one where she must walk her husband around their house and down the street like the puppy she had been once.

She made Don dinner, led his hand over the table to find his water glass, his fork, his napkin, cleaned the kitchen while he listened to NPR with headphones. Just before dark, they walked around the neighborhood, hand in hand not out of intimacy, but so he didn't step into the road or hit a mailbox. As she fell asleep, she thought of Jake's wave through the glass and wondered if he'd noticed her haircut.

Jake's Ford pickup pulled into the driveway, and Joyce smoothed on lipstick and changed her shirt, then changed her shirt again. She looked at herself in her bathroom mirror and sucked in her stomach, pulled at the wrinkles on her forehead. Not great, but not bad. She could hear Don talking on the phone in his office, probably to someone from the firm. He was still in the process of giving his clients to another accountant. He had not taken well to retirement. Most days, he wandered through the house like a prisoner, fingers tracing the walls, leaving faint streaks of oil over the paint.

"Hi," Joyce said, opening the screen door to the back patio. "Brought you some lemonade."

"Sweet," Jake said. He set down the skimmer and walked around the pool slowly while Joyce gripped the sweating glass. He slinked close. Broad shouldered and wire-

limbed, he had the body of a swimmer. Closer though, she could see a chipped front tooth, a small nose like a woman's. In her heyday, she would have been out of his league, and she stood straighter.

“Looks like a storm's coming.” This seemed like a good start. She had never been a good flirt, but small talk she could handle.

“I'll get everything done by the time it hits, don't worry.” He winked. “Unless it's actually a sharknado. Those things'll get you.”

Was this some kind of super storm she'd never heard of? “Ha ha, yeah.”

He grinned. “You've seen the movie? You know, tornado made of sharks? It's great.”

“Oh, uh...” She could feel her cheeks growing red. What was she doing? *Push through, Joyce. Live a little.* “Maybe we could watch it sometime.”

If he was surprised by her invitation he hid it well. “Sure.” He winked again. She could hear Don scoffing—*it's never the right time for an adult male to wink.* “I like your lipstick.”

She took a deep breath. “I saw you look at me the other day.”

She was sure there was a better way to approach this, but it had been years since she'd flirted with a man, and she couldn't remember making the first move a single time in her life. She'd met Don at her friend's tailgate at UNC and they'd married eight months later, him steering every step of the way, her thrilled just to follow.

“You weren't exactly hiding,” he said.

“What did you think?” she said, before she could stop herself. She hated herself for this, for asking this kid to tell her what she was worth.

Jake blinked his long eyelashes slowly, bobbed his head and shoulders to some silent song. He bent over the pool filter and scooped out a dead frog from the water with his bare hand, still holding his lemonade in the other. “You’re smokin’, man.”

“I am?” Her face burned with relief.

“Sure,” he said.

She could kiss him. “Do you want to go to the pool house?”

He didn’t ask questions, didn’t mention her husband. Just looked at her, bemused. He still didn’t speak when she took him into the pool house and closed the door behind them, or when she lifted the shirt she’d so carefully selected over her head. Only as she knelt did he whisper a soft “oh.”

“Look at me,” she told him, and the look was enough.

Joyce waited for Tuesdays. On Tuesdays in the pool house, she wasn’t wife to a blind man, a man who never was much good at noticing her anyway. Instead she was something to be desired.

Every other day of the week took on a stale pattern. Don was stir crazy—he’d never spent so much time at home before, and they’d certainly never spent so much time together. She dropped him off at his braille lessons, at doctor’s appointments, at his Adult Blindness Support Group. It felt like it had when Nancy was young—when Joyce made her peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and took her to soccer practice.

He relearned his way around the house, using the backs of chairs and doorframes as anchors so that he was never floating. He followed her from room to room, head cocked in listening, eyes unfocused.

“Don’t sneak up on me like that,” she said, as she folded a pile of laundry on their bed.

“I just want to listen to you,” he answered, looking too far to her left. And then she felt guilty about choosing mismatched socks for him, and for not trimming his nose hairs. For the Tuesday bruises on her knees, and for the fact that she didn’t need to cover them.

Don sat on the edge of the bathtub while she dragged a razor across his jaw. He kept his eyes closed, head tilted so she could reach under his chin. Joyce preferred this—better his eyes closed than rolling around the room, always searching for something, maybe her.

“You know I got a haircut,” she said. “A few weeks ago.” She could smell the coffee on his tongue, and she held her breath.

He reached his hand out, and she leaned into his palm. “I don’t remember what it looked like before.”

“It was long, the way you always liked it.” The way it had been since they’d met.

“Oh yeah.” But he looked uncertain. His face had never revealed much, always carefully under control. Now, though, it was as if it no longer belonged to him, like he’d lost not just his sight but his ability to control what his features exposed.

When he left the bathroom, she spent the next hour curling her hair, though no one would know but her.

Later, she found a bouquet of sunflowers on her bedside table. A card stuck out from underneath the lemonade pitcher—he must have felt his way to it in the kitchen cabinets and assumed it was a vase. How he'd gotten the flowers she could only guess. *I'm sorry*, it read. *I know I should have paid better attention. I know I was a terrible husband.* The handwriting was Don's but messier, slanting across the page, the letters almost on top of each other. She wondered what it was that he was sorry for—if he knew it was not now but then that hurt. If he'd still be sorry if he knew about her new secret life, especially now that his own was one of darkness. She tossed the card into the trashcan, but later when Don slept, she tiptoed to the corner of the room and fished it from the bin.

Every day, Joyce slid into her tennis shoes, called a goodbye to Don, and walked. She walked to nowhere, walked so slowly it could hardly be considered exercise, but still, it felt good to move her legs, to sweat in the summer heat. She stopped to pet dogs and talk to owners. She asked Paige Jackson about how her son was doing at Cornell. She gave an old woman pushing a stroller directions to the park. She updated acquaintances on how Don was doing and promised to give him love.

“You look great,” said a friend she hadn't seen in years. “Great haircut.”

The best part about walking was that she was out of the house. Don was trying, she knew this. Since the flowers, he had made coffee sludge for her, accompanied her to a movie where he'd asked questions the whole time, and insisted on vacuuming the living room, only to scuff the legs of the coffee table. She should have been grateful. Trying wasn't nothing. Trying counted for a whole lot. But still, she wanted space.

She wondered if he'd noticed that she'd been changing. That as he needed her more, she wanted him less. Too late, Don, she imagined telling him. It's not enough.

She walked in a new way too. Swayed her hips more than necessary. Stuck her chin in the air, smiled to strangers. Notice me, her body said. And people did.

They always dressed quickly afterward. She stuck her arms through the holes in her sundress and filled the space with chatter—where are you from, have any siblings, cats or dogs? The newness of it, her boldness, had worn off, and as soon as her heart rate lowered and the sweat on her skin cooled, her stomach began to twist. In the silence of the house, the guilt would press in until she was sick with it.

“Let's just stay and talk,” she said. “Let's get to know each other.”

“I need to do my work,” he said, not unkindly.

“He won't know if you don't.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You're sort of fucked up.”

“You're the one sleeping with a married woman. Why are you doing this?”

“You seem so sad,” he told her. “Can you pass me my hat?”

Their twenty-eighth wedding anniversary fell on a Tuesday, so she didn't meet Jake in the pool house like usual, a small relief. She couldn't think of him without feeling deflated—desperate. Still though, she sent him a text—*Won't be home today, see you next week!*

She drove Don to a greasy Chinese place where they ordered Lo Mein and sesame chicken as they had for every anniversary, and when he produced a flask from his pocket, she wasn't surprised.

"I wasn't sure you'd remember," she said. She wondered if he could hear the smile in her voice.

"Ladies first." He handed her the whiskey, and she took a swig.

"Just as awful as I expected," she said.

He drank too. "Can you tell me what it looks like in here?"

His question caught her off guard. "It looks like it always does. Sort of dark. Red paper lanterns over all the booths. Paper placemats with zodiac signs. There are two teenagers sitting a few booths behind us who look like they're on their first date. They look nervous."

"Nervous how?"

"The boy's twisting his straw paper around his fingers. I can't see his face, but the girl is smiling. She seems shy but into him."

"Think he's going to get lucky tonight? It *is* Tuesday."

She choked on her swallow of whiskey. Surely he didn't know that Tuesday was pool house day.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

She twirled noodles with her chopsticks, watched as Don attempted to stab a piece of chicken with his fork before he set down his silverware and switched to his hands. Old Don wouldn’t have been caught dead eating Chinese food with his hands. She couldn’t tell if she found this endearing or gross.

“You know,” he said. “I can’t remember what my hands look like anymore.” He held them in front of his face, wiggled his slick fingers like the movement might make them appear. “I can’t remember what color our room is—I think a shade of green? Or what a dogwood looks like. I can hear the branches hitting our bedroom window on windy days, but I can’t picture the tree.”

Joyce sat frozen. This was the most he’d said to her in weeks.

“I’m already losing things I’ve seen all my life.”

“I’m sorry, Don. It’s not fair.” She realized that this was true.

He cleared his throat. “At least I don’t have to wear those damn glasses anymore.”

She didn’t tell him that she missed the glasses. That when he looked above her as she talked she felt unnerved. That this place reminded her of their anniversary a few years ago, when he’d showed up with a golfing buddy she’d never met, and she’d watched the two of them get sloppy drunk.

“You look better without them,” she said instead, and when he placed his hand on the table, palm up, she took it.

In the pool house, Jake stepped close to kiss her.

“You know,” he said, “you’re really pretty for your age.”

“Maybe we should stop,” she said, holding him an arm’s length away. “It’s not fair.”

“To who? Since when have you cared about your husband?”

“I just think we need to stop.”

“Okay,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “No worries.”

Just like that. He probably had dozens of women on his pool rotation, all younger and less desperate to be seen. She wasn’t jealous, didn’t like him enough for jealousy. But to lose her secret, to give up something that was only hers—

“Wait,” she said, and pulled him to the floor.

Her back was still pressed to the tile, Jake above her, when Don opened the door.

“Joyce? You in here?”

“Yeah,” Joyce said, eyes wide, heart racing. “I’m just cleaning a bit.”

“Want help?” he asked.

“You can’t help with anything,” she said, probably too cruelly—anything to get him to leave. “I’ll be right there.”

He paused, as if to taste the words before he spat them out. “What time is the pool getting cleaned, Jake?” he said. Silently, he stepped back into the August sunlight.

“Get off,” Joyce said. “You need to leave.”

There was a splash outside. She froze. She knew he’d hit his head. She could see him floating face down, t-shirt clinging to his shoulders. She’d be alone in this big house,

just herself and her mistakes, and his too. Joyce elbowed her way past Jake, found her husband bobbing in the deep end, fully dressed, a flip flop floating by his head.

“Don!” She was breathless with relief. Of course he was fine. He’d always been a good swimmer. “Did you fall in? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Joyce. Just needed a dip. Come join me.” He said it without malice. She wondered how long he’d known—how long he’d crept through the house anticipating finding them. “Just get in. Please.”

“Should I finish vacuuming the pool or no?” asked Jake.

“Goodbye, Jake.”

“Chill,” he said backing away. “You started this.”

She pinched her nose and jumped. The chlorine burned her eyes, but she wanted to see. A shadow mirrored her on the tile below, her but not. Maybe that was her from above too, a shape barely human—clothes floating from her body, hair wild. She hung suspended in the blue, something she could describe to Don later, or something she’d keep for herself. She kicked her way toward him, reached for a blurry calf.

DIG

I was thirteen when my father crawled out of a hole in the backyard. I tell my daughter this, and she nods like it only makes sense. She's thirteen herself now and got the best of me and her mother, and even though I promised Carol I wouldn't tell our daughter about my dad—Carol hadn't believed me anyway—I've never lied to Lacy. I tell her the story one night after I've climbed the stairs in my townhouse to say goodnight. She listens like I listened to my own father, her eyes on my face like she'll see the story there, and I wonder if after I finish, I'll still be her hero.

My father emerged from a hole I'd never seen before under the roots of the oak with arms all over the lawn. I knew him immediately from the picture tucked into the spine of the bible we used to level the kitchen table. I'd found the photograph years before and had only seen it the once, but I remembered every detail. A couple held hands in front of a Ferris wheel, my mom's giant belly draped in a flowery dress, the man beside her tall and thin, long legs stretching from denim shorts. He wore sunglasses, but you could tell that behind them he was handsome, and my mom looked up at him smiling. I'd never seen her want anyone before that picture and it surprised me. I didn't know much about him. Mom always said he loved me but they couldn't make it work. I took that to mean she'd run him off, with her refusal to let anyone wear shoes in the house, her bad cooking. I couldn't know then the things that made a marriage fall apart.

But I knew the picture wasn't real anymore, and the lie of it made my chest twist. I stuck it back in the book and never returned for it.

He pulled himself over the lip of the hole, wriggled his hips until they were free, and stood. I dropped the spoon I'd been holding and squinted at him open-mouthed through the kitchen window, trying to see if he was handsome after all. Mostly he just looked like me. Same shaggy brown hair, same long nose. I didn't know how to feel about that—disappointed or pleased. I wasn't scared. Looking back, I should have been. I knew men didn't appear from the ground like some subterranean species, but even so I was more thrilled that he was there than astonished by how he'd arrived.

He lumbered barefoot over the deck to the sliding door of the kitchen. He'd installed the door himself, before I was born. Mom always complained that the seal at the bottom wasn't tight enough—let in drafts when the wind beat the house. He stopped in front of the glass and I couldn't tell if he was looking in or at his reflection. I waited to see what he'd do—come in or stay out, maybe climb over the fence in the back and go wherever he'd gone the first time. Maybe shimmy back into the hole and live with the moles who tunneled under the garden.

He needed to choose before Billy came downstairs wanting breakfast. Billy wouldn't know him. Billy's daddy was a lawyer from Chicago Mom dated for a few months when I was seven. He sent Billy Starbucks gift cards on his birthday and Christmas, and Billy squirreled them away in the tin Batman lunchbox where he kept his baseball cards.

That's when I saw the blood. It seeped through the front of his shirt under his open jacket, looking like a dark red bib. I crossed the room and opened the door. "You're bleeding."

"Your mom home?" I didn't know until I heard him speak that I recognized his voice, an Alabama drawl my mom had lost since moving further North.

"She's at work." Mom was a nurse on the pediatric floor at the hospital, had been since Billy was born. She'd know what to do about that much blood. She always knew what to do. "Maybe you need some Neosporin or something."

He laughed. "I think this is past the point of Neosporin." He held out the neck of his t-shirt and inspected his chest. "Looks like a gunshot wound. Doesn't hurt though. She still working nights?"

"You got shot?"

"Yeah. I was lying on the floor in my kitchen looking up at the ceiling, and next thing I know I'm coming out of the damn hole back there like some worm." He pointed a thumb behind his shoulder, like I hadn't watched the whole thing. "Some kind of space time continuum or something."

"Maybe you need to go to the hospital?"

"I gotta tell you—" He looked sheepish all of a sudden, like he didn't want to break the news to me. "I think it's too late for that too. But it's okay. No biggie."

I wasn't sure what to do with that, but it didn't really matter. He was here, standing in front of me, letting in sticky summer air. "How long are you staying?" I tried to keep the desperation from my voice.

“I dunno, Catcher. I dunno what the heck I’m doing here.” He tapped his toes on the patio. Catcher. That’s the dumb name he gave me, him and Mom. They wanted their kid to take, to be ready to pluck things midair. I never was any good at sports though. Had a chipped front tooth from a baseball to the face when I was six. “Listen, can I come in?”

He smelled like minerals—earthy and sharp. If he got muddy prints on the carpet Mom would kill me. Would she be happy, though, to find him there? Would she be mad? *It wasn’t your fault*, she said whenever I’d asked, which I took to mean she was the culprit. I’d get so mad when she said that, so mad at her for running him off, even though maybe I knew all along there was more to it than that. But I always tell my daughter the same thing. I simplify things to a mismatched equation—we just didn’t fit—and try to protect her from growing up and blaming herself.

My mom worked night shifts at Grace Hospital two and a half miles down the street, had for as long as I could remember. We usually missed each other in the mornings. She didn’t get home by the time the bus came for Billy and me, but I’d make a pot of coffee and set the machine to start brewing at 3:00 in the afternoon. She’d be sipping a cup in bed by the time we got back, and we’d pile under the covers with her and tell her about school.

I hadn’t done that as much by the time Dad came. I considered myself too old for cuddling with anyone other than a girl. I’d had a girlfriend for nine days until she told me after English that she wanted to be single to really get to know herself. I did get in Mom’s

bed that day. Billy brought me hot chocolate, and Mom told me good men were made by broken hearts.

I wondered what she knew about good men. My dad couldn't have been very good if they'd split up before I could remember. If he'd never sent me letters or called on Christmas. Billy's dad had seemed good—came with flowers and made breakfast for me in the mornings even though Mom wasn't home yet. And for a while there I had visions of us throwing a football in the backyard and going fishing in the river behind the school. I thought maybe I'd get a dad out of it. What I got was Billy.

“He's yours, you know. He's yours and mine and no one else's,” Mom said when she brought him home from the hospital. He was ugly and red.

“What if I don't want him?”

“You don't get to choose your family, Catcher. You only get to choose how you love them.”

And I did love him. At first he was like a pet, like the goldfish I'd won from the fair who only pooped and ate. But then his looks started to mean something and he shaped into a person. He took up some of the space my dad had left, and I think we were sort of each other's dad and sort of each other's son and mostly just kids missing strangers together.

Dad looked so normal sitting there spooning pink milk into his mouth, his long frame sloped over the bowl of cereal. He ate like me too, the same slurp mom hated, same quick swallows. How much of him was in me? I could hold my breath longer than

any kid in my class. Maybe he could too. Was he double jointed? Was he allergic to cantaloupe?

“Who are you?” said Billy from the doorway, still in his Batman pajamas. He looked to me, like he always did.

“He’s my dad.”

“Why are you bleeding?”

“Oh yeah, this old thing. Don’t worry about it. I’m right as rain. Perfectly perfect.” He laughed a stilted chuckle. “Who are you?”

“I’m Billy. I live here.”

“You look just like your mom.”

“I look more like my dad.” He didn’t. He had Mom all over him, her dark curls and small chin. “What are you doing here?” He sounded harsh, as harsh as a six-year-old could sound, and I shot him a look to say please be cool.

Dad wiped his lips with his sleeve and pushed his chair away from the table. “I should be going. I bet your mom’s gonna be home soon. Don’t want to give her the scare of her life.”

“You’re leaving?” I said, panicked.

“Gotta go rest for a while. Take a nap.” He didn’t say anything else. Just opened the back door and headed for the hole. He sat beside it, then slipped in, toes first, like he was dipping into a swimming pool.

“Come back,” I said. But only Billy heard.

I waited for him, sat in the attic at the window. It had the best view of the backyard, and I could see about a foot into the hole. Billy and I had gone out to look at it after Dad came and went, but there was nothing to it. No secret lever or hidden machinery. He wasn't hiding at the bottom. As far as I could tell, there was no bottom. We got on our stomachs and peered into the darkness, and I stuck my hand as far as it could reach, like I was going to fish something out. It was cold in there, the sides wet and sticky, and I pulled my hand back quickly, suddenly afraid.

"It's not right," Billy told me. "He shouldn't have been here."

"You're just jealous," I said. "That *my* dad actually came back for me."

"Something's wrong with him." He stormed back into the house, his hands gripped into fists.

"Don't tell Mom," I called out. He slid the patio door shut behind him, so hard it bounced back from the frame and stood open.

It was the beginning of summer and the attic was hot. Mom spent the days with her door cracked and a white noise machine blasting ocean sounds so she didn't hear us tromping around the house. I couldn't be up there too long without Billy threatening to wake Mom and tattle, and his version of entertaining himself usually involved something loud and messy. I didn't want to make her mad, but even more, I didn't want to tell her who I was waiting for.

We sat in the heat around the cardboard box our TV had come in and played card games while I kept one eye on the window. Billy didn't bring him up, and he didn't talk to me except to say go fish.

“What’s your deal?” I asked him once while we walked to the pool on Madison.

“I just think you should tell Mom,” he said.

“He’s my dad. I don’t have to tell her anything.”

“Fine.” He didn’t look at me for the rest of the day, and when I brought him a hot dog from the concessions stand, he ignored it—left it in the sun until it started to smell.

I mowed the neighbors’ lawns for extra cash. I played *Call of Duty* with my friends while we planned ways to get beer. But always, I was thinking of the hole. Of what Dad would do if he came out and I wasn’t there. At night, I waited till Billy was asleep and Mom was gone and took a flashlight out to the hole. If I heard something, anything, I’d flick it on and point the beam down it, but he was never there.

I’d started seeing that hole in my dreams; nothing would happen to it, nothing came out, but it was always there, like the way you close your eyes after too many video games and can see the map spread out in front of you, and you don’t have hands, just a gun pointing away.

“You look tired, Catch,” Mom said one night before she left. “You wanna talk about anything?”

I thought about telling her that I’d seen him, but it had been three whole days, and I was worried I’d dreamt the whole thing. That she’d laugh and take it all away.

“Billy’s just been snoring is all.”

I stared into the hole for four days straight, but when I saw my dad again he wasn't anywhere near it. He grabbed me from under my bed, fingers squeezing around my ankle.

“Fuck!”

“Your mom let you talk like that?” he said, voice muffled, hand still tight around me.

I should have been mad he'd made me wait so long. Four days felt long then, even if I wasn't waiting for my father to reappear in my life. I was mad a lot then. At the old people who underpaid me for mowing their lawns. At my friends who only wanted to steal their dad's beers and then complained about their dads while they drank them. At my mom for being asleep. The only person I could usually tolerate was Billy, but now he was mad too.

I wasn't mad at my dad though. He grabbed me and it was like a fist in my gut unclenched. He shimmied out from under the bed and flopped on top of it, like a movie star fainting gracelessly. I wanted to tell him to get off my comforter. He looked even dirtier than last time. He wore the same clothes, same blood stain down the front, only now it was brown and stiff. His skin was grey, sort of droopy, like wax melting down a candle. And he smelled like the mouse that had died behind the oven a few years back—foul and rotten.

“Sorry, kid. I've been out of it. Seriously. So tired these days.” He closed his eyes. “But here I am.”

“From the hole?”

“Yup. Found the *Playboy* under your bed, by the way. Didn’t know people still looked at porn the old fashioned way.”

“That’s not mine,” I blurted. “I found it.”

“Relax.” He opened one eye. “Nothing wrong with naked women.”

He sure was cool. He did stink though. “Do you want to take a shower? You look pretty rough.”

“Maybe we should do something, you know? What’s something you’ve always wanted a dad for?”

I grabbed my BB gun and we set out into the woods bordering our house. Dad moved slowly, stopping every few feet to lean over with his hands on his knees. Billy trailed us with his own gun. His dad had bought them for us a few years ago. Mom hated them, had hidden them in the freezer in the garage, but we found them and taught ourselves how to shoot.

“You’re not allowed to use mine,” Billy told Dad. “You’ll make it stink.”

“Shut up, Billy.”

“I can’t go much farther,” Dad said. He looked pale, his lips purple. But we’d made it deep enough into the woods that I didn’t think the shots would wake Mom.

I set an empty can on a molding stump and stepped back.

“Like this,” I showed Dad, pointed the gun at the can. “Close this eye, and keep it really steady.” I pulled the trigger and the shot erupted in my ear. The can didn’t move.

“You ever hit anything?” Dad said.

“I’m not very good.” I shrugged.

I gave him my gun, and he tucked it into his shoulder, bent his head to it as if to whisper a secret. He missed too, we all did, over and over, BBs whizzing into the brush and hitting trees and killing squirrels, wreaking havoc in the peace. At least that's what I imagined then—that every missed shot meant something else suffered.

He was never here for long. A few hours, sometimes less. He looked terrible, like the summer was melting the skin off his face. He came every few days, always while Mom slept or was gone, always complaining of exhaustion.

“I'm so tired. I feel like I could sleep forever.”

I taught him how to play Xbox, but his thumbs moved slow and stiff over the controllers, and he had a hard time following the movement on the screen. We lay side by side on my bedroom floor while I read to him—The Hardy Boys, Stephen King. Sometimes Billy came into my room and listened too, but he always wrinkled his nose and left before too long. Mostly we just sat around and talked. He told me about the house he grew up in, the school he went to, his big sister who died in a car crash in high school. He asked about school, about girls I liked and my best friends.

I wish you could stay forever, I wanted to tell him. But boys weren't supposed to say those things to their fathers. “Did you ever get in trouble?”

“Once my dad made me walk home from church for stealing money from the offering plate.” He laughed. “Don't do that.” He rambled on, about driving west after college, about learning to scuba dive in a YMCA pool. I loved it.

Mom noticed the smell, had come into my room after he'd left one Saturday morning and began pressing her face into my clothes.

“What in the world did you do in here?”

We all three got on our hands and knees and scrubbed the carpet, then pointed all the fans in the house at the floor, but the smell lingered. I sprayed the floor with Lysol and air freshener. Lit matches, one after the other, whenever Dad was inside.

“Maybe something died in the walls,” Mom said.

“It's not a big deal. I'll sleep with Billy and we can just leave the windows open for a while.”

But with the door closed and the summer air coming in, the smell only thickened and soured, like the house was decaying from the inside out. I started sleeping in the attic by the window. It was hot, and the smell seemed to seep in through the floor, but Billy still wasn't talking to me and I liked to watch the hole as I fell asleep.

“Do you know where that smell's coming from, Catcher? Is there something in there you're hiding from me?”

“It's nothing Mom, chill out.” I felt protective of Dad. I didn't want her to be part of it, of him being back, she who'd kept him from me my whole life.

When I found the nails and hair and skin, hardened like jerky, under my bed, I told Dad we had to stay outside, that the house was starting to reek. I pushed the pile of him into a grocery bag, tied it up and threw it away, pinching my nose so I wouldn't gag.

I don't tell Lacy all of this, leave out some of the more disgusting details: he didn't have eyeballs anymore. His tongue was mostly putty in his mouth. It had gotten

hard for him to talk. His lips seemed to curl away from his mouth, but I knew he was still listening. He was gross, even I didn't want to touch him, but he didn't scare me. I was more afraid he'd leave me.

“Dad?” I still loved to say it, though by then it made me sad too. He seemed barely human by then, more earth than man. “Are you going to stop coming?”

He didn't even turn his heads. Kept one hand on his belly. It was hard to know when he was asleep now, not without lids to shut, or eyes to stop seeing. But sometimes he'd start to twitch, like a dog chasing a bunny in its dreams, and I knew he was somewhere else. He reached his other hand to me, to where he thought I was. It was gross. Skin oozing from bone. Grey flesh turning into liquid.

“I don't want to touch you.”

“That's okay.”

“Dad?”

He grunted.

“How did you die?”

The words came up snarled and soft. “Ask your mom.”

The next morning before Mom went to bed, I approached her at the kitchen sink. “Why did Dad leave?” There was nothing new to it, nothing more to it. Tell me why he left. I willed an answer, wanted to know so desperately what no one would say.

Her hands stopped moving in the soapy water, but she didn't turn to look at me. “Oh honey. It wasn't anything you did.”

“Was it something *you* did?”

She frowned. I could still only see the profile of her face, but her shoulders were tense, her lips pressed flat together. “Yes,” she said finally. “We got in a fight and I told him to leave. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“He didn’t have to listen.”

When she faced me, I could see she wasn’t angry, not like I’d thought. She was scared. “He loved you so much. It wasn’t your fault.”

Why did she keep absolving me of guilt? She was the one who had run him off. She’d always wanted too little from people. If you ask for nothing, that’s what you got.

“I wish he’d taken me with him.” My words landed just as I’d wanted them to. Her eyes turned teary, and she fled to her room. And as much as I hate to admit it, it pleased me to know I could hurt her like that.

Mom wouldn’t tell me anything, but there was something to tell. I knew by the way she tensed her body around me. By the way she turned her shoulders when I asked her. By the way she’d always answered *it’s not your fault*, for as long as I’ve asked. What was she hiding? What had she done?

It didn’t take long to find. Mom kept her laptop on the nightstand in her bedroom. I unplugged it from the wall and she didn’t even move. She looked younger when she slept, less tired. It was hard to be mad at her when she looked so helpless, so blank. The password was my birthday, her passwords always were. When the screen blinked to life, I

was met with my face, mine and Billy's, grinning stupidly behind ice cream cones at the fair.

In Google, I typed Adam Farrow, Aurora Illinois. It came up immediately. Farrow, age 29, died yesterday from a gunshot to the chest. Shooter was 2-year-old son, Catcher. No charges are being filed at this time.

Blood pulsed in my ears. I couldn't catch my breath. My fault, my fault, my fault. When I tell Lacy this, she takes my hand, says she's sorry. It's the first thing she's said the whole time, the first time she's interrupted. I don't want to give her any ounce of the weight of my guilt, but it feels good to tell her, to tell anyone.

There was more: a picture of him, young and happy. The article described him as a loving husband and father, a stand-up community member, a talented carpenter. There's a picture of our house, the same one I'm in now. And there is me in the kitchen where I killed him, proudly carrying a plastic pumpkin filled with candy, lips turned rainbow from too many M&Ms, a unicorn horn stuck from my forehead. I bent over the computer screen in the dark and hated that happy kid, hated what he'd done—what I'd done. Hated myself.

That night, I didn't go up to the attic. I stayed in Billy's twin sized bed and listened to his breaths, felt the warmth of his small knee jutting into my back. I cried silently, let my shoulders shake with the knowledge of what I'd robbed myself of—a father, a family that was whole.

"It's okay," Billy said in the dark. His voice, soft and sleepy, made me cry harder.

"You don't even know what I did," I said between heaves.

“It doesn’t matter. I love you.”

Billy and I played HORSE in the driveway. Mom slept inside. I hadn’t seen her since my discovery the night before, and I didn’t know what to say. I shot the ball granny-style, pushed Billy into my invisible tracks when I made it.

“You have to do it under handed,” I said. “Like I did.”

There was a cry from the back yard, and I knew immediately. Billy dropped the ball, and we ran around the house. Mom stood in her pajamas over Dad’s body, the oak reaching above them. Dad’s face was sunken in, his body mostly bones and dirty clothes.

“How—”

“It’s okay,” I said, out of breath. “It’s Dad.” This was it, the end of him.

She looked so pale in the sunshine, and I realized I hadn’t seen her outside in forever—always in her room with the lights out, or coming and going to work in the dark. Her hands shook, and she leaned over her knees to steady herself. Billy patted her gently on the back.

“What?”

“I know what happened,” I said. “I know it’s my fault he died.”

“No,” she said, standing upright, her voice steady. “It’s not your fault. It was an accident.” It’s taken me years to believe her. Even now I imagine what my life would have been if it hadn’t happened. But there would be no Billy. Maybe no you, I tell Lacy.

“It’s not your dad, Catch. I cremated him—sprinkled his ashes right here, under this tree.”

“He’s been visiting,” said Billy. He points to the hole in the ground, but now there were only roots, gnarled over themselves like twirled spaghetti.

“I think I should call the police,” Mom said.

“I think we should bury him.”

“We don’t even know where this thing came from,” she said.

“Dad deserves it,” I said, almost yelling. “He was awesome.”

She let out a deep sigh, cradled her head in her hands.

We didn’t wait for an answer—grabbed shovels from the garage and began to dig. It felt good, the sun on my back, sweat dripping into my eyes. I didn’t know what to say—not to her, not to Billy—but I could dig. Mom picked up a shovel too. Stayed silent, let the slash of metal through soil speak for her, and I hoped it meant she believed us, or had forgiven what I’d done. Maybe she just wanted the pile of clothes and bones out of her yard before her life became an article. Eventually She dropped her shovel and wiped her hands on the seat of her pants, the ones with dachshunds floating across the fabric.

“Get that side, Catcher.” I dropped my shovel too. When I bent close to what was left of his legs—bones in jeans, I held my breath, trying not to breathe him in. “Billy, get that blanket over there.”

Together we hoisted Dad over the hole. On the count of three, we let go. The crunch of his bones hitting the bottom made me wince. Billy spread the blanket wide over him.

“In case you get cold,” he said.

We covered his face with earth, buried him until there was no more hole and no more Dad. Inside, I took the picture from the bible and taped it to the fridge. Now I give it to Lacy—faded and bent at the corners. She tucks it under her pillow, and I turn off the lamp on her nightstand. In the darkness, all I can see are green stars stuck to the ceiling, and the light of her glow-in-the-dark retainer, floating beside me as she says *I love you*.

BURN

Kyle gripped the steering wheel at ten and two, checked his rearview mirror, and turned slowly. The road was gravel from here on out, winding up and around wooded slopes for about half an hour to the house. Kyle's Saturn was old. It whined over the climbs and sharp turns, but he kept it in first and wiped sweat from his forehead. He didn't want Virginia to worry—about making it up the mountain or about the house at the top. His grandparent's house—that's what he'd told her.

She rested a hand on his elbow. "Thanks for inviting me. I really needed to get away from school." They'd only gone on a few dates since he asked her out a month ago. She'd been the most beautiful girl in the bar, blonde and tan, surely the member of some sorority he didn't know the name of. He told her he was a college student too. He had a feeling she was not a girl who'd be okay knowing he hadn't made it out of high school. That he still lived with his mother. That he spent most nights drinking with friends or alone, and liked to smoke his cigarettes down to the nubs so he could feel the heat on his lips.

"You're different than the guys I usually date," she'd said when he bought her a cup of coffee from McDonalds on the way home from the bar. "You've got some secrets."

"Everyone has secrets," he said, but when she told him *not me*, he believed her.

They twisted past a pond covered in bright green algae. Past tiny wooden cabins and stone mansions. Up a short, steep incline, until the tires lost their grip on the gravel, and Kyle had to let the car roll back down.

“We’re usually in my dad’s Jeep when we do this,” Kyle lied. He’d been worried about this. It had been hard enough to get the tow truck up the mountain.

“Should I get out?” Virginia squeezed the seat belt that lay across her chest. “I did have a big breakfast.” Something about the way she smiled made him angry. She didn’t even know to be worried. He’d never seen her in a bad mood, never heard her angry or upset. She’d talked the whole drive up, told him about her childhood pet turtle and where she was applying to grad school. He’d turned on the radio half an hour in, but she’d twisted the knob to a top twenty station and began singing. Of course she had a beautiful voice.

He gunned the Saturn again. Made it three quarters of the way up before the tires spun out and Virginia let out a groan. He’d been embarrassed to pick her up for their dates in his Saturn—embarrassed at the sticky clutch, the maybe-will-maybe-won’t air conditioning. Had tried to convince a buddy to let him borrow his almost new truck, with no luck, and cringed when she offered to drive up to the mountains in her giant SUV.

“You’re not driving,” he’d said, irritated. “I mean, you don’t know the way.”

On the third try, he started farther back—held his breath as he jammed the pedal to the floor—exhaled only when they made it over. He was doing fine.

“Maybe the way down will be easier,” Virginia said.

As soon as his heart had stopped thudding in his ears, they came to a gate. Fuck.

“One sec,” said Kyle, unbuckling his seat belt. The gate was nothing fancy—a rusting metal bar on hinges, pad locked between two short poles. Must’ve been open when he’d come earlier; he hadn’t noticed it. He could open the lock with bolt cutters, but he didn’t want Virginia to know something was up. Plus he didn’t have bolt cutters. He walked around the gate, hands in the pockets of his jeans, face still to hide his worry.

“We keep a key hidden,” he called out, hoping this was true. He kicked at the foliage with the tip of his boot.

“Need any help looking?” asked Virginia.

He squatted—ran his fingers over dead leaves and earth. They were going to have to go back down, and Virginia was going to hate him. Why did he think this would ever work? Maybe he could break the lock with a rock. He touched something plastic. A fake rock. Inside: a silver key. Thank you, Jesus.

“Got it!” He unlocked the gate and swung it inward, but he’d parked too close, and he had to get back in and back it up another few feet. “Sorry about this.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. She didn’t seem suspicious. And why would she be?

They finally stopped at the end of the road in front of a cabin that looked as if it’d been made with giant Lincoln Logs crisscrossed at the corners. Wooden steps led to a porch that wrapped around the entire house. Massive windows faced a view of the mountains, blue and hazy.

“Wow,” she says. “Your grandparents must be loaded.”

“Yeah.” If only she knew.

We'll be in the Keys for the fourth, the man had said when Kyle towed his BMW. *So no rush on the car*. Kyle unlocked the garage door with the combination he'd seen the man use: 1111—he fucking deserved a break-in—and then he gave her a tour of the place like he'd been there before. Like the things in this house were his.

He pointed out the window at the giant oak across the driveway. A plank of wood hung by twists of rope, at least twenty feet from the branch above. “See that swing? Makes you feel like you can fly. Best part of the whole house.”

They walked downstairs to the basement, where glassy-eyed deer heads stretched from the walls.

“I don't believe in hunting,” Virginia said.

“Don't you eat meat?”

“Only sometimes,” she said.

He shrugged, thinking of the venison sausage he'd packed in a freezer for breakfast.

Back upstairs, he patted the wood stove in the living room. “My dad installed this for my grandparents when they first built the place.”

Really, he didn't have a cousin, or grandparents, or a dad. But Kyle with the mountain house did. He had a family, had spent a childhood being loved by them here. The master bedroom wasn't where the man with the BMW slept, screwed his wife. Instead, it was where his grandparents told his dad stories until he fell asleep between them. Only when Virginia shimmied off her clothes and pulled his hips close did he forget, both the people who owned this house and those he wished did.

#

Their clothes were on the floor when Kyle heard keys in the door. The sound of firecrackers erupting in the distance carried through the open door.

“Jingles!” a woman called out.

“Who’s that?” Virginia said, bare legs wrapped around him. “I thought your grandparents were out of town?”

“Shut up,” he said. “I mean, hang on.” He pushed himself off her and dressed before she’d sat up. There was a door by the kitchen to the back porch. A door—a way out. He could leave before the woman knew he’d been there. He couldn’t go to jail—his mom couldn’t afford to stay in her house without his money—and who was Virginia to him anyways, just some girl from some bar. He could go back to that bar and find an identical blonde, maybe with longer legs and a wild side whom he wouldn’t have to lie to. Who’d be just as fucked up as he was. He’d been kidding himself with her, to think she could ever want him back.

“Is everything okay?” Virginia asked. She was so pretty, so clean-looking. Her eyes were blue and green and hazel and golden all at once. When she smiled, a crease deepened her left cheek. Her front teeth overlapped each other slightly, but even so, she could have been in commercials, on billboards. She wasn’t the kind of person who’s trust you had to earn. She assumed the world was a good place, that he was a good person. He slowed his breathing, let his face relax.

“Hello?” the woman said.

“I’ll go see who it is,” Kyle said. He brushed his hair to the side the way his mama did, and tucked in his t-shirt. “Maybe someone’s coming to clean.”

He left her on the bed, told himself to stand up straight. “Hello?”

“Oh!” The woman jumped. “Um. I’m here to feed the cat.”

“The cat?” Virginia said behind him, wrapped in the quilt that had been on the bed.

Kyle laughed stiffly. “Oh yeah. I heard you’d be coming by. We’re just here for the weekend.”

The woman shifted from one leg to the other. She was short and soft, with curls sticking wildly from her head. On her shirt, Winnie the Pooh bent over a flower to breathe it in. A purple stain covered Pooh’s torso. “I’m Candy. I live down the road in the house with the green roof. Bobby didn’t mention that anyone would be here.”

“It was last minute. Good view of the fireworks and all. We can call him if you want.”

She frowned. “I didn’t even know he had kids.”

This was not good. He could push past her and run to his car. He’d be off the mountain before cops would be anywhere close. Virginia’s hand wrapped around his wrist.

“Nobody around here tells me anything,” Candy said. But she didn’t sound suspicious so much as sad.

“Well,” said Kyle, “you know Grandpa Bobby.”

She nodded, seemed relieved to be in on the joke. “This is *so* Bobby.”

They stood in silence. Playing host in such a grand setting seemed too blatant an error. Ownership was one thing—anyone could find money—but to be comfortable in a house meant something else. If Candy could see through him, she didn't show it. She made no move to leave, held her shoulders just as stiff as his own.

“I had a Winnie the Pooh birthday party once,” Virginia finally said, pulling the blanket tighter around her shoulders. Kyle tried to meet her eyes to say *what are you doing?* but she wouldn't look at him.

“I got this down in Florida a while back,” Candy said, stretching the shirt from her belly so he could see a roll of flesh over the top of her jeans. “We were gonna go to Disney world with the boys, but the tickets ended up being too much money, so we just bought some souvenirs at a place off the highway and parked the RV in a real nice campground.”

“Those tickets are outrageously expensive,” Virginia said. Why was she humoring her? Shut up, he wanted to tell her. But when he finally caught her eye, she only smiled, like isn't this great!

“Should we start dinner?” he said, hoping this would end things.

“Yes! You should join us. Candy, is it? What's your favorite kind of candy?”

“I eat every type of candy on the planet. It's what makes me so sweet, ha ha.”

Virginia laughed. Kyle frowned. There was no way she could have found that funny.

“I don't want to intrude,” said Candy. But she bent to unlace her tennis shoes. When she moved he smelled mothballs and cigarettes, like hiding in the closet when he

was little and his dad was drunk. “Though, I must say, it’s been a while since I’ve talked to someone besides Jingles.”

Virginia smiled. “Pets are the best company.”

Kyle wiped his palms on the seat of his pants. “I don’t know. Don’t we want to be alone? You know, for romance and stuff?”

“The more the merrier! She just wants some company,” Virginia said happily as she ducked into the bedroom. “Red or white?” she called to their guest.

What the fuck, Virginia. A whole weekend with her. She was too friendly to ever be tolerable. Friendly is good, though, he told himself. Nice is just what you need. So Kyle began opening and closing drawers in the kitchen, looking for a corkscrew, trying to avoid the woman who’d plunked herself down at the kitchen counter. Maybe if he didn’t acknowledge her she’d disappear. Her eyes followed him around the kitchen, watching him fumble through utensils and measuring cups.

“What’s your name again?” she said.

Did she know? Could she smell the lie on him? He rifled through a drawer. “They must have done some reorganizing since I was last here.”

“He’s Kyle,” said Virginia, pulling a sweatshirt over her head as she reemerged from the bedroom. She searched the cabinets for a pot, and when she found one she filled it with water and set it on the stove. He knew she was used to kitchens like this, ones he’d only seen on other people’s TVs—yards of granite countertops, a deep sink that might as well have been a tub, light switches everywhere to turn on who knows what.

“You know, I think they did renovate the kitchen recently,” Candy said. “It’s just so nice to have human interaction.” She spoke with a drawl that lengthened the more she drank. “You two sure are cute together. Real cute. Reminds me of me and my husband. He died last year.” She went teary-eyed and drained her wine.

She wouldn’t be a problem. He’d seen lots of sad old women when his mama had dragged him to church when he still was afraid enough of Hell to go. There were women with too much red on their cheeks and hair dyed too dark, who wore sequined green, leopard print tops and clip on earrings. He’d always thought those were the most pathetic, the ones who kept trying after there wasn’t any point, but now he saw that it was the trying that kept them going. Candy wasn’t old, couldn’t have been past her fifties, but she looked like she’d given up long ago. Really, she looked like his mama, especially in the days right after Dad died, when she wore the same long night gown for days on end until she stank like something sweet and rotting.

He poured himself more wine, topped off Virginia’s.

“My dad died,” he said. “It sucked.”

“Oh you poor baby,” said Candy. “For a boy to lose his daddy—”

Virginia’s spoon stilled in the sauce. “What happened?”

He could tell her. Maybe a truth would make some of these lies okay. Maybe she would take it in fine—but was that even what he wanted? For her to be okay with his dad scaling a giant poplar he was meant to fell, but instead his drunk ass falling himself. Dead on impact, looking like he could’ve been sleeping except for his jaw unhinged in a scream. Was it possible to be okay with that and also not be a broken kind of person?

He'd had to be okay with a lot of things since then—his face pushed to the concrete on his way home from a bar by a bored cop, dropping out of high school to work at the lumber company where his dad died, getting fired for pissing on the wood, watching his mama's face melt when he told her on Easter it was her fault Dad had been drinking in the first place, that Jesus don't forgive drunks, getting that job for the assholes at Tow Bros. He didn't want Virginia to have to be okay with all that.

“He was a fireman. Died saving a kid.” He didn't offer anything else. Let Virginia squeeze his hand, nodded in thanks when Candy put a hand to her chest right over Pooh, as if to hold her hearth in place.

“Is there a picture of him in here?” Virginia asked.

“My grandparents took it really hard.” He smoothed his hair. “I think they put all the reminders of him away. I don't even think there are even any of me.”

“That must've been before they moved in here,” said Candy. “Your poor grandma. I never even knew.”

“He sounds like a really great guy,” said Virginia, eyes wet. For a moment he felt guilt, and something like surprise, that she cared so much for the made-up death of his made-up father.

“He was a good dad,” Kyle said. “Made breakfast for me and my mama every morning. Never hit us.”

Virginia dipped her head at this.

“I mean of course, unless I'd deserved it. Ya know, of course kids need the belt every once in a while to learn some discipline.” Wrinkles deepened on her forehead and

he realized that he'd read her wrong, that she'd never been hit a day in her life. The most she'd ever done was probably make an A minus on her homework. Probably didn't know how to get in trouble.

"Yeah, sugar," Candy said. "I spanked all my kids. And they turned out just fine. Well, two outta three." She chuckled, face still red and splotchy from her tears—or maybe the wine.

They scooped spaghetti and sauce into giant bowls—did bigger bowls mean more money?—and moved to the porch to watch the fireworks burst in the town below. Virginia kept up a stream of talk he didn't want to listen to. What did he know about fourth of July beach weekends in Charleston or riding beach cruisers along the boardwalk. She didn't seem to need an audience, though, and he stayed quiet.

"You sure can talk, huh Miss Priss?" said Candy, not unkindly.

Virginia laughed. "Even more when I'm drunk."

"Well I've never had vacations like that, but this feels like a celebration. We're having a right ol' party. Wish my husband could be here." Kyle wondered when she'd leave. She was starved for human company, that much was obvious, and in a way she was more familiar to him than Virginia was. Too familiar.

"This doesn't feel like any party I've ever had," said Kyle. He knew what it was like to miss someone, at least the taste of it—the burn of whisky and tears and something deeper, bitter and sour. He never let himself quite feel it though, always another shot swallowed, another punch thrown, before he let it touch him.

“Never been in a place like this, have you?” Candy said. “I can see it all over you.”

“What are you talking about,” he said, hoping Virginia couldn’t see his cheeks growing red under the porch light.

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“Shouldn’t you be getting going?” Kyle said.

“Be nice,” Virginia said. But her eyes were closed, her wine glass empty.

“It’s fine, sugar,” Candy said, her face sallow under the porch light. “We both know who belongs here.”

“I’m going swinging,” Virginia said, pushing herself to her feet clumsily.

“Fine,” Kyle said. He wasn’t sure about this girl anymore. Wasn’t sure if it was even worth lying to her. What did it matter if she knew him or not.

She walked down the wooden steps, across the yellowed yard to the swing. He slouched in his rocking chair, watched her extend and curl her legs in rhythm until she was all movement, her arc growing wider and wider. He didn’t speak. He listened to the drone of cicadas, the far off ruptures of fireworks. The trees had been cleared on the slope away from the porch, and in the distance lights burst in greens and yellows and pinks.

“So your grandparents—” Candy said.

“What about them?” He sounded defensive, even to his own ears.

“They’re pretty snooty. Sort of terrible, really.”

“I don’t have anything to be snooty about.”

There were more pillows in the living room than in his entire house, there were more windows too, and lamps, and candles. Knick-knacks everywhere: porcelain snowmen and ugly pottery. Outside, though, he was safe. The woods smelled like fir and decaying leaves and the smoke from faraway explosions in the sky. The night was warm, and in the woods he was himself. He thought of hunting with his dad. Driving down back roads of Marion county, drinking Budweiser with the windows down. He tried not to think about the way the drive back usually went, something dead in the bed of the truck, his dad shit faced and looking for trouble. And when he couldn't find any, making some.

"Me neither," Candy said. "They only asked me to feed the cat because I'm the only person in the neighborhood without a life."

He didn't know what to say to that. It was probably true.

"You should tell her," Candy said. "It'll make you feel better."

"Tell her what?" He gripped his wine glass.

"You know what." She kept her face to the fireworks below. "You remind me of my husband. He didn't know how to lie either. Made it harder to be married to him, I think."

"I'm not a liar."

"That's what liars always say. But it's okay. Your face is kinder than you want it to be. Gives you away." She propped her legs up on the porch railing. Her toenails had flecks of yellow painted on them so they looked sickly, like they were barely hanging on. "I liked my husband better when he got fat and ugly. He was better with the truth by then."

“Are you going to call the cops?” His car keys hung by the door. He could stop by the swing and tell Virginia to get in, make up some other lie about an emergency at home. Or he could leave her on the mountain, accept that they were never going to work, give her some distrust of the world.

“I won’t tell.” She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her bra, stuck one in her mouth unlit. “But you have to do something for me.”

“What’s that?”

Now she looked at him, her mouth pressed thin in something he couldn’t decipher. “Give me a kiss.”

“You’re crazy.”

“You know what?” She held the cigarette, still unlit, between two fingers, licked it like a sucker. “You get nothing from being good. My husband learned how to be good, and then he died. Esophageal cancer. Couldn’t even say my name at the end.”

“Boo fucking hoo,” he said. “I’m not kissing you.”

“It’s been a long time since someone’s looked at me the way you look at Miss Priss down there. Like you can’t wait to get her alone. It’s cute.” She moved the cigarette deeper into her mouth, spoke around it. “Just one kiss. Real short. No tongue.”

Her lips looked chapped, now covered in flecks of tobacco. Those lips might be worse than Virginia finding out who he was, or learning she wasn’t what he wanted at all. Worse than the police waiting for him at the bottom of the mountain. Than when his dad couldn’t find trouble and decided to make some with his wife or with his kid. He watched

Virginia pump her legs, head tipped to the moon, hair flowing behind her like the trail of smoke left by a firework.

“You can keep your eyes closed.”

“Fuck me,” he said. He faced her—closed his eyes and leaned in.

Her laugh was hoarse, something like a cry. “I’m just messing around, sugar. I just wanted to know.”

“What the fuck,” he said, swiping a hand across his mouth as if just the idea of a kiss had left something sour there. “You wanted to know what?”

“What are you guys doing?” Virginia said, coming up the porch, ducking into the house before she got an answer. Kyle followed her to the kitchen.

“She needs to leave,” he told her. She was sweaty, her ponytail cockeyed on her head. “She’s fucked up.”

“Why are you so angry?” she said, filling up a glass at the sink with water.

“I’m not angry.”

“Fine. I don’t care what you are. You just have to be nice to people.”

What did she know about people? What had ever happened to her to make her think people deserved nice. People weren’t good. He wasn’t good. He wanted her to know, wanted to see her eyes discover she was believing in the wrong things. “Let me tell you something.”

“Don’t.” She shook her head, as if to free something trapped inside. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I’m not a good person,” he said—practically shouted. “I’m actually definitely not.”

“You don’t just get to decide you aren’t good and then stop trying to be. Just believe you’re better and you’ll be better.” She was so earnest, so pretty. What if she was right. What if he wasn’t good or bad? He allowed himself a moment to see it—something beyond this weekend, something after. Driving her home and introducing her to his mama. Teasing her about her want to chit chat with strangers, to talk away silence. Following her to wherever she went to school. He could be better than his dad ever was.

Back on the porch, they lit sparklers and wrote their names in the black with the fizzing sticks.

“It’s just like it always was,” said Candy. And Kyle nodded, agreed through his wine haze even though he didn’t know what she meant.

“Let’s get the fireworks,” Virginia said.

He retrieved them from the trunk of the car, and stuck the base in the gravel of the driveway. His mama never liked fireworks, jerked at the noise, always swore the sound made her pee her britches. His dad had liked anything that could kill—guns, trucks, angry words. How they had ended up together Kyle didn’t know. But there was the time he’d yelled at the ref at Kyle’s football game because of a shit play, and the way he always told Mama how beautiful she was whenever he had a couple beers, and Kyle could see it made her happy even when she was already mad.

He lit the fuse, and stumbled up the steps to stand between the women. The flare climbed closer to the base, and he draped an arm around Virginia’s shoulders. The sky

stretched away forever, empty and filled all at once, and under his hand, Virginia's skin was sticky with sweat.

And then the rocket shifted, pointed to the ground and exploded across the lawn, leaving a trail of scorched earth and sparks. The grass, brittle and yellow, was on fire in seconds. Flames swirled over the yard like dancing leaves.

"Oh," Virginia said, her voice a whisper of disbelief. But Kyle could have guessed this. He'd seen things burn and break, knew how quickly something could be destroyed. He imagined the man with the BMW somewhere in Florida, sipping something fruity, telling his wife her ankles were fat. If this man didn't know how suddenly things could fall to shit, he would now.

"Let's get a hose," Kyle said. "Or fill up some buckets with water." But he could already hear the crack of burning wood as the flames climbed the beams of the porch, and the soles of his bare feet felt the hint of heat. "Fuck, we have to get off the porch."

They stood in a line on the driveway by the swing, facing the house. It burned fast in a blaze of orange. Smoke drifted toward them, stung their eyes. It was beautiful, flames flicking the sky like things alive.

"We have to get Jingles," said Candy. She turned to Kyle, her face panicked. "Come on, y'all!"

"I'll go," Kyle said, but he didn't move. Stood and watched as Candy ran toward the flames. Soon, it would all be gone. Ash. Virginia had been wrong about him, about the way the world worked. He'd be who he was no matter how he saw himself. The seeing didn't change anything. And besides, the world didn't care what you were. Men

fell from trees. Cats burned in houses. People came home to find no home at all, only spoons warped with heat, the rusted door of a wood stove, the face of a snowman figurine, delicate and white among the ash.

DROWN

The pain of delivery clarified the room. Dr. Barton's fuzzy white head, the fetal monitor in the corner, her husband, who was so elated she could strangle him—all of it seemed too clear, the edges dazzling. The window let in afternoon light that traced the men in yellow. She could see the electricity in the room, surfaces glimmering with energy—was that possible? She hadn't expected this stark focus mid-labor. With Alby, the whole thing had gone by in a drug-induced blur.

She'd opted out of an epidural. She wanted to feel everything she'd missed the first time. Maybe if she'd felt the pain of giving birth, maybe if she'd never numbed herself to any second of motherhood, Alby would still be alive.

"It's close now, Margaret. One last push." Dr. Barton's voice was bright. Chipper.

"You can do it, hon. You're so strong." God, Tom was chipper too. Two men urging her through an experience they could never understand, their smiles broad and unmoving.

She was tired of being strong. Thirty-three hours of labor and Tom had beamed through all of it. Had he done that the first time? She couldn't remember.

Tom patted her bare knee. "Almost there."

But something was wrong. Margaret could feel it in the air—the same way she knew in the middle of the night when Alby was having a nightmare. A cry, sharp and

alien, erupted from her, as another thing ripped away, falling from between her legs to the scuffed linoleum with a wet thump.

“You dropped the baby!” she said, gasping. “Is it okay?” Dr. Barton was an imbecile. She’d suspected it from the beginning. He was too old, too cheerful.

“Not to worry. We’ll scoop her right up.” But when he bent to pick up the baby from the ground—Margaret wasn’t sure, couldn’t quite see over the curve of her belly—he only managed to push her farther away with the clumsy tips of his fingers. Something grey and long and wriggling slid across the floor like a puck across ice.

“Is something wrong?” said Tom, his voice hesitant.

Dr. Barton lifted the baby off the floor. In his arms was a fish—shining scales, eyes like glassy pebbles, fins, gaping mouth. His eyes found the nurse’s and the two shared a look. *This poor couple*, the look said. Margaret saw the understanding, the pity, pass between them, and felt her stomach drop.

“I know this wasn’t what we were expecting,” said Dr. Barton, “but this kind of thing happens. It’s rare, but it happens.”

“But, why didn’t the tests show anything like this? Is she—” Tom searched for words. “Will she be okay?”

“I don’t understand,” said Margaret. She looked around the room. Dr. Barton had stuck her healthy child somewhere, hidden her away. Maybe Tom was in on the joke. “Tom, where the fuck is my baby?” She felt the air leave her chest like she’d been punched.

“Try to stay calm, Margaret,” said Dr. Barton. “Don’t panic.”

Nothing in the room was highlighted any more. Everything but the fish faded to the background, the way the world zooms by from a fast-moving car.

“How?” said Tom, hands on his forehead.

“We don’t really know. This is why I really recommend ultrasounds,” said Dr. Barton. Was that blame in his voice? She’d been so careful—had read the articles about the risks of ultrasounds, how in the rarest of cases, they’d been attributed to things like radiation poisoning, cancer. This wasn’t her fault, was it? He tenderly wrapped the fish in a baby blanket with elephants and giraffes and lions running across it. “You were right about her being a girl—groupers are all females until they reach maturity.”

How is he being so calm, thought Margaret, her chest heaving. “There’s been a mistake,” she said. “That’s not mine.”

“Patsy,” Dr. Barton called to someone in the hallway. “Can you get us a tank, please?”

Margaret couldn’t breathe, couldn’t drag in air. Why was Dr. Barton acting like this was normal? Why wasn’t Tom saying anything? Was she high on something—they’d given her something? Was she dreaming?

“I know this isn’t what you were expecting. But she can still have a good life. It will be different, but it can be good,” said Dr. Barton. The nurse offered Margaret a sad smile.

The fish was weighed—five pounds exactly—rinsed, and dropped into a pink plastic pan used for bathing infants. Margaret caught her breath—in and out, in and out,

this much she could do—but still, she sat stunned, feet in stirrups, knees wide, mouth agape.

“I—” Tom sputtered, looking down at the fish, searching for something in its features. Only when Tom brought the fish, wrapped in a sopping blanket, to her chest did Margaret stir.

“No,” she said. “That thing is not mine.”

But Tom laid it on her chest anyways. “What else can we do? She’s ours.”

It wiggled in her hands, gills moving up and down so she could see something pink and secret inside. She and Tom had eaten grouper on their honeymoon in Cancun. It looked then, served with its head still on, as this fish did now. Blank and stupid. Repulsive even—frowning mouth, rubbery lips opening wide to reveal two rows of tiny teeth.

“She has your eyes,” Tom told Margaret. He smiled, slowly. “I bet she’s hungry.”

“What am I supposed to do about it?”

“You don’t want to breastfeed?” said Dr. Barton. “Breast is best, you know.” He was crazy, she decided. Too many years of playing God had made him delusional.

“How would that even work?” She was shaking, sure she was going to vomit.

“Tom, how are you okay with this right now?”

He shrugged, rubbed the back of his neck. “We get another try.”

When Alby was four, Tom and Margaret took him to Hawaii. Tom, a “professional schmoozer” for a company that sold aluminum, was meeting a client there, and they decided to make a vacation of it.

The first day on the big island, Tom woke her with a tray full of waffles and strawberries and coffee he’d ordered from room service. They ate in bed, quietly so as not to wake Alby in the next room, then Tom pulled off her robe and kissed her neck.

Later, they all boarded a rusty pontoon boat. They passed black lava beaches, waterfalls falling hundreds of feet into rainbow mists. When the boat stopped at Honaunau Bay, they donned musty-smelling wet suits and jumped into the shallows.

Alby was a natural in the water, plunging below the surface to perform spastic dances, his eyes open wide to the ocean. Each time he surfaced, he checked that his audience was enraptured. Pearls of water clung to his golden eyelashes, the same color as Tom’s.

“Do I look like a merman?” he asked, flipping through the water, his legs not even touching one another.

“No, like this,” Tom said, stretching his arms above his head and flopping forward. They looked so much alike, both beautiful sun gods.

A woman with large white teeth and deep grooves along her eyes distributed dead fish, smooth and slender as a syringe. Dorsal fins circled the group of waist-deep tourists.

“You can touch them along their backs,” the woman said. “Be gentle, they’re very strong.” She flung a fish to a grey body on her left.

Alby quieted, sunk until the water hit just below his nose. His eyes trailed the movements of the dolphins as they crested the surface. And then he was under, a thick tail fin jerking where his head had been.

Only Margaret saw. The flare of panic in her chest was immediate. She attempted to run through the water, but it was heavy against her limbs. Still, Alby stayed under. He was dying, looking up at the sun through the blue as water filled his lungs. She was certain.

And then he was up again, blonde head bobbing, face tipped toward the sky in a laugh. She was relieved, crushed by the force of it, but there was something else, too. The sickening awareness that she could be so wrong—that motherhood was not a sixth sense after all, but the gamble that at any moment her world would not be destroyed.

On the way home from the hospital, Tom pulled the SUV into the PetSmart parking lot. He dangled his fingers into the pan on Margaret's lap. The bottom of the container had ridges that dug into her thighs through her leggings.

"I'll just be a second," he said.

Margaret watched his back shrink away from her until he disappeared into the store. She was alone with it for the first time.

"Anybody in there?"

Its gills opened and closed as it swam lazy circles in her lap. She hadn't really looked at it—too much shock, revulsion, disappointment. Now though, without Tom there, she let herself study it with a scientific eye, void of sentiment. It was mottled

brown, had a large, cartoonish head and sickly yellow fins. She imagined sending out birth announcements, trying to explain to her parents in Minneapolis what her body had created.

“Hello?” she whispered, leaning her head over the water. Maybe there was something sentient in there somewhere, some whisper of humanity trapped like Jonah in the whale. Maybe she had swallowed a grouper unknowingly. It had been living inside her, and it’d eaten the baby. Maybe the baby was still alive inside of it. Why hadn’t Dr. Barton x-rayed it? Rare, that’s what he’d said. Had she read an article about this once? Well, not this, but something else, something other. But she’d assumed it was fake, that there was no way.

Tom opened the car door, and she jerked, sloshing water over the sides and onto her legs.

“Careful not to wake her,” he said. It was sleeping? Margaret squinted at the fish. How could he possibly know this?

Behind him, an acned sixteen-year-old in a PetSmart shirt pulled a large box on the back of a trolley.

“Congratulations, ma’am,” he said, dipping his head reverently.

Tom removed the car seat, folded down the back seats, and, with the help of the PetSmart kid, heaved the box through the trunk. “She’s a doozy,” he said. “But only the best for our girl.”

Margaret sat in silence, watching the teenager drag the trolley across the parking lot into the store. Her child would never be able to do that—to get a job, to walk, to speak. So many things she'd wanted for the life she'd created, all gone.

“I know this isn't what we'd thought it would be,” Tom said, pulling out of the parking lot. He stopped at the entrance, turned to her and squeezed her shoulder, eyes worried. “I know this is hard. But we'll figure it out.”

“What is there to figure out,” Margaret said. “We were supposed to be coming home with a normal baby girl.”

“I'm so sorry, Margaret,” Tom said. “I know. Maybe we can find a support group online or something. Maybe the specialist Dr. Barton wants us to see knows of someone we can talk to about this.”

At home, Tom shoved the crib to the corner of the nursery that had once been Alby's room, unpacked the 150 gallon tank, and plugged it into the wall across the changing station. For hours, he made trips back and forth from the bathtub to the tank with a lemonade pitcher they'd gotten as a wedding gift from some forgotten relative.

Margaret escaped to the basement, collapsed onto the couch, sure she'd immediately conk out. But she was restless, nauseated, and she couldn't forget what was in the house and who wasn't. She turned on *House Hunters*, fell into a pine and granite induced stupor. Crystal and Bobby toured lavish home after lavish home, eventually settling on a hideously ornate mansion.

“Tacky,” she affirmed to the empty room. How simple Crystal and Bobby's lives were, talking hardwood floors and expanding the master closet—things she used to think

about, too. Crystal would never have a fish baby, probably didn't even know what a grouper was.

Tom adjusted quickly—was flexible, easygoing. When Alby had died, he'd shut down. Stayed in the guest room, buried himself in work, avoided her eyes in the bathroom mirror. She was dizzy with grief herself. Almost didn't notice his absence in bed, his silence over dinner. Barely noticed him punch his fist through the window in Alby's room, right into the sticker of a fireman's helmet above the words CHILD INSIDE. But the next morning, he swept up the glass, brought her a cup of tea, bit her shoulder playfully and said he was sorry for going MIA. Said *I'll never do that to us again*.

Now, he sang to the fish, ran a finger gently along its spine, played Baby Italy podcasts so they could "learn the language together." He flipped through baby name books constantly, read names aloud to the tank to see which ones she liked. For hours, he rocked in the rocking chair next to the tank, laptop open to articles like "Caring for Your Sea Critter" and "So You've Bought a Saltwater Tank" and "Clean Tank, Happy Fish." The temperature had to be regulated with LED lights and heaters. The amount of salt in the water had to be exact, the salinity measured constantly. Evaporated water needed to be replaced throughout the day. The whirring pumps and filters looked like they belonged in a hospital room.

And every few hours, Tom disappeared into the nursery with a bottle of breastmilk Margaret had pumped.

“You aren’t giving it fish food?” she asked him.

He frowned. “No. Of course not.” He waved an empty bottle in front of her face.

“You loved breastfeeding Alby. We just have to think about it in the same way.”

She had loved breastfeeding. The smell of him, sweet and new. The soft down of his head against her skin. The knowledge of what her body could do. She had always felt conned by womanhood—almost angry at Tom for it. He would never wake to find his sheets sticky with blood, would never cry in the fetal position until the Advil kicked in. But carrying Alby inside her, feeding him, was something he couldn’t have. It was hers.

After two weeks with the fish, Tom went back to work.

“Something’s gotta put her through college,” he said, laughing. Margaret was beyond humor. The world, her husband—everything had stopped making sense.

“You know that will never be an option,” she said, stonily.

He sighed, and she saw exhaustion on his face, the same look he’d carried for months after Alby’s leukemia diagnosis—tired desperation. He was going grey, just by the temples, and the skin under his eyes was puffy. She hadn’t given him much thought during all this, she realized now. They’d gotten so good at not talking about things.

“I know,” he said. He smiled, and immediately the look disappeared. “But she’ll have so many other experiences.”

“Don’t leave me here,” she said, ashamed of the squeeze of fear in her chest.

“She’ll grow on you.” Margaret knew he meant it.

She was used to being alone while Tom was at work or out of town. She liked the emptiness of the house, had slowly learned to live in silence and stillness after Alby. She

busied herself shopping, or working in her vegetable garden, or powerwalking with women from her book club. When she'd gotten pregnant, surprisingly soon after Tom had asked her to go off birth control, she'd readied the nursery—painting the walls a soft green, going through Alby's boxes to find what she could use for the new baby. She hadn't exactly wanted another baby, even three years after the funeral, but Tom's excitement was infectious.

Now though, the house was neither shared nor empty, and she couldn't wait to leave. The first day Tom was gone, she walked around the neighborhood, giant sunglasses shrouding her face, headphones in to ward off any chatty passersby. It was early spring, and the world was beginning to green. She felt less dazed, less crazed, with each step away from the house. The thought of explaining her situation to anyone set her heart racing. She hadn't slept much in the past days. She spent her nights feigning sleep, thinking of Alby and all the ways this fish wasn't him, while Tom parented: checked the tank's temperature, salinity, pH. He squatted by the tank until the fish was at eye-level, and sang out-of-tune Billy Joel songs. She always strained to listen, tears dropping into her ears, fists clenching the sheets.

She saw her neighbor Rebecca outside watering her azaleas a few houses ahead. She recognized her expensive haircut, her perfectly applied makeup, and slowed down. There was no way Nancy could understand this. But she had to pass.

“Hi! Margaret!” Rebecca waved and jogged to the sidewalk.

“Oh, hey, Rebecca.”

“We’ve missed you around here.” Her voice turned to a whisper, like she was just gossiping with a girlfriend. “We heard you’re having a hard time with everything.” She shook her head in exaggerated sympathy, then waited for Margaret to deny it.

“Nope, everything’s fine. We’re so happy.”

“Oh great! Can I see a picture?”

She must’ve known what she was asking, must’ve been craving the inside scoop for days. There was no way Margaret was showing this bitch anything. “Sure,” she said. She pulled her cell phone out of the sweats she’d been wearing for a week straight, tilted the screen from Rebecca, Googled *week old baby*.

“She’s lovely,” said Rebecca, sounding disappointed. “I’d heard—”

Margaret’s phone vibrated in her hand. It’d been ringing constantly—well-wishers offering cheerful congratulations, her mother begging to visit. She let Tom deal with them—“Healthy, yes! A bit unconventional of a situation actually. But it’s nice to have a little one in the house again. How’s Benny? That new hip working out okay?”—and the ensuing inane conversation was almost as bad as his resolute delusion.

“I’ve got to take this,” she said. “Take care now.” She left before Rebecca could ask something else of her. “Hello?”

“Hey, hon. Just checking to see how she’s doing.”

“Oh. I’m out walking but I can text you when I get back.”

“You left her? Alone?” His voice was sharp, something in it that hadn’t been there in months.

“What am I supposed to do, Tom? Never leave the house?”

“I don’t care where you go. She needs her Mom.”

“I’m not a mom anymore,” she said.

In the silence on the line, she felt his intensity of his anger, felt her chest burn with the sudden fear it lit in her. She could not let Tom go back to the place he’d fallen into after Alby. To lose him again to that rage would be unbearable. She wasn’t going back there, either. She’d promised herself.

“No, no,” she said. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I’m tired and I wasn’t thinking. You know I haven’t been sleeping.”

Someone called his name. “Measure everything when you get back. And text me all the info.” The line fell silent for a moment. “Don’t leave her again.” The call ended.

Margaret pushed her shopping cart through the vegetable displays at Ingles. A plastic bucket that once held cement mix was in the cart, the grouper circling inside. This was their first outing together. She’d driven across Asheville to the farthest grocery store she could find on iMaps in the hope that she would recognize no one and no one would recognize her. Not that she looked like herself these days. The Margaret Chapman of two and a half weeks ago was always pristine—dressed immaculately, nails painted, hair styled. Now though, she looked like Margaret’s dirty, desperate, much older sister—or maybe a crazy aunt. And she smelled fishy, salty.

Getting the fish out of the tank had been a trickier ordeal than she’d expected. They didn’t have a net—she’d looked unsuccessfully for the one Alby used to catch fireflies with in the backyard—so she’d had to scoop it out with a mixing bowl. Every

time she'd tried to trap it against the glass, it jetted into the corner where the bowl couldn't reach. She managed to block its path, finally, with her other arm. Her chest, shoulders, and chin dunked into the water in the process.

She'd changed her top, traded one ratty t-shirt for another, but not her bra, and in the frigid grocery store air, the wet fabric chilled her skin. She pulled her shirt away from her skin, but the light grey had already soaked dark around her breasts. Great.

She didn't have much time to spend here. According to an internet search and a quick call to Dr. Barton—she'd asked her question through gritted teeth—most salt water fish could survive for a few hours outside of their carefully controlled habitat. The worry was the temperature dipping too far below 80 degrees. She'd wrapped a battery-powered heating pad around the bucket and grabbed a thermometer. It would be fine.

She wanted to make Tom a pot-roast, his favorite, but she hadn't cooked for him in years. She usually ordered their meals weekly from a catering company specializing in local, organic food. They'd gotten into that sort of thing in the putting-the-pieces-of-their-lives-back-together stage of Alby's death. Their bodies were in their control in a way that Alby's never was, and money made it easy. Tom ran. She yoga-ed. They reheated the meals separately. It was fine.

Apology pot-roast seemed like a good idea. Sorry I couldn't give us the baby we wanted pot-roast. Why is the world still turning pot-roast.

Now, though, she couldn't remember the recipe—did she even still have a crockpot? She'd buy one, she decided, throwing onions, carrots, and potatoes into the cart around the bucket.

As she wound her cart up and down aisles, trying to guess what sorts of things her mother put in her pot-roast, other shoppers eyed her cart, the bucket, the fish. Most people smiled, cooed, but there was something else in their glances—pity. She'd seen it before when strangers saw her with Alby after he'd lost his hair.

She stopped in front of a row of sliced salmon, oozing beef, lobsters on ice. The butcher wore a white apron, had twisted his thin grey hair into a braid that coiled loosely in his hairnet.

“Can I get two pounds of chuck roast, please?”

“Sure thing,” he said. “Cute.” He pointed a knife at the bucket.

“What?”

“Your baby. Cute.” He wacked the knife to the cutting board.

An older woman with a green basket in the crook of her arm leaned over the bucket to investigate. “So precious! What's her name?”

Margaret searched her face, then the butcher's, for any trace of humor. They wore the same expression—crinkled forehead, somber smile—no, they weren't joking, they pitied her. She turned, left the cart and walked down the canned aisle. Only when she reached the door did she realize she'd left the fish. And she couldn't leave the fish. Tom would leave *her*.

Back up the aisle, back to the laden cart, where the woman stood stunned. Margaret said nothing, hoisted the bucket over the cart's edge, carried it stiff-armed and slowly so as not to slosh any water over, and left the store.

At night, the tank took over the house. In the room across the hall, Margaret lay next to Tom, his breathing deep and unperturbed. She was still, careful not to touch him, felt distrustful of what their bodies could make together. The heat-light above the tank buzzed, and she swore she could feel the vibrations under her skin. The filter pumped a constant trickle into the water. She longed for the noises Alby had made those first months, the cries, the gurgles. She stayed beside Tom for as long as she could, listening, hoping for the relief of sleep, before escaping to the basement and turning on HGTV.

Sometimes, if she managed to fall into a restless sleep on the couch, she dreamed she could hear Alby screaming. But in the dream, when she opened the door to his room, his bed was always made and empty, as it had been before she'd converted his room into the nursery.

One night while Tom was asleep, she followed the blue glow of the heat lamp into the nursery. Inside, the fish swam from one end to the other, floating like something terrestrial above the rainbow pebbles Tom had dropped inside for "a bit of cheer."

Her mother had called a few hours before, asking to visit. "Please, hon. We want to meet our grandbaby."

There's no baby, she wanted to say. We got cheated. "Soon. It's been a crazy few weeks."

Tom told her she needed to tell them, that the longer she waited, the harder it would be. "Don't feel ashamed. Your parents will understand."

But who could understand this? Now, she knelt before the tank. "Do you sleep?" she said, leaning her forehead against the glass. "Do you think?"

It gave no indication of having understood. It looked the same as it always did, like something that should have gone extinct eons ago.

“Alby?” she asked. She didn’t know why she was looking for her dead son in this fish. Couldn’t help it. But something immense had opened within her with the sound of his name in the not-solitary room, and then she was crying, great gasps that left her breathless. The force of her sobs, her sadness, her anger, shocked her—pleased her. This was the only natural reaction to what had happened, to watching his tiny body shrink, eaten by cancer. This was right.

She grabbed the net that Tom had brought home, stuck it into the tank and swallowed the fish with it. Alby was gone and he wasn’t coming back. This fish was not her child. She quieted herself—closed her eyes and counted to ten. Then, she held the net in front of her with outstretched arms and crept down the hall, stepping into the trail of water droplets. In the bathroom, she raised the toilet seat. How easy it would be, to shove the net backwards through its hoop and drop the fish into the toilet. She’d done this as a kid with the body of a goldfish she’d overfed. She’d been shocked by the suddenness of death, but not sad. She flushed it down the toilet. The next day there’d been another in its bowl.

All it would take was a flush—to simply push the handle as she did every day and watch water fill the bowl, a body swirling along its rim. It would be over. She flipped the net inside out, and the fish splashed into the toilet water. It was dark, like a stain against the porcelain. One mad eye looked up at her. They could try again, try for something easier, something she could understand. They deserved easy after what they’d lived

through, what they'd lost. The stain would swirl and disappear, just small enough to slip down the hole and into the pipes and away, like it had never been hers, like she hadn't made it.

But she didn't feel relief. Instead, panic—something instinctual, innate, beyond reason. There was Alby, dunked under the water by a flash of fin. Alby, hooked to machines. She caught herself in the mirror—a crazed stranger, wild eyed. A woman her son wouldn't know, would fear.

Before she realized what she was doing, her hands were in the toilet, clawing for a grip on the fish. Not Alby, but hers nonetheless, and she reached for it with a desperation she hadn't felt since her son had died.

Finally, she caught it—slick and cold. Under her fingers, a heartbeat, fast, but there. She kissed its—her—head, kissed her mottled scales. She carried her to her tank, released her gently inside. The fish looked dazed but alive. Margaret knelt before her, shaking, forehead pressed to glass. Gills moved in and out, fins waved—perhaps at her. It was okay. *She* was okay. Margaret tiptoed to her room, stripped naked, slipped into bed. Tom turned to her.

“I heard you crying. Everything alright?” She reached for him under the sheets, held his hand.

“Yea. We're alright.”

She started telling her about Alby. Tom would leave for work, and she'd sit cross-legged on the floor in front the tank as if before a shrine, and talk. She told her about the

first few months, how he'd fall asleep at her breast, milk dripping from his chin. About the way he'd bawled when they met Tigger at Epcot because he loved him so much. About his hands and feet and hair and smile and all the Halloweens and birthdays and Christmases, though there had only been five of each. She sang the songs she'd sung to Alby—"You Are My Sunshine" and "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." She taped pictures of him to the tank so the fish could know her brother.

Margaret liked to think she could hear her, that she was listening intently to every word. She searched hungrily for any indication that this was so—a blink, a wave of a fin.

One morning, Tom left a bottle with a sticky note taped to it: Didn't have time to feed her this morning.

She hadn't fed her yet. She hadn't wanted to. But she'd already decided, hadn't she? She'd lifted her from the toilet and chosen to be a mother again, whatever that might look like.

In the nursery, she lowered the nipple of the bottle into the water, then hesitated. She set it on the changing table they'd never gotten around to moving to the attic and peeled off her shirt, unhooked her bra. She dragged a chair from the corner of the room to the tank and stepped onto it. This was right, this was what she knew to do. She leaned over the water, hands on both sides of the tank, and lowered herself until her chest was submerged. Her child found her breast—began to suck.

FALL

It wasn't until Liz had gotten the job in Galway that she realized her imagined life abroad was Jamie-free. Jamie, who texted her every day at 10:15 to make sure she'd taken her antidepressant; who ran six miles before she'd even hit snooze once and wore the exact same outfit on rotation.

"Of course I'm coming. It'll be an adventure," he said, stirring alfredo sauce on the stove. She'd moved in with him three years before—had gotten rid of everything except her welcome mat and the pot that now held the alfredo. He'd needed a pot that size.

"You sure you want to leave the States?"

"Won't you need me there?" he said.

She supposed she would.

It had been months since Liz had opened her eyes in the bathtub, looked through the murky water at the dead roach in the light on the ceiling, and wished that roach had been her. Her therapist told her it was okay to take big steps—that part of feeling better was taking big steps. And Jamie would make this step easier. He always did.

On the City Link bus from Dublin to Galway, Jamie took the window seat and spent the next two and a half hours talking to a big-bellied Irishman two rows ahead about American football and Trump and Irish mythology. Of course he had an opinion on

the decline of the wool industry. Yes, he'd just read that article on urban bike sharing. He loved this—turning strangers into friends, proving his competence. Liz leaned her head against his shoulder, watching a world of green streak by under a bleary sky. Sheep dotted the fields like giant cotton balls. Jamie's shoulder jerked under her cheek with every wave of his arms. When he noticed several nearby passengers watching him, he began performing for the whole bus.

In Galway, they dragged their suitcases over the cobblestones of Shop Street, pushed through window shoppers. Men in business suits drank pints with lacquer-haired women outside of pubs. Straight past St. Nicholas's Church, right on Lombard Street until it became Market. She followed the phone clutched in her hand, rechecking directions to their new place every few steps.

"Smells rainy," Jamie said. The streets were dry, but he was right. The air was cold and fishy and salty. They stopped in front of a square townhouse with a red door, shoved in a row of identical buildings. It looked drearier than the picture she'd seen online—the shutters peeling, the front steps crumbling.

"I think this is it," he said. "Home sweet home."

"Looks pretty murder-y." Like it had just recently been emptied of an old man's belongings.

"How can a house be murder-y? It's quaint."

"Who actually says quaint?"

"Someone needs a nap." Jamie dragged his suitcases up the walkway. A piece of paper was tacked to the front of the door. "Huh." He dropped his bags and ripped it loose.

“Looks like a missing person.” He handed it to Liz and opened the door, leaving her on the porch with Barry Quigg.

Liz peeled back the covers and tiptoed to the bathroom. The sounds of the house were foreign to her—creaks from somewhere above her, a soft tapping in one of the bedroom walls—but Jamie’s snores were the same, both comforting and annoying. She closed the door and sat on the toilet, elbows on her thighs, pajama pants at her ankles, more out of habit than because she needed to pee. The poster hadn’t said much: *missing man, age 25, height 6’1”*, last seen leaving the *Roisin Dubh* on March 23. *Any information on his whereabouts can be brought to Garda Police.* There’d been a picture below, a fuzzy black and white headshot that at first glance looked more like a mugshot, but when she’d brought the paper close to her face, she could see a grainy smile, big and dimpled, and something in her stomach flipped. It was the feeling of meeting the eyes of a beautiful stranger across the subway, the burn of her middle school crush sending her a note in Earth Science.

In the next room, Jamie snored, and she thumbed Barry’s name into the search bar on her phone. How many friends had she played detective for, finding the barista on Elm street for Suzy, the guy at the dog park for Nat. Thousands of lives she’d never know, thousands of people she’d never be or kiss or hurt.

This felt different though. Barry wasn’t a fitness guru posing on the beach in Australia, far away and poreless. He certainly wasn’t Jamie, who posted a picture daily at the end of his run that included his time, mileage, and “extra thoughts;” Liz always liked

them, but she never *liked* them. Berry's page was full of mostly out of focus and over-filtered pictures: in a black beanie, stony faced in front of a bar; leaning on a grungy car in an Aldi's parking lot, smoking; standing with sopping hair before a cracked mirror. The last one was of an empty coffee mug, posted over four years ago. The Instagram of an angsty kid who took himself too seriously. A kid she'd once been.

She clicked his tagged pictures. Ah yes, here was a different Barry—older, smiling, better haircut, handsome. He sat at a kitchen table with a woman with grey frizzy hair and a rather large nose that mirrored his own. He kicked a soccer ball, knelt by a sheep dog, posed with friends. Many of them were posted by the same woman—a blonde with heavy eyeliner and a wide smile. She had better boobs than Liz, but her blonde was bottled and yellow. Jamie disapproved when she compared herself to other women. He didn't understand, didn't know how to hate himself. Jealousy never occurred to him.

In another picture, Barry was suspended between a monstrous diving platform and the ocean. The caption read: "Last dive of the season from Black Rock!" She rested a finger on his figure, just a sliver in the air. What must it be like to fall like that? What was he thinking in the second it took to drop?

In the week before Liz started her new job, she tried to make the house feel like theirs. It was furnished with sunken chairs and worn rugs torn at the corners, but she bought bright, flowered pillows and stuck a plant in every room. The result was a hodgepodge of colors and textures, mismatched in a way that she decided she liked.

She turned up her “Happy” playlist and scrubbed the walls, leaving grimy rings around the tops of every room where she couldn’t reach with her sponge. When she heard the plucky guitar of Fleetwood Mac, she thought of the man from the poster. She’d seen on Facebook that he’d gone to a Stevie Nicks concert six years ago in London.

Where was he? Did he know he was being searched for, sought after? Was he afraid—of being lost, of being forgotten? Maybe he was trapped, taken hostage. She wondered what his normal life looked like, if it was one she could slip into easily.

The roar of the vacuum drowned out her singing, but she decided Barry was the kind of man who’d smile at her shitty voice, and she sang louder, let herself forget the new job and the new place and all the reasons she didn’t deserve them.

She stretched the vacuum under the coffee table and the cord snapped free of the wall. The shock of her voice in the empty room brought her back to the house—the afternoon light pale and flat, the furniture ugly.

“Can you keep it down, baby?” Jamie called from his office. He worked from home, helped with the cleaning when he wasn’t on his computer building websites about kids with autism or gardening or vaccinations or whatever he’d most recently become an expert on.

“Almost done.” She plugged the vacuum back in and hummed under her breath.

Jamie left early for the farmers’ market, placing a cup of coffee on Liz’s bedside table beside twenty euros and a pink post-it note that said, “If you need anything.”

The second the door closed, she hopped out of bed and into leggings—the purple high-waisted ones that sucked in her belly. If she bumped into Jamie, she'd tell him she'd been out for fresh air, exercise. She didn't really like exercise, but Jamie would be too thrilled to question it. He was always trying to get her to run with him—*endorphins are the best cure for a bad day!*

Galway was a place of contradiction. Fresh-faced tourists bustled into hidden side streets. Orange and Green flags waved in a dreary sky. A toddler laughed on the steps of a giant stone cathedral. Sleek cars with tinted windows rolled over the ancient cobblestone roads. There was no place like this in America, nothing so long-lasting. It gave her both a sense of grandeur and a reminder that she was no one. Galway only knew new Liz, and nothing old Liz had ever done to herself could ever touch a place of such permanence.

It took about twenty minutes to cut through Shop Street. Without Jamie, she was invisible. The man in the red beanie playing Galway Girl on his guitar, the flutter of green and orange and white flags pulled from parallel windows over the street, the smell of waffle cones from Gino's Gelato. None of it was for her, and this made it better.

The Roisin Dubh was just over the river, a right at the yogurt store, the bright red façade impossible to miss. She'd never been to a bar alone, and she paused before the thick door. Being with Jamie meant she didn't do much alone any more, and she'd finally taken her therapist's suggestion a few months ago to cut back on alcohol. But new Liz could face the world solo. New Liz knew when to stop drinking.

The inside was dimly lit and mostly empty. A fire crackled in a great stone fireplace. A dark set of stairs twisted upwards. She ordered a Guinness and sat at the bar beside a blonde woman, the only other person there. He'd sat somewhere in here too, by the fire maybe, or at the window with his friends. The same flyer that had been on her front door was taped to the wall behind the bar. Already, it felt like hers, like she was responsible for its placement.

"They haven't found him yet?" she asked the bartender, a balding man in a turtleneck.

He looked up from drying glasses. "What's that?"

She pointed at the flyer. "Him."

He turned and studied it, as if he'd never read it before. "I just started here." He went back to wiping the counter.

The Guinness was good, soothed her nerves. She was just getting a drink, that's all. Curiosity was harmless.

"You know Barry?" said the blonde woman a few seats down without lifting her eyes from her drink.

Liz waited a beat to answer to make sure she was talking to her. "Yeah. I mean no." She racked her brain. "I mean a little. We met at school once."

"You're American?"

"Yeah. I studied here one semester in college." The lie came easily.

"He's been gone for three weeks. Nobody seems to care anymore."

“I care.” Now the woman met her eye. Liz knew her immediately, the blonde from Barry’s pictures.

Her eyeliner wasn’t as flawless as it had been on her phone. It was uneven, and smudged under the eyes so it looked like her cheek bones were bruised. “Weird we never met. We dated all through high school.”

Liz swallowed a gulp of beer, wiped froth from her lip. “You’re his girlfriend?” She hoped her voice didn’t seem too desperate for an answer.

“No.” The woman frowned and looked away. “But if you know anything, or think you see him or anything, call me.” She tipped the rest of her glass down her throat and slid a piece of paper across the bar. “The police aren’t doing shit. I wrote my number on the back,” she said, slipping on her coat. “That’s my dentist’s card. I’m Nell.”

Liz already knew this. She knew her name was Nell, and that she was twenty-nine and that she had a tramp stamp of a hibiscus that Barry teased her about. She knew she worked in a hair salon and that she preferred red wine to white. She knew she’d been to Costa Rica with Barry last summer and that they’d attended her friend’s wedding in matching Converse. And she knew what the pictures couldn’t tell her, that they’d whispered promises to each other after sex, shared eyerolls across the room at another’s expense, made the other cry and made the other laugh, and all the other million things that make up what it is to love. But, Liz reminded herself, Nell had lost him.

Monday morning was bleak and wet, like all the mornings had been so far. The heat wasn’t working, and the landlady hadn’t sent someone to look at it, so Liz and Jamie

clutched each other under the duvet in sweatshirts and wool socks. She wasn't ready to kick back the covers and let in the cold. Cold meant orange juice and a small white pill and walking in the rain and facing an office full of strangers and texting Jamie updates and feeling too much like old Liz.

"You need me to walk you there?" Jamie asked, and she opened her eyes to his, kind and always filled with something like concern.

"I'm fine by myself," she said.

The streets held an inch of brown water that looked like ale. What did it taste like—the dregs of pavement and rubber soles and rain. As she walked, she searched the faces passing her for his nose, his freckles. She wasn't expecting to find him, but it felt inevitable. Somewhere he was waiting. She had time to stop in Elle's for an Americano before work, she decided.

"An Americano, please," she asked the woman behind the counter. And then on impulse, "Actually two."

She set his cup on a table overlooking Shop Street and sat across it. She sipped her own, opened a pack of sugar into his. He liked sugar, had a sweet tooth. It was how his mom had taught him to drink it. Her phone buzzed.

How's work? A text from Jamie. You're so strong.

Great, she responded. She dropped her phone back into her purse and let herself feel the weight of Barry's hand on her knee.

I'm waiting for you to find me, he said.

Later, she crossed the milky water of the River Corrib, following its churning coils until it reached the ocean. Swans—some startlingly white, some yellowed like old newspaper—watched her from the riverbank, flipping bottles and wrappers with their beaks.

At the mouth of the river, the road turned and she stepped onto the promenade that snaked between a field and the ocean. Salty gusts pummeled her face, but she opened her eyes wide into the wind instead of squinting, relishing the sting until thick tears rolled down her cheeks. The sun drew her shadow far in front of her, and her long hair whipped from her face in a way that made her feel romantic, heroic. But a rollerblading middle-aged man in a track suit leered at her, and she pulled her hood around her hair.

He'd biked this promenade at least once with Nell. Liz had seen the picture. In it, they were laughing, their legs sticking straight from their seats like the wings of a plane. She didn't like thinking that he might come back to a place he'd shared with her, but it was possible. She and Jamie shared pictures like that too, all forced smiles and stiff posing.

"Where should I go?" she said into the wind. A woman pushed a stroller passed her with a wide berth and raised eyebrows.

She walked up and down the promenade as the day grew more grey, looking for the wide shoulders she'd already memorized. Her phone vibrated in her pocket, but she ignored it. She stopped at the Ferris wheel on her right, crossed the street.

"Two, please," she asked the man at the gate.

"But you're alone."

“Two.”

She went round and round, letting herself imagine he was there with her. People have believed in men they can't see for forever. People talk to God, visit the graves of dead loved ones, fantasize about movie stars. Sometimes those absent were more real.

Don't worry about that, Barry told her. All that matters is what's good.

She checked her phone constantly, ignored the calls from work, before she remembered there was no way he'd contact her. She screenshotted any picture she could find—saved them on a password protected file on her computer.

Everything in moderation, her therapist had told her once when she took up scrapbooking, spent hundreds of dollars on thick paper and custom made prints, left scraps of paper and ribbon all over the house, stopped sleeping to watch How To videos on YouTube. *Try not to distract yourself from feeling bad, let yourself really feel it.* But this wasn't like that. This was for the good of the world. She was being a vigilant citizen, helping the police find a man who needed her help. The more she knew him, the more likely she'd be able to find him.

She thought of him as she fell asleep. She pictured his face in the dark when Jamie reached across the bed. When she made tea, when she painted her nails, when she shopped for a rug for the living room.

Jamie had given her the names and numbers of counselors in Galway, said he thought it would be a good idea to keep going. But she didn't want another person

wrapped in her life. She could picture herself on a beige couch in a beige room, revealing she was in love with a man she didn't know.

"I'm feeling great. Work is just what I needed," she told him one night in bed.

"We just don't want another repeat of last year. And you've been spending so much time there," Jamie said, sticking his cold feet between hers. "I miss you."

"What are you talking about?" she said, phone resting in her palm. "I'm right here."

Liz swirled champagne in her glass. Jamie had gotten it to celebrate her first two weeks. He didn't know she'd been fired just today. Her would-have-been-boss had sent her almost daily emails demanding to know where she was, when she was starting, had she gotten the starting date wrong? The messages grew shorter and more terse, the last one saying only the job was no longer hers, good luck with your future endeavors.

"I'm so proud of you, baby," Jamie said. "I'm so proud of how far you've come in the last few months." He grinned and bent to one knee. "Will you?" He slipped on the ring before she could answer.

When it caught on her knuckle, she twisted it past and kissed him. After all, he was the one who'd found her in the bathtub when she'd swallowed the pills. He was the one who'd driven her to therapy when all she wanted to do was watch CSI and eat melted chocolate chips. He was the one who swore this whole depression thing didn't matter to him, because it wasn't who she was.

Who was she, anyways? And what would Barry think when she found him, seeing that ring on her finger? She could tell Jamie right now. *There's someone else.* Instead, she finished the champagne and let Jamie fuck her on their sagging mattress, believed him when he told her he'd love her forever, wished that it was enough.

She let herself believe in him—chose outfits she thought Barry might like, braided her hair the way Nell had in one Instagram picture. She bought a bike at a used shop and pedaled side streets until her legs ached and her lungs burned. She read books he'd liked on Good Reads, ate where he had, did her eyeliner like Nell's. She loved Barry, even as she knew he didn't exist outside of her brain, off her screen.

She noticed things about Jamie she never had. The way he scraped teeth to fork whenever he ate, how he couldn't go to bed without her beside him. How loudly he typed on his computer while he worked. And other things too, the way he held her hand whenever they crossed the street like she was a kid. The way he shushed her if she laughed too loudly in public.

Tell him the truth, Barry told her. Tell him what you want. But she didn't say anything.

She sat at the bar of the Roisin Dubh, four drinks in, not drunk enough to forget her life, but drunk enough to be okay with it. She let Barry sit with her, let him buy her another drink. She tried to keep one foot in reality—he wasn't really there, he didn't really know her—but the alcohol made it harder than usual.

You look beautiful, he told her.

I am, she thought, and blushed.

You have to find me. I need your help.

It was all she wanted, to help him. It had always been her who needed saving. Who caused worry and demanded attention. But she was a different person now. Barry made her different.

A man approached her. “Can I join you?”

“I’m with someone,” she said.

Everybody here wants you, Barry said, leaned in and bit her shoulder. She felt powerful, strong, desirable. But on the way home she barfed over the bridge into the river, watched the brown chunks disappear into the swirling water.

She knew something was wrong immediately. The door was unlocked, all the lights were on. She looked at her watch—1:15 AM. Shit. She hadn’t realized it was so late. She pushed open the door.

“Where’ve you been?” Jamie sat on the couch, her computer in his lap. He sounded breathy, worried.

“I was just getting drinks with a friend. Sorry, I forgot to call.”

“Don’t you have work tomorrow?”

“I’m an adult, Jamie. I can take care of myself.”

“You smell like vodka and barf. And your makeup’s all messed up. You look insane.”

“It’s not insane for me to stop needing you.”

“Because you’re suddenly so competent.” He stood, began to pace in front of the couch. “I went to bring you lunch today. To surprise you at work.” He stopped and faced her. “You weren’t there. And then I came home and checked your computer.” He pointed to where it sat open on the couch. On the screen, dozens of Barrys smiled up at her. “Who’s this guy?”

And she knew she couldn’t do it. The crack in his voice of hurt, the way he made her feel safe. It wasn’t fair of her, to stop needing him. She’d required so much, only to ask for less. He’d done nothing but love her, even when she didn’t deserve it. She was a fuckup. She needed him.

“He’s nobody.”

They stayed up for another couple hours talking, the way they had when they’d first started dating and they couldn’t get enough of each other. But then their conversations had been punctuated by laughter and sex and wine. Now, they sat at the kitchen table and Jamie mapped out her plan of action—therapy, exercise, extracurricular activities.

“It’s all about structure,” Jamie said, writing a schedule on a piece of notebook paper. “You weren’t ready for any of this.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. And she meant it.

When he finally fell asleep on the couch, pencil still in hand, she pulled out her phone, flipped to her favorite picture of Barry, one with Nell on a hike. Nell looked into the camera, a close-lipped smile on her face, but Barry looked at something off screen, beaming. She could delete him, it would be as simple as that. No messy breakup, no

splitting up their belongings or calling her parents. Instead, she found the card with Nell's number, wrapped herself in a scarf and coat, and locked the door behind her.

Liz could see Nell's hair first, white and floating as if in midair. The air smelled of the day's rain, but it was a rare clear night, and the moon hung brazen in the sky. It felt good to be out of the house, to remember she could exist outside its walls even without Jamie.

"You're lucky I was out," Nell said without turning away from the ocean. "Why'd you text me? Have you heard something?"

"Well, no. I need to know about Barry."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

Nell lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. "We were engaged once."

"You and Barry?" She hadn't known, hadn't seen any evidence anywhere.

"Duh. I thought if we got married, he'd change. Stop being a selfish prick. Grow up." She inhaled hard, then breathed a column of smoke into the sky. "Didn't work."

This didn't sound like the Barry Liz knew. The Barry she knew gave his leftovers to homeless men on the corner. He gave everyone the benefit of the doubt and always remembered to bring his own bags to the grocery store.

"Maybe you deserved it." Liz desperately hoped she did.

Nell only laughed. "You don't know shit. The only thing you can count on is that people will disappoint you."

“You’re wrong.” But something in her chest deflated. Liz knew the biggest disappointments were self-made.

“Jesus.” She whipped her phone out of her pocket. “Look.”

On the screen, a naked man walked along a highway wearing a cowboy hat and flippers on his feet. The headline read Missing Man Found, Arrested for Public Indecency and Substance Possession.

“That was last year. He’s probably just on some fucking binge right now, high out of his mind.”

“There’s no way,” Liz said. “That can’t be him.”

“You don’t know anything about him. Why do you even care?”

Liz doubled over, stunned. How could a man she didn’t even know betray her? But no, this was all on her, all on her fucking romantic delusions. He’d never been real, but now she knew the possibility of him hadn’t been real either.

“Come on,” said Nell. Liz, unsure of what else to do, followed.

They passed the lighthouse, the Famine Ship Memorial, the wide, grey beach, the Ferris wheel, neon pink against the setting sun. An old man wobbled by on a turquoise cruiser. A stray dog trailed them in hopes of scraps. They didn’t speak; Liz didn’t know what to say. At a stone wall, the wide sidewalk turned toward the ocean, leading to a great metal contraption rising from the choppy seas, not far from the water’s edge. Black rock, same as it had been in the picture of Barry.

“You’re supposed to kick it,” said Nell, brushing hair from her face. “For good luck.” She pointed a boot at the wall to illustrate.

Liz mirrored her move, kicking her ballet flat too hard into the stone, her toe firing in a sharp jolt of pain that felt deserved. She teetered, bringing her now-scuffed shoe back to the ground. She watched Nell stride down the cement walkway, stopping at the benches to pull off her jacket, her jeans, her shoes. Her skin was almost phosphorescent, too fragile and white for the open air. Nell walked barefoot from the benches to the fixture, the cement walkway raised several feet out of the water. She climbed the diving tower without hesitation, ignoring the lower platform and rising to its highest point, what Liz guessed to be about thirty feet from the waves below.

Nell's face was now too far from hers to see, but in the moonlight, her shoulders were squared, her head held high. She peered from the edge to the water below, teeming and black. Then, she pointed her arms above her head and fell, her body graceful and lithe mid-air in a way it hadn't been moments before.

Liz's eyes combed the water, watching for the bob of the Nell's blonde head. She counted the seconds, holding her breath to gauge the time, to see if she, too, could survive with no air.

She couldn't. She gulped in shallow breaths long before the woman rose, hours before, years before. When Nell heaved her body up the yellow ladder, when she passed Liz on the walkway, Liz had lived lifetimes.

“Your turn.”

“I'm not doing that,” Liz said.

Nell shrugged. “Your choice.”

It was. She could walk home alone, shower off the day, wake up and be the person Jamie deserved. She could keep looking for a man who would never deserve *her*. She could fly back to the States, get another job, a cat maybe, and start over again. Or sell her belongings and backpack through Europe. She could do whatever she wanted, be whomever she wanted.

“I’ll do it.” Liz stripped, left her clothes in a pile beside Nell’s. The cement steps were cold. The wind off the ocean was colder. From the top platform, the ocean looked like satin, like she could fall to it and into sleep.

“Just jump!” Nell said from the shore.

She hit the water, sliced down, down. The cold was shocking, a full body scream. She stilled her limbs, let out her breath until she dropped deeper and blood pounded in her ears like waves crashing into sand. It was blacker than she’d ever seen, and she opened her eyes wide to it. Here, she didn’t need Jamie. And she didn’t need Barry either. She could breathe in the darkest waters and become something else, a part of the ocean, powerful, mythical. Her hair would turn to seaweed, her skin would shimmer green, and her legs would morph to fin.

She tipped her head up. Her lungs began to scream, and pressure built in her ears. She could still see moonlight, pale and distant, but there. When her lungs began to scream, she faced the sky, began to kick.