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The Transmigration of Souls

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Samantha N. Lamph

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oranges</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reroute</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You’ve Seriously Considered This</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everybody’s Laughing, Everybody’s Happy</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridge</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanksgiving 1999</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Saw the Master</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ORANGES

It gets easier once you accept that nobody is coming to save you.

Kind of like how those eight hour shifts at Hudson’s used to go by a little faster when I realized that I wouldn't be going home early. Or how once I forgot I was exercising, I could run miles and miles without thinking about how tired I was.

I don't flinch at the sound of shoe leather against gravel, anymore. I don't blink when I hear a rifle being loaded or sense a clenched fist nearing my left temple. The canvas bag over my head doesn’t irritate my skin anymore.

I know what is going to happen to me. They didn't try to keep it a secret. I was only in this dark room a couple hours before they brought in a guy who could speak English. My face was already torn open and pulpy from the first beating, I could barely hear him through the ringing of my ears.

“How are you doing?” He laughed and put his cigar out on the table between us.

“I’ve got to tell you, you don't look so good.”

“What's going on? What do they want?” I asked, hoping this guy wasn't all asshole.

“You remember a couple months ago? It was all over the news. Family man. Three kids. Got his head chopped off on live TV?”

I stared blankly back.

“You're fucked.”
I did remember. Me and a few of the other guys had all seen it together, on the small little TV they had at some hospital we were staying in for the night. It was eerie. I remember how laid back they were about it. “Oh, nothing going on here.” Their calm faces teased. “Just slicing this guy’s head off.” And that’s how it was. A complete man one second, a head rolling on the floor the next. Nothing too fancy. I was even able to eat lunch an hour later, without getting nauseous or anything. Even with my weak stomach. It was a sloppy joe. A mother fucking sloppy joe.

You know how, in the wake of a tragedy, people use that tired old line about hearing about these sorts of things, but never expecting them to happen to them? You know, I've seen people’s homes burn down before, but I never expected it to happen to me. Or, I’ve heard about people being robbed at the ATM, but I never thought it would happen to me. Well, when I saw that guy’s head being chopped from his body, I thought about how it would feel if that happened to me. It probably wouldn’t even hurt. At least not too bad. I knew that there was a possibility that something like that could happen to me. But I also thought that thinking about it meant that it would never happen. As if mentally preparing yourself for something horrible made you exempt from it. I’ve thought about things in these terms since I was a little kid.

I tried a few times to escape from my cell, always knowing it was of no real use. Even if I could get out of the five by five metal box steaming with my own sweat, reeking of my own shit, there’d probably be nowhere to go. There are always men lurking, stocked with guns that probably weigh more than me.
I often wonder if this was really meant to be my end. Am I really supposed to go out like this? It just seems too epic a death for a guy who never really left Tennessee. Except for this one time. And look where that landed me. I'm not complaining, I just feel like I should have died like anyone else. Like any normal person. I should have gone quietly. In my sleep. A car accident, maybe. Something a little less dramatic.

I think about you a lot, too. I think about how you told me not to go, how you'd never forgive me if I died over here. Or even got hurt over here. I'm calling your bullshit, now. I know you forgive me already. You acted real tough at the airport. It was cute. You were trying to protect me in your own way. I loved you for it.

“Just be careful, Andy.” You were the only one who I’d let call me that. I wouldn’t even let my mom call me Andy. “Look behind you every once in a while. Or whatever it is they train you to do.” Your smile was weak. Shaking. You laughed and I could already hear the tears. You kept swallowing air, trying to hold the tears back, prolonging the inevitable.

I wish you would have cried that day. I want that for you more than anything in the world. It makes me sick to think of you back home, crying alone in our bedroom because you didn't want to cry in front of me. Because you wanted to be strong for me. I think of how you'll always be choking on those words that you wanted to say to me, the things you wanted to yell at me the last time you ever saw me. You’re just a selfish piece of shit, Andy. Or, I need you. How could you leave me? That’s what I imagine you wanted to say. Instead of calling me an asshole or punching me in the nose, you smiled and kissed me goodbye in the sweet way that you do.
The plane ride had been smooth enough. Not like that flight to Los Angeles when I was a kid. The only other plane I had been on. Hardly any turbulence, this time. I thought it was a good omen. That was the first time I met Rembrandt. The first time I met anyone from my unit, actually. I didn't want to talk to anyone, I just wanted to fall asleep. He started yapping right away, though. I don't think we were even in the air before he had asked me whether I was married or had a girl back down on the ground. He smelled like Misty's cigarettes. Those horrible things you used to chain smoke to look older. You were smoking them that first night we met at Shep’s place. You leaned against the wall in the crowded garage, tilting your head to the side each time you exhaled. Attempting to seem seductive and sophisticated in your wrinkled sundress. Made me wonder about his sexuality.

“So, what's she like?” he asked, reclining his chair back.

“Who?” I asked, already losing track of our mediocre conversation.

“The girl on the ground. Your lady.” He laughed.

“She’s cool, I guess.” I felt weird talking about when you weren't around.

“She cute, man?” he asked.

“That's why she's my lady.”

He turned out to be a good guy, I learned later. Most of them were. It wasn't like in those war movies, though. We didn't hold each other up by the backs of our uniforms as we climbed steep hills. Nobody ever had to carry another person over their shoulder in the chaos of battle. I never had to stare into the eyes of a dying comrade and hold his hand as he made his way into the light. We never had a chance to feel that intense bond.
Nothing ever happened to us. We were bored most of the time. We'd play poker with the cards that Carter's wife put in his suitcase. We'd drink the whiskey we found at the local convenience stores, but we'd only buy the names we knew from back home. It felt like we were meeting up with old friends, throwing back double shots of Jim Beam or Jack Daniels. Sometimes the guys would have conversations about their normal lives, when the mood was nostalgic enough. I didn't take part in those.

I remember the worst things now. The memories can be triggered by anything, really. The humidity in this room reminds me of that time we went to Miami. You wanted to see the ocean, and I wanted to do it right. We both got the week off work and I drove us down in the Tacoma. When we got there, all you wanted to do was walk up and down the beach, over and over again. You wouldn't stay in the water for more than five minutes at a time, even when I was trying to teach you how to swim. You just wanted to walk and I held your hand and walked with you. You wore that green bathing suit that I like, the one with the beads on the straps. Your hair was still damp from our last stint in the water and it curled in that way that you hate. Your nose was already getting sunburned. You wouldn't stop thanking me for taking you there. Kept stopping and standing up on your tiptoes to kiss my chin in that giddy sort of gratitude I thought only a child could feel.

Or that morning, not so long before I left, when you woke me up early and told me to get in the car. It was my day off, a Wednesday, and the sun was already out at seven in the morning. You wouldn't tell me where we were going. You just threw a pair of my old jeans, a sweatshirt, and my boots on the bed and told me to get dressed. You
drove. I felt awkward about that. I asked if you could just give me the directions and let me drive, but you wouldn't go for it. When we were out in the middle of nowhere, you pulled into a rest stop and parked.

“Gotta pee already?” I asked.

You just rolled your eyes and told me to get out and follow you.

You walked past the bathrooms and the weird little bulletin boards with pictures of missing children and fliers for landscapers. Once we were far enough from anything man-made, we walked through dead weeds that came up to our knees, scaling a hill. You looked back every couple of minutes to make sure I hadn't fallen too far behind. Sweat dotted your forehead, but you looked more focused than I had ever seen you. When we’d gotten pretty far up, you made a sharp turn and stopped in front of a giant rock.

“Here we are.” You put your hands on your hips in triumph.

I looked around and then back at you. “You brought me to a giant rock?”

You giggled and walked around to the other side of the boulder, hunched down, and disappeared from my sight. I followed you and saw that the rock was hiding an entrance to a small cave. You were sitting Indian-style. And there was just enough room for me to crawl in and sit beside you.

From where we were, we could see everything around us, for miles and miles. I could see our car, still alone in the parking lot. Past the rest stop and the highway, were just fields of weeds, yellow grass, and patches of wildflowers.

“It's great, right?”
“We should move the mattress up here. Survive off of pop tarts and granola bars.” I laughed but, on some level, I really wanted to.

“Maybe one day.” Then you reached into your bag and pulled out two oranges. You handed one to me and started peeling your own. I didn’t think to ask why you had brought oranges. They had always been my favorite fruit, but I didn’t remember telling you that. Why would I? When I had pulled all of the skin off and tossed it down to my feet, I pulled a slice from the fruit started to chew on it. The citrus burst in my mouth and I felt like a little kid, again. Just sitting in my backyard on a summer afternoon, eating an orange in the sunlight.

I'm glad that I've got this bag over my head. I'm not sure how these guys would react to a grown man sobbing like an old woman. I'm pretty sure it wouldn't be the best situation for me, though. Not like it really matters. Could things really get any worse for me? It's so weird– all the crying I've been doing lately. I hardly ever cry. You know this. I would say that you've never seen me cry, but that wouldn't be true. There was that one time. I forgot Mom's birthday. It occurred to me the next day when I was writing the date on a deposit slip. I cashed the check, we walked back out to the truck, and as soon as we had merged back onto the street, the tears started up. What kind of asshole forgets his mother's birthday? She pretended not to be mad, gave me a hug and said she understood that I had been busy. That didn't ease my conscience at all. I imagined what a mess she must have been the day before. No calls on her birthday, not even from her only son. I hope she’s forgotten that by now.
That night in bed, you played with my hair as we watched TV. I was trying to ignore your humming and pay attention to whatever it was we were watching. You pulled yourself up close to me, grabbed the remote, and turned off the TV. You started whispering in my ear.

“I love you, I love you, I love you” Over and over, slow and melodic.

“Words lose their meaning with repetition.” I felt like a piece of shit even as I said it.

“Not when people mean what they say.”

You detached yourself from me, rolled out of the bed, and left the room. You didn't talk to me for two days. I'm not so sure you ever forgave me. I don't know how you could forgive me for saying something like that.

The first time we met, at that party at Shep’s apartment, you didn’t like me. I was about to punch the guy you were with in the face because he had some shit to say about Shep’s father, who had practically raised me. You called me an asshole in front of everyone. I can’t remember how we got past that point and moved on to where you could stand being in a room with me, and, finally, where you told me you loved me. A lot of the time, I think you were right the first time.

The day they got me, we were all at some outdoor market. It reminded me of when my mom used to take me to the old fairgrounds on Saturdays. People would come out and sell their crafts, the carrots they grew in their gardens, ugly puppies. Rembrandt and I were standing in front of a fruit stand. He was comparing two kiwis. I was holding an orange up to my nose. Sniffing. Then peeling. Trying to remember our cave. All of a
sudden I felt a violent thud on the back of my skull. The orange fell from my hand, onto
the cement. Rembrandt turned around and I'll never forget the look on his face. It was
worse than the face I made when we were going through the turbulence on the flight to
L.A., worse than the face you made when you found out I was leaving, almost as bad as
the face you made that night I rejected your “I love you”s.

He reached for his gun, but as soon as he did, someone from behind me shot him
in the stomach, and his body sprawled out across my dying orange. After that, the next
thing I remember is waking up in that room where two guys pissed all over me as a few
others watched. When they were sure I was awake, the biggest one pulled me up and
threw me against the wall, punched me in the face a few times, and let me slide to the
floor, back to where I had started. The others crowded around me and let me have it. It
felt as though my bones had been crushed underneath their boots and my muscles had
been pulled out and stretched. I wasn't concerned with the pain as much as I was with the
realization of what kind of trouble I was in. And after talking to Cigar Man, I didn’t
really have any reason to hope I’d ever be getting out of here.

I thought you were here the other day. I could have sworn I smelled your
shampoo. Coconut. Somehow, I thought, you had found me. I was convinced that our
love had transformed itself into a giant magnet of sorts and led you to me. Maybe the
coordinates had revealed themselves to you in a dream. I knew I was hallucinating
though. I haven’t eaten in days. All the time now, it feels like I’m floating above my
body, watching the things that happen to it. It feels kind of like the first time I was high,
kind of like sleep walking. I like the feeling. It’s like this isn’t really happening to me, it’s
happening to a dream version of me. I pretend like the real me isn’t here at all. The real me is back at home with you, making breakfast or listening to music.

What was the name of that song about floating? You played it on repeat every day for a month. It was irritating at the time. I told you I thought so, but you ignored me and continued to play it until one day you just stopped. And then I kind of missed it. After a couple days I had to ask.

“Hey what happened?” I asked, moving my arms above my head as if it represented the silence in the air.

“What are you talking about?” you asked, looking at me as if I were crazy.

“That song. Why'd you stop playing it?”

“What song?” You put your hands on your hips.

“The only song we’ve been listening to for the last month. The song about floating.”

“Why do you care? I thought you hated it.”

“Well, I did. But now, I feel kind of weird without it.” I knew you'd make a big deal of it.

“Oh,” you giggled, “I just wasn't feeling it anymore.”

What is it called? It keeps playing in my head. All day. I hear the words and the beats, and I can see you dancing to it in the kitchen. I can't remember the name of it though. And that's all that matters to me right now. Do you listen to it now that I'm not there to complain?
I feel like the end is coming pretty soon for me. They are talking more than usual in that strange language I recognize but don’t understand. Cigar Man's voice leaks like acid into my skull, he asks where to set up the camera, and I can guess that the sliding I hear against the gravel is a tripod. The dirt below my knees begins to vibrate as men crowd around me. And there's not much I can do. Someone walks up to me and kneels down to whisper into my ear. Cigar Man's breath is warm against my ears. He tells me to say cheese.

I pretend that you can hear these thoughts like some sort of telepathic radio transmission, that you’ll hear these last words from me to you. I pretend that after hearing them, you’ll be able to forgive me for leaving you, for everything else. I pretend like I still believe in Heaven and that one day, many years from now, when your time has come, we'll go walking together again. Except it will feel like sleepwalking. Peeling oranges and splashing salt water at each other's knees. You’ll put that song on again, and it will be our soundtrack, forever. You'll play with my hair as we sit in the sand and talk about all that happened in your life, after I left it. I'll kiss you and forget. Forget that any of this ever happened. Like I never left at all. I pray to a god that I'm not sure exists to never let you see this tape. That it never airs. I do the only thing that there is left to do; I scream your name. In the loudest voice I've ever used the only thing I can say is that I love you, I love you, I love
Maricela died in the eighth month of Bernadette’s first pregnancy. It was the smoking that finally got to her, working long and hard over the years to cook her from the inside out. In the final years, even her skin had begun folding over itself, taking on a sickly yellow flatness reminiscent of stale, old cat piss. Bernadette tried not to remember her that way. Instead she thought of the giant blonde, hair-sprayed coif that had been her signature style for the majority of her childhood, the bright pink scrunchies she’d tie it all back with when she went to the gym.

On the morning of her funeral, Bernadette ironed out the wrinkles of her pale blue maternity dress. She had turned the mall inside out looking for something more subdued—anything black that would contain her bulging body. No such garment existed. She bought a black sweater, a scratchy wool cardigan, instead, to wear over one of the dresses she already owned. This one, decorated with tiny printed dandelions, was her least favorite. The scooping neckline managed to make her look even bigger than she already was. This, she thought, would make the whole thing easier. She would just throw the dress out with the garbage on Friday morning and forget she ever wore it at all. There would be nothing to miss.

Frankie sat sprawled on the bed, slurping cereal from a plastic bowl as he watched Rocky and Bullwinkle. They had half an hour to get on the road if they planned to make it on time, but he was still in the boxers he had slept in. He had owned this pair for years, for as long as she had known him. Threadbare and holey, his mother had probably given
them to him on some Christmas morning years ago when he still lived in her house. She probably would give him another set this Christmas. Bernadette would never receive another Christmas gift from Maricela. This is what she realized as she stared at the furl of hair poking out from his old underwear.

“Do you want me to iron something for you?” she asked, slipping the pressed dress carefully onto a wire hanger. “You can jump in the shower.”

He ignored her, continuing to sip from the mixing spoon he used to shovel his cheerios. There had been no time for dishes in the last few days—a tower of plates and cutlery gathered ants in the sink. Normally she would scold him for infecting the spoon with his mouth germs. That’s not what it’s for, she would snap, I use that to mix cookie dough for Christ’s sake.

“Frankie,” she stepped in front of the television. “We need to get moving.”

He looked up at her, eyes first landing on her belly. Every time he looked at her, he looked at it first.

“Almost done. Just pick something for me. I’ve never been to one of these. You know better than me.”

“Fine.” She walked to the closet and flipped through his dressier shirts, the ones he wore to church or to family parties at his mother’s.

“Blue or green?” She asked. Both shirts had the same checkered print.

“I don’t care.” Frankie didn’t look away from the screen.

Bernadette chucked the green shirt onto the floor of the closet, turning back toward the ironing board. The blue shirt hung limply from her clenched fist, choked at the
Forty-five minutes later, they were finally on the road. Bernadette sat in the passenger seat with one hand resting over her stomach to calm her nervousness before it bloomed into a real nausea. It was an old trick, one she had learned from her childhood stomach aches.

She reached forward and, with her free hand, began scrolling through the radio stations. Commercials for plastic surgery, lap bands, and car insurance occupied almost every channel that didn’t play foreign or classical music. It always seemed to work this way. Dozens of channels all on the same schedule. They must have all been in on it together. Listeners won’t stray during commercials if they know they’ll only find more commercials. It was almost like a truce. Nobody made money from the practice, but nobody would lose it, either.

Eventually, she gave up on the radio, and switched on the tape deck. Frankie’s car was a relic, a boxy, red compact from the early 90s. He’d never owned a cd but his collection of cassettes was immense. On their first date, when he had picked her up to take her to Red Lobster, she had been impressed by the collection, organized neatly in a couple zippered containers at her feet. Her father had been a music collector, too. She remembered the stacks of records scattered throughout the living room in that first apartment, before he left. Marvin. Al Green. Jimi and The Who. Every Beatles album she knew of. He’d taken them all with him. She imagined him up all night, packing them away while she dreamed, clueless of his impending departure, down the hall.
Frankie’s collection was not as comprehensive as her fathers, but it had its own personality. He liked Marvin and Al, too. Led Zeppelin. An assortment of 90s R&B—everything from Brandy to Bone Thugs-N-Harmony.

Today, Mariah Carey’s “Daydream” started up in the middle of its most popular track. Bernadette began humming along to “Fantasy.” He’d been palying to this tape for weeks now. That’s how he was. He’d listen to the same cassette, sometimes the same track, obsessively until he finally got bored. This time, she didn’t mind. She’d always loved the song; it reminded her of bus rides in elementary school. Her bus driver, Mrs. Purple they called her, always had 98.9—So Cal’s Top 40—playing on their ride home. Bernadette wished she could remember more of the music from that time.

Bernadette turned to Frankie, studying the stubble on his jaw, the smudge of dried toothpaste at the corner of his mouth. She reached over and rubbed it away with her thumb.

“Couldn’t manage a clean shave?” She asked.

He rolled his eyes and tightened his grip on the wheel. “Don’t start. I’m not in the mood.”

She pulled her arm back and turned her gaze to the trees lining the sidewalk outside her window. “Settle down. I was just teasing.”

“The hell you were. You needed something to bitch about. You always find something.”

“Always, huh?” Bernadette reached into her bag and pulled out her lipstick. The red gloss caked on the dry patches of her chapped lips.
“Yes. Always. And it’s fucking exhausting. I just want to get through one day without the passive aggressive commentary.”

“And your scraggily face and dirty shoes aren’t making their own passive aggressive commentary?”


“You could have at least pretended to give half a shit on the day I bury my mother. My whole family is going to be here. They already hate you.”

“Well, I don’t give half a shit what any of those people think. And I’m no actor. No use in pretending.”

Bernadette snapped the visor up against the roof of the car and put her lipstick back into her purse. One day she would throw all his shit on the porch. Burn all their pictures. Pull the tape from each of those fucking cassettes until the entire floor of their apartment glittered black.

They stopped at a red light. Bernadette watched three young children—two boys and a girl—rough housing on the bus stop bench on her side. Their mother sat rooted at the center of it all. They climbed over her, jostling the plastic grocery bags she held at her sides. She remained still, staring straight ahead, through the wall of La Bodega, with vacant eyes. This must be what every day is like for her, Bernadette thought. Predictable and chaotic all at once, every moment claimed by the needs of her children. She probably hadn’t had a single thought to herself in five years. No time for manicures or pedicures. No more nights out at the club with her girlfriends, if she even had girlfriends anymore.

Had her mother endured the same misery at her expense? She had seemed to
enjoy motherhood as far as Bernadette could tell. For the most part, anyway. Every morning she woke up in her mother’s house, she had been lulled into consciousness with a smile and a kiss on the cheek. Bernadette doubted this woman did the same for her own brood; she didn’t seem to have the energy.

Soon, Bernadette worried, she would become her own version of this woman, every remnant of herself devoured by the parasite almost full grown inside of her.

She would have to do it alone. Of course. They all did it alone. Frankie would be no help. A man was never any help, even if he did stay.

…

Frankie walked a few steps ahead of her as they made their way from the parking lot to the doors of her old church. She trailed behind him, grinding the heels of her black pumps into the gravel. This was the most she was willing to do in protest of his silent treatment.

There was no reason for them to talk, now. Bernadette’s extended relatives swarmed around her once they had entered the courtyard. They rubbed her stomach, feeling around for a tiny kick from the creature inside, sputtering unintelligible pleasantries and well-wishes directed toward the fetus rather than the mother or father who had concocted it.

“You’re going to grow up to be something wonderful, little peanut.” Aunt Macy cooed in the same terrible baby voice she had spoken to Bernadette with so many years ago, “Maybe a lawyer, like your cousin Cindy? Or a doctor like Uncle Arturo?”

Or a maid like your mommy, Bernadette thought, working for free from home for
your lazy ass husband?

Frankie refused to humor any of them with even a smile or nod, abandoning Bernadette to play nice all alone. She lied about their happiness and their progress on turning the extra bedroom into a nursery. Frankie had thrown a wrench into that plan months ago.

“The hell does it need its own room for?” He spat at her in the baby aisle at Walmart. She had asked which wallpaper he thought would be best to last the kid a few years. Bernadette wanted something classic. Something he could grow into. Or she.

“Wait until its old enough to care. It’s gonna be in our room most of the time anyway, right?” He had already pushed the cart halfway into the next aisle.

The condolences were an afterthought for all of them. Their lively faces would suddenly fall, mid-sentence. A new, somber silence replaced their bared, glittering teeth.

“Bernie,” they encouraged, “This is rough. Really rough. But you’ll be okay. Your mama’s watching you, still. Just from higher up.”

Higher up? She almost had to laugh. Higher up, where? Heaven? That didn’t matter to her, that meaningless promise of a final, paradisiacal destination. It had been years since she last worried herself about heaven or hell or some dark waiting room swallowing her whole. Any of those places were the same to her. Places immeasurably distant, wholly unreachable. Wherever her mother was now, it was nowhere close enough for her to be watching over Bernadette.

By the time she collapsed into the front pew, she was exhausted. All the words that had been talked at her in their varying voices and tones swirled around in her head.
She longed for the preacher to begin the ceremony. It would be a relief to have single vocal track to latch onto.

She didn’t stir when Frankie plopped down next to her. She stared up at the stained-glassed replica of the crucifixion. In her final years here, this was all she ever paid attention to in Sunday service: this window mosaic depicting Christ’s misery. Bernadette peeked up at it for a second. The artistry was rather sloppy, the sections of glass far too large and simple to impress anyone who had ever seen a real stained glass window, one of any quality at all. It had probably been constructed for free, some amateur artist’s gift to the church.

They were always looking for ways to cut corners, to save as much as they could of the money they collected in those plates they sent around on Sunday mornings. It was one of the many reasons she had stopped coming here altogether as soon as she turned eighteen. Always, they seemed to be asking favors. Bernadette, could you help in the daycare center next week? We’re understaffed. Maricela, is your living room available for Women’s Study? She was forbidden to ever say no to any of their requests, no matter how invasive or demanding. In her junior year of high school, in the midst of SAT prep courses and evening soccer practices, she had been forced to act in the church play—as one of the leading roles—simply because Pastor Gary’s wife, who was directing the whole thing, had asked her to. Bernadette was not an actress. Being on stage mortified her. The mere prospect of her first performance on stage sent her into a month-long stint of insomnia. But, she had done it, somehow. She would never forget, or forgive them, of that.
She looked, once again, down at her belly. Whoever was inside would never be brought back to this place or any place like it. She would buy him books, telescopes and science kits. Soccer balls and acoustic guitars. Art supplies and subscriptions to National Geographic. Her child would have globes, world maps, and the latest encyclopedias to peruse at their leisure. On weekends, she would take them to museums and national parks but she would never bring any child of hers’ to a Sunday morning service as long as she was of sound mind.

In her head, she cursed God on loop like a broken record.

As if on cue to save her soul from her private blaspheming, Pastor Gary walked up and crouched down next to her in the pew. There had been a phase in middle school when she had suspected Pastor Gary of being psychic. She thought that he could read her mind, that he knew each of the sins she had committed earlier in the week. The paranoia had been enough to scare her straight—she stopped staying up late to chat on the internet with boys from school, stopped secretly using her mom’s back massager as a vibrator — for a year or so. To avoid the temptation she eventually had to throw it out in the shed. Only a thick net of spider webs could protect her from herself.

She hadn’t seen him in five or six years, but Pastor Gary looked mostly the same. Twenty pounds heavier, he hunched a bit more when he walked. His condescending grin hadn’t lost any of its power to start her blood boiling.

“So, we’ll start with my part and then we’ll open up to anyone who wants to share a few words. Sound good?”

“Yes. Sounds fine.” She flashed a thin smile, averted her eyes.
“Bernadette,” he continued in a lower voice, “I’d like to speak with you after the service. You remember where my office is? I want to touch base with you. We can pray together.”

“Pastor Gary, thank you, but that won’t be necessary.”

“I insist. Your mother was an essential part of this congregation. She’d want me to make sure you’re doing okay. We both owe it to her. I, for one, am looking forward to catching up.” He stood up, straightened his slacks. “There’s no shame in reaching out, you know.”

Bernadette stared at his back as he made his way to the podium. Frankie snorted next to her, amused. This was probably his fault. Her family must have begged Pastor Gary to talk some sense into her, hoping to save her doomed soul, and her impending offspring, from this failure of a man. Maybe if Frankie wasn’t Frankie. Maybe if Frankie was someone more stable and well-mannered she could be left alone on today of all days. Maybe if he took her to sushi restaurants instead of Sizzler on their anniversaries, and listened to cds instead of tapes he bought used at garage sales, her family could rest assured that he wasn’t a total loser.

She knew that they talked about him behind her back and had been since she first introduced him to the family years ago. She didn’t know the specifics but she could guess. They didn’t think he was good enough for their Bernie; she had been such a smart, capable girl until she took up with him. He worked, sure, and long hours, but his labor wasn’t worth a damn. How could he support her, and raise a child, working full time for little over minimum wage? Even Maricela had tried, in her own subtle ways, to urge
Bernadette forward from him, as if he were just another life lesson to be learned, another hurdle for her daughter to master in time. Before the cancer banished Maricela to her bed, and before the pregnancy glued Bernadette irrevocably to Frankie, Maricela would ask about Gustavo, Bernadette’s first boyfriend, in his second year of medical school. *Why not give him another chance, Bernie? He can move you to Malibu. Isn’t that where you’ve always wanted to be?*

Now, it didn’t seem like such bad advice.

Up at the podium, Pastor Gary began tapping into the microphone, sending dull thuds out through the old speakers placed around the perimeter of the sanctuary.

“Good afternoon, everyone. As you know, we’re here today to celebrate the life, and mourn the loss, of our dear sister in Christ, Maricela Gongora. I’ve spent the past few days with her closest friends and relatives, and I’ve found myself being surprised. Not that Maricela was such a generous and caring soul—we all already knew that from her hard work in the food ministry here—but that she was also a bit of a firecracker!” Pastor Gary smiled out at someone in the back of the church. Bernadette turned to see Aunt Claudia blush and give a small wave.

“I’m not sure many of us could have guessed that Maricela had been skydiving in San Diego *and* Brazil? Or that she had served a full term as Miss Santa Ana in her heyday. I saw a few snapshots and all I can say is, Maricela must have been quite the heartbreaker.”

This was all wrong; Bernadette cringed, digging her nails—jagged from a recent biting habit—into her palms. These cheap factoids may have been true, but Maricela
would not have wanted to be remembered by them. She had always been frugal in sharing
the memories of her girlhood with Bernadette. She knew a few things, basic details.
Bernadette knew that her mother’s first boyfriend was a hopeful poet named Luis that had
written Maricela enough poems to fill a whole book. In high school, she wore her hair in
tight curls like Jennifer Grey, before anyone knew about Jennifer Grey. She almost won
homecoming queen—second runner up. Bernadette had never known about the
skydiving.

“She was born in Tallahassee in 1960 and moved to California just before starting
high school. She worked, as most of you know, for over twenty years as the receptionist
at Dr.Ofen’s Orthodontics. In 1992, she and her daughter, Bernadette, made their first
visit to our church and became an invaluable—and I mean that, she was absolutely
invaluable—member of our congregation. Even in the last year, with all the doctor visits
and rigorous treatment schedules, Maricela managed to stay involved as much as she
could.”

This is what he should have been saying from the beginning. This is what
Maricela would want to hear if, somehow, she could sit in on her own funeral service: no
glitter, no jokes, just the straight facts of her angelic existence.

“I want to open the microphone up for anyone who has a story to share, a sweet
memory you have of a time you had with Maricela. I know we’d all love to hear.” Pastor
Gary stepped down from the stage and took a seat in the front row next to his wife.
Bernadette’s old acting director had gone natural, letting her red hair fade to gray. It
delighted Bernadette to see these people age.
Uncle Arturo was the first to shuffle from his seat to the stage. He cleared his throat and unfolded the stapled sheets of notebook paper he had brought up with him. His voice quivered as he read. “Maricela was my baby sister. Six years younger than me. I always felt responsible for her, like she was mine to protect.” He stopped to wipe a tear from his cheek. “She shouldn’t have gone before me. She shouldn’t have gone before seeing her first grandbaby.”

Frankie grabbed Bernadette’s hand, enclosing it within his own. He rubbed his thumb in small circles at her wrist, assumedly to calm her, or to make up for their rough morning. It accomplished neither. She let him hold it, anyway.

For the rest of the service, through the rest of Uncle Arturo’s speech and a handful of others, Bernadette sat stiff, her hand paralyzed in Frankie’s. She ignored every itch and took slow, methodical breaths; she hardly blinked for the rest of the service. Instead, she planned a quick exit. As soon as Pastor Gary made his closing statements and invited everyone to the courtyard for juice and desserts, she would make her way out of the sanctuary through the back. It would look like a quick trip to the bathroom for tissues or a mascara touch-up. She’d take the keys and tell Frankie to meet her back at the car, sneaking out through the door right next to Pastor Gary’s office before anyone would even have the chance to suspect her of fleeing.

She could not handle any more of this endless talking. And she certainly couldn’t endure a one on one with Pastor Gary. Not today. Even if it was what her mother would have wanted.

“I, along with the Gongora family, want to thank you all for coming today.”
Pastor Gary nodded out at the congregation. “Maricela’s death is our loss. And a great one. But I encourage you all to take solace in the fact that she is no longer in pain. She is in a better place, her final home with the Lord. Please join us in the courtyard for some conversation and refreshments.”

Bernadette stood up and slung her bag over her shoulder. “Meet me at the car. I have to get out of here.”

Frankie stared up at her with upturned eyebrows.

“The keys, Frankie. Now.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the key ring. Bernadette snatched them away and made her dash for the exit. She bowed her head and hid her face in the wad of tissues she had been holding throughout the service, now damp with her sweat. The key was to look as though she were crying, and embarrassed for it. Then, nobody would bother her.

She pushed herself through the throngs of people, already grouping off to chatter, and into the hallway that would lead her to freedom. She quickened her pace as she passed Pastor Gary’s office. His door was wide open. She recognized the posters on the wall, the finger-painted crosses she had helped a group of kindergartners create years before. This part of her would always be trapped here.

A strong hand clamped onto her shoulder. She turned and looked into Pastor Gary’s sideways smile. “I think now would be a good time for that talk. Don’t you, Bernadette?”

“I have to find Frankie.” She motioned toward the door, willing herself to be on
the other side. “Maybe in a few minutes.”

“He’ll be fine. I think I saw Mrs. Lippman take him under her wing. She’ll be talking his ear off for at least half an hour, bless her soul.” He reached into his office and flipped on the light. “Come on. I won’t keep you very long.”

She let him lead her into the office, stealing one last glance at the door. She had been so close.

“Take a seat.” Pastor Gary nudged between his desk and filing cabinet. The extra pudge had taken a real toll on his mobility in this tiny space. Bernadette obeyed his command and sat down on the edge of the pleather chair. Another donated item, she presumed.

“We’ve missed you here!” Pastor Gary leaned back in his swivel chair, crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s unfortunate that this is what it took to get you back to church.”

“I hardly recognize anyone.”

“It’s been years, Bernadette. They look different. That’s life. Try not to let it on once you’re out there though. Don’t want to hurt any feelings.” He chuckled.

“Of course not.”

“Have you thought at all, in light of recent events, about coming back to church regularly?”

“I don’t know, Pastor Gary. I’m not sure if that’s what’s best for me right now. It’s a stressful time. I’m due any time, now. And with my mother. It’s just—” She paused to find the words. “Not a good time.”
Pastor Gary leaned in closer to her, over his desk. “Have you thought about what’s best for the child? Like you said, it’ll be here any minute. Don’t you think you could benefit from the love and support of this community? Your spiritual family?” He stopped to take a good look at the balloon beneath the flower print dress. “The way I see it, this is the perfect time to find your way home.”

“Pastor Gary, sir, I appreciate what you’re doing. I really do. And I know my mom would appreciate it, too. But even if I was interested in getting involved with the church again—and I don’t think I am—I’d probably go to Frankie’s church. It’s closer to us. His whole side of the family is really involved there.”

“Frankie is involved there, too?”

“Well, no. Not currently.”

Pastor Gary slumped back into his chair. “I see.”

“I’m not sure either of us really believes in any of this anymore. I’m not saying I’m an atheist. Not at all. Agnostic, maybe.”

“Tell me more about Frankie. How are you two doing? The first pregnancy can be a tough time in any marriage.”

“We’re fine. He’s fine.”

“Where’s he working these days?”

“He works for his uncle’s company. A machine shop.”

“And how’s the money in that? Like I said earlier, I’ve had the opportunity to talk with your family these past few days. They seem worried.”

“Worried?”
“Yes. Worried about you. Worried about the little guy or girl. They don’t seem to think Frankie’s taking the best care of you.”

“How’s that? He works. He keeps us fed and pays the rent. What better care can he take of us?”

“That’s just it, Bernadette. He can’t. Frankie may be doing all he can, all he is capable of. But will it be enough to sustain your family?”

“And what do my uncles and aunts think? What’s their plan? They think I should just leave him? Is that it?” She stared into his eyes. She felt sharp, suddenly violent.

“Doesn’t seem like the Christian course of action, does it? Just leave your husband just as his baby is about to be born?”

“It’s not a traditional course of action. Of course not. But everyone’s situation is different, Bernadette. You have to do what’s best for you and your baby.”

“And if I leave him, how should I provide for the baby? I don’t have a job. I don’t have a degree or any experience. My last job was as a cashier at FoodMax. I couldn’t make half of what Frankie brings in bagging groceries part time.”

“Of course not. That’s why I wanted to talk to you Bernadette. I’ve got a great opportunity, one that I think would be perfect for you.”

“An opportunity?” Bernadette rolled her eyes. “What sort of opportunity?”

“A job. A good one. You’d be keeping the books at my brother’s company. He’s just got it off the ground and he’s willing to inflate the salary a bit as a favor. My only condition would be that you start going to church with him. Regularly.”

“I’ve never been a secretary or a treasurer or whatever it is this job entails.”
“Look, I know you don’t have experience. That’s fine. He’ll train you. What’s important is that I know you can do it. Your mother bragged for months on end about your SAT scores. I know you can figure this out.”

“Say I accepted the job. What does that have to do with Frankie?”

“Well, you’d have to relocate. To Sacramento.”

“Sacramento? I don’t know anyone up there. All my family is down here. My friends.” She began shaking her head. “Impossible.”

“So get a couple years experience and maybe eventually you can find something similar down here. Sacrifice. For your child.”

“I don’t think so.” She stood up, shaking. “It isn’t right.”

“Wait,” he opened his desk drawer and pulled out an index card. He picked up the fountain pen next to his keyboard and began scrawling out an address and phone number. “Think about it. Really think about it. It’s a great chance to make your life, and your child’s life, meaningful.”

He held the index card out to her. She plucked it from his grasp and stared down at it.

Hank Miller—

(530) 555-9920—

4564 Haverford Ct. Sacramento, CA

“That’s my brother’s information. You change your mind, that’s how you can get a hold of him. He’ll know who you are. He can help you find a safe neighborhood.”

She stuffed the card into her purse and left the office.
Frankie sat on the parking block in front of the car, his back resting against the wire fence. He pulled himself up as Bernadette approached. She tossed him the keys.

“Sorry. The pastor cornered me in his office.”

“What’s that all about?” He asked, sliding into the driver’s seat. He started up the car and Mariah picked up where she had left off.

Bernadette reached over and turned the volume down. “He just wanted to check up on me. Make sure I didn’t wanna talk about mom. Playing therapist or something. Aunt Macy probably put him up to it. All she does is worry.”

Frankie drummed on the steering wheel with his thumbs. “Well, maybe she’s right to worry. Do you need to talk to someone? It’s a big deal. Losing your mom. It’d be fine if you wanted to talk to someone. A real therapist.”

“I’m fine.”

“We could find the money for it. I could work a few overtime shifts during the week.”

“No, really. I’m fine.”

Before turning out of the parking lot, he reached over and grabbed her hand again, giving it a meaningful squeeze. “I’m sorry about this morning, Bernie. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“We’re both stressed,” she waved him off, “I understand.”

“Still, that was the last thing you needed, me acting a fool. You don’t deserve it.”

She turned the volume back up.

…
Later that night, after they ate their takeout Chinese dinner, she got a call from her Aunt Macy.

“Berndita, I didn’t get to talk to you today. You rushed off before anyone could find you.”

“I know. I’m sorry Aunt Macy. I just couldn’t stick around, you know?”

“Did Pastor Gary talk to you? He told me he would be.”

“I’m sure he did.”

“Bernie, it’s such a fantastic opportunity. What’s stopping you?”

Bernadette looked up at Frankie across the room. He had fallen asleep in the rocking chair watching a rerun of Seinfeld.

“I can’t believe you think this what he’s suggesting is a real option. I can’t run away from my life just because things aren’t perfect.”

“That’s right, things aren’t perfect. Not even close. How can you raise a child with that man? He is not even a man. Still an adolescent himself!”

“He works hard, Aunt Macy.”

“Not hard enough. He’s no spiritual leader, either. Not by a long shot. Has he ever taken you to church before today?”

“I don’t need him to take me to church. I don’t go because I don’t want to go.”

“Aye, Bernie. What would your mother say? Think about her! You need this.”

“Auntie, I have to go. It’s late.”

She slammed the receiver back into its charging dock. Frankie’s eyelids twitched, tinted by the flashing colors of the television. His cereal bowl from that morning still sat
at his feet.

... 

The next morning, they were both awake by eight, getting ready for yet another family engagement. This time, on his side—his niece’s fourth birthday party.

“Did you wrap the jewelry box?” Bernadette asked, staring at herself in the mirror as she curled a chunk of her dark hair.

“Yeah. It’s in the car. Did you talk to my mom? Do we need to bring anything else?”

“She called when you were in the shower. She says we can pick up some juice if we have the time but not to worry about it.”

“Then we won’t worry about it.” He winked at her. She ignored him.

She hadn’t slept at all the night before, her mind too occupied with Pastor Gary’s offer to dream up any other fantasies.

The drive to his mothers was short; she only lived on the other side of town. Her lawn was immaculate, as usual. Festive bunches of balloons in light pink and lavender framed the doorway.

Bernadette rang the bell. The laughter from inside seeped out through the cracks in the door.

“Frankie!” His mother squealed as she pulled the door open. She hugged him tight as if it was his birthday they were here to celebrate, and she hadn’t seen him in years.

“And Bernie!” She talked at her belly, “So good to see you.”

Bernadette leaned in for a quick hug. “Nice to see you too, Rosie.”
“Come in! Come in. Liliana is out back. Jasmine hired a clown. We’ll do the cake once the kids have worn him out.”

Bernadette followed her mother-in-law to the kitchen, setting the jewelry box, wrapped in glossy red paper, on the gift table.

“Can I help with anything?”

“Oh no. We’re all set. Just fix yourself a drink. Jasmine brought margarita mix. Maybe you can fix yourself a virgin?” Rosie handed her a plastic blue cup and left her alone in the kitchen.

Bernadette walked over to the drink counter. Jasmine had splurged on Patron, Bernadette’s drink of choice before the pregnancy. She plopped a couple of ice cubes from the bucket into her cup and poured the margarita mix to the half-way line. She looked over her shoulder, at both entrances to the kitchen. Everyone was outside. She had to use both hands to pour the tequila from the curvaceous bottle into her cup without making a mess. She tried to eyeball a double shot. Upon lifting the cup eye-level, though, it was clear that she had been more gracious in her pour. She filled the rest of the cup with the margarita mix, hoping to disguise the alcohol.

Bernadette made her way to the backyard, struggling for a moment to open the sliding door with her drinkless hand. Frankie sat at the patio table in between a couple of his cousins, smoking a cigarette. She sat down in the open chair across from him and began sipping her cocktail.

“What’s that?” Frankie asked.

“Is the new mommy getting drunk?” His cousin James laughed, taking a swig
from his beer.

“Virgin margarita.” Bernadette stuck her tongue out at both of them. “Maybe the kid’ll come early so I can get sloshed with the rest of you at Kimmi’s party next week.”

“Dream on, Bernie.” James smiled. “You won’t be getting sloshed for a few years. Jasmine wouldn’t even let me drink until Lili’s first birthday party.”

“We’ll see.” Bernadette stared down into the cup, swishing the lime green liquid back and forth. “I’ll be right back. Is the downstairs bathroom working again?”

“Yeah, fixed it last night.” James said, “Would have been a disaster without it.”

Bernadette met Rosie at the sliding door.

“Jesus. This door!” She laughed, putting all her weight into pulling it back with a screech. “I’ve gotta get your husband out here to oil it up.”

“He should be free next weekend, assuming the baby doesn’t come early. We were slammed this weekend.” At her side, the ice swirled in the cup. She held it from the top, her hand covering the opening.

“How was your mother’s service?” Rosie put her hand on Bernadette’s shoulder. It felt icy against Bernadette’s skin.

“It was lovely. Her church family really appreciated her. They only had wonderful things to say.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make it. I was zipping around town all day, prepping for the party.”

“There wasn’t a lot of room left to sit, anyway. It’s a small sanctuary.”

A piece of cilantro poked out from between Rosie’s front teeth. Bernadette tried
not to stare.

“How’s that drink? Is the mix any good on its own?”

“Not as yummy as the real thing but it works. I’ve already got to use the ladies room.”

“And here I am holding you up!” Rosie moved aside, stepping back against the bar. “The bathroom down here is working again, so you won’t have to hike up the stairs.”

“I heard. Great. I’ll meet you out back in a couple minutes.”

Bernadette inched past Rosie into the house. She sped down the hallway, careful to avoid eye contact with the pictures lining the wall. The last before the bathroom door she didn’t have to see to remember: her in a white dress, Frankie in a suit on their wedding day, smiling genuine smiles.

She stepped into the bathroom and locked the door behind her. Lifting the cup to her lips, she gulped down the entire margarita before she could change her mind. Already, there was a lightness in her head. She turned on the sink and rinsed the cup clean of any residue that might give her away. Bernadette looked up into the mirror, staring into her watery, brown eyes. Did she look drunk? She blotted the moisture away from her eyes with a piece of toilet paper. Before, she had felt anxious. Now that it was done, though, she didn’t feel guilty. Not at all.

She tossed the cup into the bin, shaped like a seashell to match Rosie’s beach-themed bathroom, and wiped her hands on one of her sea blue towels. The texture sent a current up through her fingertips.

Back outside, she listened to Frankie and his cousins bullshit about baseball.
In the far corner of the backyard, the children sat in a circle around the clown as he made a balloon giraffe for Liliana, the birthday girl. Only she stood next to him, blushing as he bopped her nose playfully with the giraffe’s orange neck. After he made his final twist and tie, the clown handed the giraffe over to her and she ran with it, squealing, to the other side of the yard. The children on the ground all sprang up immediately to chase her. One little boy tackled Liliana, staining the knees of her blue jeans green. He stood over her, taunting her with the giraffe.

Bernadette hurried over to the scene of the scuffle, the sun stinging her eyes as she walked. She plucked the balloon from the little boy’s hand. He was nobody she knew. “That’s not yours. You need to learn how to play nice.”

Liliana stood, wiping the grass from her knees. “It’s okay Aunt Bernie. He can play, too.”

“If he plays nice, he can.” Bernadette stared into the little boys terrified eyes, daring him to say anything at all. “Pushing Lili down wasn’t very nice was it?”

The little boy began to wail, tears streaming down his face in translucent ribbons. Immediately, Rosie was at her side, kneeling down to hug the perpetrator.

“What’s wrong, Tony? Are you okay sweetie?”

“She took the giraffe!” He pointed at the balloon still in Bernadette’s hands. Rosie turned to look up at her. “For Christ’s sake, Bernadette! Give him the balloon.”

“He pushed her. He needs to learn.”

“Lili’s fine. Aren’t you Lili?”
Liliana nodded. “Tony can have it. Mommy says I have to share.”

“See?” Rosie snatched the balloon from Bernadette’s grasp and gave it to the little boy. He hugged it tight in his chubby, little arms. “What’s gotten into you? He’s just a kid.”

Luckily, no one else had seen the encounter. Striding back across the lawn, Bernadette approached the table with her arms stiff at her sides. She leaned over to whisper in Frankie’s ear.

“Do you think you could get a ride home? I’m not feeling well.”

He sprang up, frowning. “Is it the baby? Do you need to go to the doctor?”

“No, no.” She shook her head, “I’m just feeling a little nauseous. Too much sugar in that margarita mix. It’s not sitting well.”

He handed her the keys. “Yeah. I’ll get someone to drop me off later. Call if you need me, okay?”

Once she was off Rosie’s street, she began to sob, her shoulders bobbing in spurts and heaves. This would be her life from now on: weekends at her mother-in-laws, the never-ending cycle of birthday parties and holidays trapping her there with them, forever. She couldn’t do it. She’d lose her mind.

She reached into her purse and pulled out Pastor Gary’s index card. Self-sufficiency she could do. Maybe. She punched Hank’s address into her GPS and followed the commands of the robotic voice as it led her back to the freeway.

No more long days spent at home alone, watching TV and prepping dinner for Frankie. No more mixing spoons or congealing milk in abandoned plastic cereal bowls to
scrub clean. She would never play another cassette tape.

“In four miles, merge onto I-5 north toward Sacramento.”

Cars sped past her in the slow lane. She flipped on her signal to merge right.

She’d make her own money. Enough to buy nice clothes. To pay for sitters on the weekends. She could meet a nice guy with money.

“In two miles, merge onto the I-5 north toward Sacramento.”

A lawyer or something. She wouldn’t have to work forever. Maybe she’d finally go to school. This church would be different. Bigger. She could be anonymous, meet milder followers who didn’t ask for favors. Make friends.

“In one mile, merge onto the I-5 north toward Sacramento.”

If her mother was watching, she’d be proud. Finally, she’d give her a reason to be proud.

Bernadette looked into her rearview mirror, switched on her signal once more. The stream of cars was endless, and they were all coming too fast. Gradually, she tried to edge herself in. Car after car passed without a break. A pick-up honked at her as she tried to cut in. Her sweaty hands slipped on the wheel, her knuckles red from her tight grip.

“Rerouting.”

“Rerouting.

“In two miles, exit on 5th street.”

She pressed her finger hard into the power button, shutting the GPS down. She turned off her signal and turned the volume up. Mariah had switched to side B. Bernadette rewound the tape.
Behind her, Pastor Gary’s index card soared through the traffic.
YOU’VE SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED THIS

You’d always worried this might happen to you.

At seven years old, up past your usual bedtime to watch Beverly Hills 90210 with your mom, you watched, peeking through the gaps of your bony fingers, it happen to Kelly Taylor. She begged and pleaded with her rapist, a shadowy figure in black who trapped, beat, and forced himself upon her in a dark alley. Your heart pounded faster than it did during the mile run in P.E. You wanted to cry. You felt so nauseous you almost lost mom’s dinnertime goulash all over her clean sheets.

You didn’t sleep at all that night.

You watched it happen again one Sunday morning a couple years later. It was a made for TV movie on TBS. A man gets a call—his wife is in the emergency room with a broken arm after being gang raped in an abandoned metropolitan warehouse. He rushes to the ER, thankful, at least, that she is alive. When he arrives, though, she has died—the injury to her arm severing some important artery.

What. The. Fuck.

And then, again, you watched it happen to Tiffani Amber Thiessen—a familiar face from your 90210 days—in your grandmother’s entertainment room as she prepared dinner downstairs. She knew her rapist: her boyfriends creepy, over-eager friend. Her little sister listened to it happening in the next room.

And now, here you are, and it has happened to you. And you, like Tiffani, know your rapist.
He is your cousin. Not by blood, but by marriage. You’re twenty-one, now, but you’ve known him nearly all your life. You’ve eaten Thanksgiving dinner at the same table with him. You’ve hunted Easter eggs in your grandma’s backyard together. You have bought him knick knacks from the dollar store to present him with on Christmas mornings throughout the years at your parent’s insistence. When you read the first three Harry Potter books in sixth grade, you borrowed them from him, his last name spelled out in permanent marker across their spines.

I’ll spare you the details, because you already know them, but he did it with a glass of water and some pills. And he’d probably done it before. And since you waited too long to tell anybody, and because you’ve still never pressed any charges, he’ll probably do it again. And those will, partly, be your fault.

You’ve had lots of time, almost two years now, to consider the best way to proceed. At first, you wanted to ignore it because it happened at such a bad time and it wasn’t violent, really. Not like all those rapes you’ve watched on TV. School was starting. You had work. Really, if he could have raped you a year earlier it would have been so much more convenient. You should have had his people get in touch with your people.

Later you tried to use it as a lesson for the rest of your life. It was good, you thought, that it had happened this way. Now, it could not happen again, because you would not be so easily tricked. He pranked you, and pretty good, but all in all, at least you wouldn’t get raped and murdered by some lunatic on a motorcycle or in the bathroom of some dive bar years down the road.
But then, at some point, it made you sad to look at it this way. It broke your heart to remember who you were before your cousin drugged you up and shoved his cock inside you from all those different angles. It made you feel like an animal. What a bummer that realization has been. And now? Now you can’t even visit your grandparents without being sent into a tailspin. You spent a whole month after Christmas trying to figure out why normal tasks seemed so daunting, why you were distracted and distant during normal, consensual sex.

Now, you have anxiety. About everything.

Now, when you walk the mile from school back to where your car is parked, you usually think about this, about your cousin.

You consider how, when you finally have the time, you’ll get him back.

Somehow, you could get your hands on a vial of LSD. You could give him a taste of his own medicine, but do him one better. Pour that entire vial in that same plastic cup he used on you and send him on the trip of his life. Once he really got into the swing of it, you could lock him in a basement somewhere and play Rebecca Black’s “Friday” on a loop until he was finally compelled to end it all himself. You’d leave one of your grandpa’s pistols in the basement with him because you are a merciful god.

You’ve imagined doing it with the corkscrew tool on the wine key you use to open expensive bottles of Pinot Noir for people who can’t afford it any more than you can slinging spaghetti at your shitty waitressing job. You’d stick it in that tender part of his neck, that thin slice of skin that shields his throat, and twist, twist, twist.

You’ve seriously considered this.
You could round up all your guy friends—some have already offered—and roadtrip it back up to the scene of the crime. You’d all push him around a bit, humiliating him to your heart’s content. And then, at some point, things would take a serious turn and you’d just totally lose your shit on him. Your buddies would hold him down, tie him up. You’d walk up and, nonchalantly, cut off his cock with his own pair of kitchen shears.

You want his mother to be the one to find him this way. Later that afternoon, or days later, you don’t care when. You want her to walk in, a tray of brownies made with love especially for her precious baby boy held tight against her chest. You want her to call out for him, voice light and sunny—not a care in the world. You want that tray of brownies to smash against the floor as her blood-curdling scream fills his house, his street, that entire buttfuck town of Redding, California. Because she raised him, and he raped you, and this is what she deserves for that.

Maybe this makes you as sick as he is, but you don’t give a single fuck, because in the name of self-respect, you are willing to do anything. And it’s not like you haven’t considered this.

You’ve seriously considered a lot of things.
EVERYBODY’S LAUGHING, EVERYBODY’S HAPPY

Julia was still in her pajamas, one of Andy’s old t-shirts and the navy blue sweatpants from high school gym class, when Ray came over with the acid.

“How many tabs did you get?” She asked after she let him in. She tied her hair back. At least she had put on makeup.

“Six. Three for each of us.” Ray grinned. He sat down on the floor of the living room and unzipped his backpack. He carried it everywhere with him now. Julia peeked inside as he rooted around the larger compartment, his shaggy hair falling in his eyes. Most of the space was taken up by his gray sweatshirt but she also recognized the shiny turquoise glass of his pipe, the rainbow of canisters from his dispensary. Purple, yellow, blue, and orange. She wondered which strains he had bought this week.

Ray pulled out a small plastic sandwich bag. It was empty save the little square of foil in the right hand corner.

“Do you have any scissors?” he asked. “I’m gonna need to cut them up.”

She nodded and walked to the kitchen. She opened the drawer underneath the phone to find them. She had to pull out everything else in the drawer—the giant phonebook she had never opened, a bunch of old bills, still in their envelopes, bundled together with a rubber band, the bright green memo pad Dr. Krischen’s secretary had given her after her appointment last week—before she finally picked up the safety scissors she’d had since she was a kid. The handle was wrapped in soft purple rubber. It felt nice between her fingers.
“You want anything to drink?” She yelled at Ray from the kitchen. She slid everything back into the drawer and walked to the fridge.

“You got any orange juice?”

Julia opened the door and took a quick inventory of her stock. An empty pizza box, a carton of milk, two jars of pickles on the top shelf. A box of strawberries, two oranges, and a tub of cream cheese on the second. In the compartments on the inside of the door Julia found only condiments. No orange juice.

She closed the fridge and opened the pantry door next to it.

“No orange juice.” Julia called out. “But we have a liter of Dr.Pepper and a bottle of cran-grape.”

“Any vodka?”

“Nope. Shouldn’t drink on this stuff anyway.”

“Dr.Pepper, then.”

Julia pulled two plastic red party cups from the stack she had of them by the sink and brought them, along with the entire liter of soda and the safety scissors, out to the living room where Ray still sat, legs-crossed, on the carpet.

“No ice?” he inquired as he stared down into his empty cup.

“No ice.” Julia confirmed. She plopped down on the floor next to him and began pouring.

Ray picked began to carefully cut the long strip of what looked like cardboard into small squares. He made sure not to touch the surface of the paper, instead pinching the sides with his thumb and pointer finger.
“What happened to your couch?” Ray asked.

She looked at the empty wall where the sofa she and Andy bought together used to rest and shrugged. “Sold it.”

“Do you need some money?” he put the scissors down and waited for her response.

“Not anymore.” She said. “Not for a while.”

Ray nodded. “Here, open your hand.” He placed three of the perfect squares into her open palm. She stared down at them. “You ready?”

She hadn’t dropped in six months. That time, he was there with her. The day after Christmas. Just a couple weeks before he shipped out.

“Are you sure you want to?” Ray kept on. “I know the last time—”

“I’ll be fine.” She placed the first tab under her tongue and counted to twenty before swallowing it, repeating the process with the next two tabs. Ray took all of his at once.

Ray turned and smiled at her. “You stoked?”

“We have an hour before I’ll be really stoked.” Julia crawled over to the TV, and reached into the cardboard box that sat underneath it. She pulled out Andy’s old Super Nintendo. “Tetris until then?”

“Down.” Ray laughed. “Let’s smoke a bowl first. It’ll probably jumpstart the trip.” He disappeared into his back pack again, this time pulling out the red and the blue canisters. “Blue Dream or Trainwreck?”

Julia shrugged. “You’re the connoisseur.”
“Blue Dream it is.” He packed the bowl; Julia hooked up all the necessary cables and controllers for the game.

Ray was on his belly, head propped up by his hands like a toddler, watching as Julia turned the shapes this way and that before letting them drop to the floor. As the minutes passed, Julia’s skill level dropped exponentially. She was more concerned with the color patterns she could create than with actually winning the game. It only took a minute and a half for her screen to fill up and for the “Game Over” sign to flash at her. She tossed the controller aside and rocked back and forth to propel herself up from the ground.

“Ray,” she leaned down over him. He was still staring at the screen. “Your turn if you want to play. I’m starting to feel it; I’m gonna go off by myself for a while. Help yourself to whatever.” She started to exit the room but stopped at the sight of Ray’s backpack. “You mind if I take some weed with me? I’ll pay you back later.”

“No worries.” Ray turned and waved her off. “I brought it for both of us.”

Julia walked into the bedroom. It was the only one in the house that still looked the same as when he was still there; the only room from which she hadn’t yet sold any of their furniture. The dresser on the wall opposite the door was large enough to keep both of their wardrobes organized. A mirror sat on top of it, reflecting the rest of the room back at her. The queen sized bed they had shared was unmade, though he had never seen the striped comforter that was balled up on her side; she bought it one of the first weeks he was gone, finally boxing up and closeting the old quilt he insisted they use. He said he liked the way it felt cool on his feet. He couldn’t sleep if they got too hot.
She jumped up on the bed and opened the drawer on her nightstand, pulling out her own pipe. It was smaller than Ray’s. If she closed her hand around it she could make its bright red and orange swirls, the deep blue the glass had become with use, disappear. And she did, there on the bed, opening and closing her hand slowly. First obliterating, and then resurrecting the piece out of thin air, over and over again. If only it were this easy, she thought, for her to unexist.

Packing the bowl seemed, to Julia, to take a lot of effort. The pursuit exhausted her and before even taking a hit, she collapsed backward on the bed for a break. She stared up at the textured ceiling. Pictures began to take shape and become animate. Across the entire surface, Julia saw crude human figures in the act of lovemaking. The figures seemed to pump life into one another in an intricate cycle; a domino effect of fucking pressing into more fucking. Julia watched the orgy in amazement, forgetting all about the bowl lying next to her on the bed. She tried to discern faces in each of the figures. Were they strangers, she wondered, or people she had met, people she knew? Julia hoped she and Andy were up there too. She was already starting to forget what he felt like in those moments.

Julia pulled herself up out of the bed and walked to her record player. She pulled Abbey Road out of the stack of vinyl next to the bookcase. This is what they had listened to last time.

She went to her desk and pulled out her pastels and sketchbook, sitting with them on the floor next to the record player. Julia wasn’t an artist and she had no illusions of being one as she pulled her red pastel out of the box and drew a large S-shaped swirl
across the blank sheet of paper. She drew more of these swirls, in purple and yellow, in
different sizes on top of the original while humming along to “Something.” The shapes
began to rise like fluorescent ghosts from the sketchpad, floating to the ceiling along with
the playful tones of Harrison’s guitar. Julia looked up to see if the ceiling people were
still mid-coitus. They were.

“Oh fuck.” She whispered. Her heart stopped and her eyes widened. She kept her
head thrown back and waited to see if her living drawings would harm the lovers. The red
swirl arrived first, exploding across the ceiling. Julia almost gasped before realizing that
the ceiling people were not at all disturbed. They had all simply become red. They didn’t
even bother to stop what they were doing as the transformation took place. When the
purple and yellow swirls reached the ceiling, similar explosions occurred; the top of
Julia’s bedroom became a tie-dye of breathing hues, mixing and mutating into new
configurations every instant. Julia focused on one of the figures who seemed to be
expanding and constricting steadily; a woman, Julia decided, who was half-red, half-
purple, mid-orgasm. Julia smiled, happy to have made it so.

Julia pounced back on her bed and finally took a hit from the bowl. Exhaling
slowly, Julia thought she caught a glimpse of his face in the smoke. It hung there only for
an instant. He had not been smiling. Or frowning, either. Julia took another hit. This time
she simply opened her mouth wide to release the smoke. It became a solid cloud in front
of her. He was there, again. This time, though, he did not disappear.

She reached out her hand. She wanted to touch his lips. To stoke the dark stubble
growing on his cheek. To feel warmth emanate from him.
“Don’t.” Andy’s apparition warned. “You won’t feel a thing.”

“Why not?” Julia asked.

“Don’t be silly.” He smiled. “I don’t have to tell you what you’re on. I’m not real. Or really here.”

“Then why are you here at all?” Julia looked away.

“You tell me.”

Julia wiped away the wetness that had begun to settle under her eyes.

“Well, don’t be mad. It ain’t my fault.”

Julia turned back to face the smoky semblance of Andy. She stared into his eyes. They didn’t seem entirely the same. They recognized her, but she could tell they had already misplaced the feelings he once had. They did not remember that they had once looked upon her in love.

“How could you?” she snapped. “Look at this place. Everything’s falling apart. You asshole.”

“I know. It’s hard.”

“Do you miss me?” she asked. He looked confused.

“I don’t know. I don’t know if I can miss anything. Or feel anything. Besides regret.”

“What do you regret?”

“Ever leaving this bed.”

Julia suddenly shifted her gaze to the record player on the floor. The beginning notes of “Sun King” had caught her off guard.
“Fuck.” She stammered, wiping once more at her tears. “Of course.”

They had made love to this song last time. She had thought it, and still thought it, one of the most beautiful moments of her life. Their souls, Julia remembered, had danced around each other, appearing as warm, golden rays of light. He probably didn’t remember. He couldn’t remember anything.

He was here only to taunt her, to speak to her of regret. She had no use for his regret, now, living alone in an apartment they were meant to share. Nor did she have use for her memories of him or of the image, still vivid in her mind, of their souls surrounding the both of them. Locking them together not so long ago. She had no use for his empty face there in the smoke. Still, though, she looked up, once more, to find it. To find his eyes and the lack of recognition in them.

When she looked up again, though, he was gone and the song had already ended, vaporated along with Andy. Extinguished like their dancing souls.

The ceiling, though, remained vibrant above her. Life thrusting into life thrusting into life.
RIDGE

I pulled the Corrola into a spot near the end of the lot, hoping it would be out of view of the front office. The space was partly shaded by the Sycamore that had been growing here since I’d attended John F. Kirkpatrick Elementary decades ago. It was so much larger now, but it had always loomed.

Past the front gates, well over two-hundred kids swarmed on the playground; it felt like a zoo. I quickly scanned through the various herds, looking for Lisa’s lime green backpack or her wild blonde curls. No luck. She wasn’t on the swing set or in line for any of the slides. The dull gray steel of the dated playground equipment glinted in the fierce sun. Of all the days to forget my sunglasses. I’d be squinting for hours.

I turned toward Rhonda in the passenger seat where she sat smoking. She stared into her side mirror, blowing smoke at her own reflection. Her fingers pulled through her red hair, which she had dyed the night before, like a comb. The night before, she had blown it dry, the buzz of the machine obscuring my Bronco’s game. Now, it seemed like a fire consuming her face, fueled by the cheap, Kmart makeup she had caked it in. Her white tank top was too small for her—her chest poured out over it, the crests of her hot pink bra clearly visible.

“Wait here. Don’t talk to anyone.” I said, unbuckling my seatbelt which had grown hot from the lingering sunlight. “And maybe put your tits away, if you don’t mind.”

“Fuck you.” Rhonda spat as she pulled each side of her tank top up with her free
hand. “Just hurry up.”

“Hey,” I warned, “Watch your mouth around her. I’m not raising some dirty-mouthed whore.”

“No.” She smiled, blowing another puff of smoke into my eyes. “You’re just screwing one.”

I peeled myself out of the car and slammed the door behind me, pausing to grab my pills from my shirt pocket. I tapped two capsules from the canister, swallowing them down as I crossed the parking lot toward the office. Glancing quickly into each car, I searched for any potential witnesses. The old man asleep in his green pick up could be ignored. He was at the opposite end of the lot—a heat stroke would kill him before he could get in my way.

As I opened the heavy, metal door a wave of cool air washed over me. Instantly, I could forget about the intolerable Nevada heat of early September. The woman sitting at the front desk reminded me of my Aunt Gertie, pasty and decorated in pastels like a stale, old cupcake. Her name tag read “Opal” and she wore a gaudy, red and orange floral-print pantsuit that seemed to light the whole room. Her gray hair had been sprayed solid with Aquanet into some nameless shape. As I walked toward her, she looked up, startled, from her computer screen. I could tell by her almost immediate change in posture that she had not been laid in a very, very long time and that she was one of those women who fell in love with every penis that came within ten feet of her.

“Hello sir,” She smiled, flashing her pearly yellows. Some of her coral lipstick was smudged on her front tooth. “What can I do you for?”
“My name,” I tried not to laugh, “is Jerry Ridge. I’m here to pick up my daughter, Lisa Ridge. She’s got an appointment with her doctor.”

She nodded, turning in her swivel chair to face one of the giant filing cabinets behind her. She opened the drawer labeled “J-R” and flipped through the manila folders. She plucked one out and spun back around to face me. Opal set Lisa’s file down and flipped the cover open. From a flap in the folder, she pulled a yellow index card. She read through it, frowned slightly and then re-read it, squinting harder this time.

“What did you say your name was sir?”

“Jerry Ridge. I’m Lisa’s father.” I reached for my wallet and pulled out my driver’s license. “Do you need to see identification?”

“That’s not necessary, Mr. Ridge. “ Opal said, “But you aren’t listed on her emergency card. I’m afraid I won’t be able to release her to you. It’s district policy.”

Maryann must have already come down here and taken me off the list. That bitch. She’d probably done it last week, when she drove down here for parent-teacher conferences. I knew I should have gotten the night off and come with her. Geoff could have survived one night without me down at the station. We hadn’t had much coming through in the last few weeks, anyway. We could unload the whole nights work in half the time of our shift. I wanted to run back out to the car and make a visit to her work. I’d march right in and grab her by that long brown hair. I’d drag her all the way back to this office. I’d strangle her as she put my name back on that fucking card. I could almost feel the tendons in her neck, writhing under my grip.

I remembered the pill I just took, hoping it would kick in soon.
“Are you sure?” I asked. I could hear my blood pumping through my brain. “I’ve never had a problem before. My wife must have forgotten to put me on the list this year. I’m sure a sweet thing like you could fix it for me. Couldn’t you, Opal?” I leaned in toward her, my crooked elbow supporting my weight on the counter.

She blushed, biting her lip. “Let me see what I can do, Mr. Ridge. It sure would be a shame if Lisa had to miss her appointment. I know how hard those are to reschedule.”

Two minutes later, I was still giving Opal my hungry for love face when Lisa came in through the door on the opposite side of the room. She walked slowly, both eyes super glued to the floor in front of her. Her backpack bobbed up and down on her shoulders. She looked up and smiled at me, revealing two new missing teeth.

“Daddy!” She squealed, “Are you taking me home today?”

“No, sweetie. You have an appointment with Doctor Fisher.” I asked, taking her backpack from her. I turned back to wink at Opal, a final parting gift to thank her for all her help.

I buckled Lisa in, glaring up at Rhonda in the front seat. She sighed and tossed her cigarette out the window. Before reclaiming the driver’s seat, I did another quick scan of the parking lot. Just to make sure nobody was watching us. It didn’t matter that I’d put on fake plates, or that the car wasn’t registered. I didn’t want anyone to catch even just a glimpse of the paint color. I sat down and started the engine, relieved that the most important part was over. I smiled, turning the radio up, as Rhonda reached back to tickle Lisa’s tiny, sandaled-foot.

“How are you, sweet stuff?” Rhonda asked.
“We learned about space in Mrs.Langley’s class today, Aunt Rhonda!” Lisa replied excitedly. She reached into her backpack and pulled out a worksheet with pictured of all the planets in a line. We made our way out of town quickly; the highway was wide open in the middle of the day. Rhonda listened patiently as Lisa regurgitated all of the information she had obtained in the first grade so far. She had such patience, Rhonda. It was hard enough for me to tolerate Lisa when she got to babbling like this—and she was my kid! It must be fucking torture to listen to someone else’s child talk incessantly about caterpillars and cocoons. Spelling words. Which bones connect to which other bones.

“Daddy!” Lisa shouted abruptly from the back seat, “This isn’t the way to the doctor.”

“I know, honey.” I found her eyes in the rearview mirror. “We’re not going to the doctor. We’re going on vacation. I wanted to surprise you.”

Her face lit up, bright as when she watched her first firework explode across the summer night. “Are we going to Florida again? To Disney World?”

“No. Not Florida this time. We’re going to Mexico. It’s even prettier than Florida, if you can believe that.”

“Is Mom coming?” She fidgeted with the dolphin keychain I had bought her on our last vacation. It was generic and poorly made, but I had to buy something to shut the greedy vendor up as we took shelter under his tent during one of the sudden, unexpected rainstorms that Florida was known for.

“No. Mom won’t be there.” Her mention left a rotten feeling in my brain.

“Mom told me I wouldn’t be seeing you for a long time, Dad. But it’s only been
two weeks. Is two weeks a long time?” She held out ten fingers, as if counting the days since our last encounter.

“Yes! Of course two weeks is a long time to be away from your dad. Didn’t you miss me?”

She nodded eagerly.

“Good. You’ll be seeing me a lot from now on. We’ll see each other every day.”

I knew she’d probably be a bit tough to deal with for a few weeks once she realized she wouldn’t be seeing Maryann anymore. It was best for her, though. One day she’d thank me for extracting her from the clutches of Satan’s merciless whore.

After a while, the car became silent. My foot never left the accelerator as we approached the state border. I thought about the last time I’d seen her—Maryann. I hadn’t been taking my medication that week. Or part of the week before it. That’s what set her off. Lisa wailed as Maryann threw my various belongings out of our bedroom window onto the dying grass of our front lawn.

“What the fuck?” I yelled, coming from behind her to slam the window shut.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“You’re fucking sick, Jerry!” She backed away from me to the other side of the room, picking Lisa up as she crossed over the doorway into the hall. “You know that!”

“I have a fucking problem, Maryann. A disease. A sickness.” I threw an empty bottle from the night before into the wall. “Do you think I want to be like this?”

“You don’t have to be like this, Jerry. You could take your pills. You promised me you’d stay on the pills, this time.” She shook, tears streaming down her red face. “I
counted them, Jerry. I know it’s been days since you’ve been straight.”

She was right, the hallucinations were back and, already, they were as strong as they were before I started the medication. The voices were louder, angrier. It was hard to hear myself think.

I blamed her. I wasn’t like this before we met. I used to enjoy the simplest shit. Hearing “Hotel California” on a sunny day used to be enough for me to get through the day just fine. Maryann was a fucking leech, though. She crawled into my brain and lived off me until there wasn’t anything left for either of us. She was gorgeous, though. I couldn’t forget that no matter how bad I wanted to. Her long hair and almond-colored eyes had me hooked from day one. She had all of Rhonda’s lovely features without all the tackiness.

“I’m not going to keep arguing with you. You’re out today.” She grabbed a suitcase by the bedroom door and walked further down the hall. “We’re staying with some friends tonight. Don’t be here when we come back in the morning.”

And then, they left.

It had only taken me an hour or so to pack all of my shit up into two green duffel bags. I didn’t have much to take. An old bowling trophy, some framed family photos. My father’s old suit. Besides my own clothing, those were the only things I took with me. Those were the only things I thought really mattered even just a little bit. I didn’t have a lot of money and I didn’t want to blow what little I had on a shitty motel room. On a whim, I’d gone to Rhonda’s.

Apart from her glorious curves and wide eyes, she’s not anything like her sister.
She didn’t ask any questions. She just opened the door and led me to her bedroom. That’s where I had spent most of the last two weeks. We got along pretty well, better than Maryann and I ever did. She understood the sudden bouts of anger, the depressed days, and the brief moments of contentment that punctuated the constant paranoia. She hadn’t asked any questions when I told her my plan. I suspect she’s just as fucking crazy as I am, to tell you the truth.

I knew what Maryann wanted to do. She always had a plan, and I wasn’t dumb enough to think for a second that it wouldn’t work. She always got what she wanted, and never by coincidence. She’d hire a fancy lawyer and get full custody. She wouldn’t be able to afford it, of course. Not on her shitty salary from the bank. Maryann would find other ways to pay the bastard back. There’d be supervised visits every other weekend. Child support payments. Restraining orders, even, if she could find a way to justify it. If the bitch had her way, I’d never see Lucy again. I guess that works for a lot guys these days, but not for me.

Fuck Maryann. I was going to beat her to it. Rhonda and I would take Lisa to Mexico to start a new life. Find a smaller apartment with easy rent. Find some construction work. Any work at all. If I had to scrub shit from the walls of the raunchiest dive bar bathroom, I’d be happy to do it. I’d be happy to do anything as long as I could keep Lisa. The medication would be cheaper here, too. I wouldn’t have to go off of it for months at a time like I did here. We’d be a normal family. Or something like it.

After three hours on the road, I pulled into a shady looking Arco station. These what were all gas stations looked like in the movies. Right before it was held up. Or
invaded by zombies. Deserted and decrepit, helpless, like an old man. Across the dirt
road in front of the station, I saw a towering model, constructed from broken car parts
and scrap metal, of some dinosaur I couldn’t tell you the name of. I can tell you that it
looked like a mean mother fucker. Dozens of tiny, rectangular blades jutted out from its
mouth—sharp, carnivorous teeth that made me shiver. I bet that somewhere, probably
somewhere in Africa, if there was a small community of dinosaurs like this one. Sitting
around a fire pit underground, biding their time until they could violently reclaim their
territory.

I wanted to make it out of Nevada before stopping, but Rhonda and Lisa had
started whining about need the restroom. It was just after three, Maryann was probably on
her way to the school by now. Hell, she may already be parked, waiting for Lisa at her
usual spot. Maybe she had a Happy Meal for her sitting on the floor of the car. She was
always doing shit like that—trying to buy Lisa’s love. Manipulating her with art supplies
and chicken nuggets—the keys to our little girl’s heart. Within minutes, with no sign of
Lisa, she’d get irritated and wonder what the hell the hold up was all about. I could see
her in the office, raising hell with sweet, old Opal. She’d call her out on that ridiculous
outfit, that was for sure.

As we walked through the automatic doors, I scanned the small store for cops. For
all I knew, an investigation could already be underway. My description and Lisa’s being
read out across the radio for anyone to hear. Maryann wouldn’t fuck around.

Rhonda and Lisa ran past me hand in hand, disappearing into the bathroom at the
back of the store. From the upkeep of the place, I’d bet the bathroom hadn’t been cleaned
in the past week. It’d feel just like home for Rhonda, I guess. She really wasn’t the most hygienic woman I’d ever met. Or slept with.

   Lisa skipped out of the bathroom, stopping to stand beside me in the aisle of sweets. The rule had always been the same, she could pick one candy bar. I watched as she weighed her options.

   “Which is better?” She asked, holding out a Snickers bar and a sleeve of Starburst.

   “The hell,” I started, “It’s a special day. You can try both.” I grabbed the candy and walked over to the dollar bin where Rhonda was trying on sunglasses. She turned to kiss me, her eyes shielded by two over-sized lenses in a plastic, yellow frame. Lisa waddled up from behind, rooting in the bin to find her own identical pair. She slid them on and struck her best movie star pose—one hand on her hip, one supporting her head, flung back with the weight of all their glamour. I don’t know where she got this personality, with me being so socially inept and Maryann being a total twat. Two negatives make a positive, I guess. I failed algebra. That concept still doesn’t make any sense to me.

   We walked up to the counter, slapping our desired purchases down in front of the cashier. I could tell he was a prick by his stupid, swooping haircut and the name tag that read “Chad” pinned below his collar. His head was stuck in an old copy of Maxim. I had to ring the service bell to get his attention. The kid nearly messed his pants, jumping up from the battered stool he rested on. He set the magazine carefully underneath the counter and started ringing up our items.
“Find everything you needed?” he recited, staring blankly over our heads.

“Yes, Chad.” I said, “We found everything just fine.”

Rhonda chuckled under her breath, elbowing me in the side.

“You know of any nice restaurants around here, Chad?” Rhonda asked, her voice extra sweet.

Good thinking. All I’d eaten today was half a chocolate bar that I had found in Rhonda’s pantry. I’m not sure how long it had been expired, but it had tasted faintly of gravy.

“Uh.” He grunted, contorting his face painfully as he grasped painfully at the corners of his brain to remember even just one such establishment in the surrounding area. “There’s a McDonald’s two exits up from here.”

“There’s not anything nicer? Like an IHOP or something?”

“Nah. That’s probably the last place you’re going to see for a while. We’re kind of in the middle of nowhere.”

Yeah. I guess we were. But I had always imagined the middle of nowhere being a fucking IHOP.

We got back on the freeway. In a few minutes time we were walking into what looked like the only McDonald’s that hadn’t been renovated since 1976. The paint on the outside of the building that, I assumed, used to resemble ketchup and mustard, was now salmon pink and Easter bunny yellow. The interior was just as dated. The life-size statue of Ronald McDonald was missing its nose and the wallpaper, printed with millions of tiny cheeseburgers, was peeling away at the corners of the room. An entire patch of tile
was missing from the floor in front of the counter which was, by some act of God, simultaneously crusted and sticky. For how shitty this place was, there was definitely a fair amount of business to justify its existence. A small family sat at the nearest booth. The two children shared a Happy Meal while their morbidly obese parents devoured entire trays of greasy, fried food. They played footsie under the table. A modern day romance—who knew things could still be so idyllic? Behind them, underneath a cracked window painted in advertisements, three hookers nibbled at a shared order of french fries. At least it was super sized. A pile of crumbled cheeseburger wrappers sat in a pile between them.

“Daddy, can I go play in the ball pit?” Lisa asked, tugging on my T shirt.

I looked over at the Play Place which was in a separate room made entirely of windows. It looked incredibly dirty. A rainbow of rogue balls and abandoned trash were scattered about the floor. A single employee sat in a chair in the corner. She was an older woman, probably around sixty. Her ratty hair was pulled into a sloppy bun at the nape of her neck. She sat hunched on a bench, her legs sticking straight out in front of her. She took long, slow drags from her cigarette and stared at the emptiness of the desert all around her. She was probably planning her inevitable suicide.

“I don’t know, Lisa.” I said. “It looks pretty gross in there. And check out that scary lady. She might bite you.”

I’m such an unrelenting asshole.

“Please, Dad? Please, please, please?”

I took another look at the ball pit. It had to be filled with AIDS-infected
hypodermic needles. It just had to be.

“Fine.” I agreed. “Just don’t take your shoes off.”

Rhonda and I got into line and ordered a random assortment of shit from the dollar menu. After our mentally incompetent cashier finally gathered it all onto our tray, we walked to a table across from the hookers and started peeling the wrappers from our McChickens.

“I’m totally not hating that kid of yours.” Rhonda said, sliding the sunglasses down her nose to smile at me with her eyes. “She’s got good taste.”

“She likes you, too. I can tell. It might actually work. This plan of ours.”

“I always knew I’d be a good mom.” Rhonda mused, putting her sandwich down to take a long swig of her Root Beer. “Dolling her up to go out to fancy dinners. Painting her toe nails and shit like that. I’ll like it. Fuck, I even brought a box with a few of my old Barbies. She plays with Barbies, right?”

Maryann never bought Lisa Barbies. She didn’t want her to have unrealistic expectations of her body or some bullshit like that. She can’t stand to see anyone happy. Not even a six-year-old.

Rhonda could be a good mother for Lisa. Sure, she’d have to dress a little differently, clean up her mouth and, eventually, lay off the coke for good but her potential was definitely evident. I could tell by the way she pulled Lisa’s hair up when she came running to our table.

“You don’t want to get food in your beautiful curls.” She whispered as she secured the ponytail with a rubber band.
We were sitting there for about half an hour, making plans for our first few days in Mexico, when Lucille Plasterson, the moronic PTA president—and town gossip—from back home came waddling up to our table. She held her full tray of food perkily out from her chest, displaying each item with equanimity—like she was gonna flip the goods for a profit or something. What the hell was she doing here?

“Hello, hello everyone!” She squealed, “What a small world! What are ya’ll doing all the way out here?”

“We’re going to Mexico! For vacation!” Lisa answered. At the very least her excitement made her sound convinced.

A flash of bewilderment blinked across Lucille’s face which she quickly replaced with another one of her trademark saccharine smiles. “Is that so?”

“Yeah, we’re going on one of those cruises. Down the Riviera? We’ve got a stop in Catalina, too.” I said. “Maryann didn’t wanna call off work. She’s gonna fly down to meet us in the morning.”

“Ah! Of course.” Lucille replied. She seemed satisfied enough.

“And what brings you out to the middle of nowhere, Lucille?” Rhonda asked. She jiggled the ice in her paper cup, slurping the last drops of liquid up with her straw.

“Oh!” Lucille smiled. “We just met the grandkids at Disneyland. Three whole days!”

“How fun!” Rhonda smiled back. She knew just how to play this one. “ Doesn’t that sound fun, Lisa.”

“Will you take me Aunt Rhonda? On the way home from Mexico?”
“Maybe next summer, kiddo.” I said, “One vacation at a time.”

“Well it was nice running into you all.” Lucille gave one final, enthusiastic grin.

“I gotta get this hot food back to Mr. Plasterson!”

I kept my eyes at her back as she trotted to a booth near the restroom. She sat down opposite her husband. He slouched in his ill-fitting sweater vest. Lucille had probably picked it out for him, forced him to wear it. It was only a matter of time before Maryann would be just as controlling and psychotic as Lucille Plasterson. Maybe twenty years. Maybe fifteen. Maybe even less. All I know is I’m glad I won’t be around to see it for myself.

Lisa gobbled down her chicken nuggets in record time and found her way back to the Playplace while Rhonda and I called numbers from the list of apartment buildings we’d scouted out online. Any open unit at a good price would do—the sooner we had a destination, the sooner I’d be able to relax a little. Things wouldn’t feel certain until I at least knew where we were going.

I kept close watch on the Plastersons. Lucille’s back was to me, but she kept hunching over toward her husband—whispering, perhaps? I turned my head to get a better look, pretending to study the poster on the door to the kitchen. 1100 calories in a #1. 750 calories in a Oreo McFlurry. A strange, narrowed stare from Mr. Plasterson—we caught eyes as I turned back to face Rhonda.

“We gotta get out of here.” I said. “Plasterson’s getting nosy.”

“That ain’t nothing new. What could she do?”

“I don’t know. But she could do something. Maybe she’ll try to get a hold of
Maryann. You think she’s got her number?”

Rhonda shrugged. “How the hell would I know whose number she’s got or ain’t got?”

I took my keys out of my pocket and slid them across to her.

“Go start the car, pull up to the side door. Be quick, but don’t make a scene. Be cool—throw the trash away on your way out.”

I watched her exit the restaurant, her high heels clicking against the linoleum, and then the concrete outside. I stood, nodding over to Mr. Plasterson. He raised his hand weakly—some half-assed sort of wave. Something was up. That much was understood between us, knowledge exchanged in the awkward coding of our gestures. He would not stop me and neither would his idiot wife. Not personally, anyway. Not directly.

I walked slowly to the entrance of the Playplace, taking care to emphasize the casual nature of the decision.

I didn’t see her right away—the room almost seemed empty save the clomping of her knees against the plastic tubing of the crawl tunnels that weaved in and out of each other.


She popped her head out from an opening in the side of the giant, lime green tube. Her face was flushed, dotted in sweat.

“Five more minutes?” She asked.

“Nope. We gotta get on the road. Now, kid.”

She groaned, her clomping louder and slower than before—a reluctance we didn’t
have time for.

As soon as she was back on solid ground, I snatched her hand and squeezed it tight.

“When I tell you to do something, you do it.” I barked as I marched her to the door. “You don’t drag your feet and make a scene. You just do it. Understand?”

“Yes, daddy.” She answered meekly. “I’m sorry.”

I pushed the side door open with my free hand. Rhonda was ready, waiting for us. I opened the back door for Lisa. I watched her buckle her seatbelt before getting in myself.

“Jesus Christ.” Rhonda said, turning down the radio and silencing Three Dog Night in the middle of their chorus. “The hell took so long? I thought you were in a hurry. Seemed that way, at least.”

“We are in a hurry.” There was no slack in my voice. “We gotta get as far away from here as we can.”

We pulled up to the exit, Rhonda flipped on her turn signal. Turning onto the street, she adjusted the volume again. I turned around, looking back at the McDonald’s to see a squad car turning into the parking lot. Fucking Plastersons. I knew it. They’d be on our tail quick. Mexico was out.

“Don’t get back on going southbound. Go back north.” I said. I popped the glovebox open and pulled out a crumpled map.

“The hell you mean go north?” Rhonda spat, incredulous.”We ain’t gonna get to no Mexico going north.”
“Fucking Lucille Plasterson and her sweetie called the police, Rhonda. They know where we’re headed. We’ll be fucked in ten minutes going south. I just watched the police pull into the parking lot. ”

“God damn.” Rhonda said. “Where we gonna go?”

“Go somewhere else for now, wait it out. Just head east when you can.”
THANKSGIVING 1999

The drive out to Pilsky from the city took a little over an hour. Herding George and the kids into the Cherokee took Eileen almost as long against their whiny resistance. It was Thanksgiving and they had a date to meet up with her side of the family at her mother’s place—that same old house Eileen had grown up in. Eileen did not enjoy making the journey any more than the rest of her brood, but it had been at least half a year since they’d been out that way. Charlie, her older brother, would be there with his family as well. Eileen felt no excitement at the prospect of a family reunion. Instead, she dreaded it, growing more irritated with every mile marker she passed along the way.

The inside of the SUV was silent, she looked into her rearview to see each of her children staring down, engrossed, at their own electronic gadget. Liz wore bright pink headphones and bobbed along to the peppy beat emanating from her Walkman, likely the same terrible pop song she had been playing, nonstop and full blast, for the last week in her room. Jake bit his lip, pressing the buttons on his Gameboy furiously. Next to her, George held the green bean casserole on his lap and stared indiscriminately out the windows at each passing burger joint and Bank of America. The oniony scent of the casserole filled the whole car, even overpowering the extra-strength coconut air freshener that dangled from the rear view mirror. The combination of the two dissonant scents made her nauseous. She tinkered with the controls at her arm, rolling each window in the car down just enough to let in some fresh air.

Immediately and without comment, using his own window control button, George
rolled his back closed. Eileen turned to scowl at her husband, but he refused to meet her gaze.

“I don’t like the wind in my face.” He said, still staring out at the businesses littering his side of the highway.

“I feel sick. Too many smells. I just want to air it out.”

George shrugged. “So roll down your own window. The rest of us don’t have to suffer just to make you comfortable.”

Eileen rolled her eyes, lamenting that she was dealing with a thirty-six year old adolescent—just another person she had to take care of and clean up after.

Years ago, she would have enjoyed these two days off from the office. A four day weekend used to be as exciting as a sprawling summer break from school. Now, she wished for the office, that silence interrupted only by her fingers tapping against her keyboard. It was so different from the stifling silence created by her family in this unbearably small space. And today was just the start of it. How would she keep them entertained tomorrow? Saturday? Sunday? Already she was exhausted and she hadn’t even had to deal with her mother, yet.

“Mom,” Liz yelped, yanking her right headphone violently from her ear. “How much longer?”

“Thirty minutes. Just enough time to watch one episode of the Rugrats.”

Liz threw her head back against her seat in defeat, “Why do we have to come all the way out here for Thanksgiving. Why couldn’t we just do it at home?”

“Thanksgiving is a time to be with your family, sweetie.” Eileen answered, “And
our family is out here.”

“But why’s Grandma gotta live so far away? It takes forever and I’m so bored.”

This was a question Eileen had asked herself many times. She, too, saw no reason why her mother could not have moved closer to them. She and Charlie had both been working in the city for years, over a decade by now. Each time one of them brought up a condo or an apartment in the city to their mother, though, she had shot it down.

“I’ve been living in Pilsky fifty years! Why should I pick up and move just because you did? There isn’t anything there for me.” She had repeated each time the proposal resurfaced.

“Mom,” Eileen had tried to explain, “You’re getting older. What if there was an emergency? It would take hours for Charlie or I to get to you. We’re all you’ve got!”

In response, she had simply shrugged, “You’re just lazy. Lazy and ungrateful.”

Eileen had considered the possibility, briefly, that her mother’s words were true. That she and her brother were lousy, ungrateful adult children who thought only of themselves and their own convenience. At first, the idea had startled her. She was repulsed by the suggestion that she could be labeled as something so ugly and unkind.

She resolved to fight the accusation head on, carting herself and her family out to Pilsky two or three times a month for the first few years of her children’s lives. Eventually, though, a bitterness of her own was born. She began to resent her mother for never making the trip from Pilsky to the city to see them—not even once. Here she was, raising two children, keeping a house, and working full time towards a promotion at her company, and her mother expected her to spend the little free time she did have traveling
the hour both ways to take her to lunch and a show? What world was she living in?

Now, they made the trip only two or three times a year. Thanksgiving, Christmas, sometimes Easter. This, she decided, was the extent of the time she was willing to sacrifice for her mother who, for her own part, seemed unwilling to sacrifice anything for her.

Pulling into the neighborhood, Eileen grimaced at finding it in even worse shape than it was at their last visit. Her mother had obviously given up on the place. The flowerbed at the center of the lawn was no longer blooming with daisies and tulips as they had in the years previous. Instead, it was overgrown with weeds and tall, bending sunflowers. Their thick, ugly stems looked like the twisting veins in her mother’s aging legs. Varicose.

Eileen parked the car on the street directly in front of her mother’s trailer. Charlie’s Lexus was already parked on the driveway. She stepped out of the vehicle and tried to peer in through the front window to see what was happening inside. She smoothed the creases in her slacks with her palms and pulled down on her blouse, straightening herself out after the long drive. Liz and Jake grumbled and rubbed at their eyes, already exhausted by the efforts required of them on this holiday. George was already at the front door with the casserole still cradled in his arms, trying to press the doorbell with a single finger extended from the glass baking pan.

Eileen took a deep breath, still staring up at the window, trying to distinguish the shapes she saw moving inside, and grabbed her daughter’s hand. “Remember to give grandma a big hug and kiss on the cheek,” she told her as they walked to the door.
The door swung open as they scaled the incline of the driveway. Rosie and Grace, Eileen’s twin nieces, sprinted past George out toward her, shouting “Aunt Leenie! Aunt Leenie!” They latched onto each one of her legs, looking up at her with wide eyes.

“Didja bring us more coloring books?” Rosie asked.

“Or a new Mary Kate and Ashley movie?” Grace chimed in.

Eileen forced a laugh and reached into her purse, rummaging through the old receipts, loose credit cards, and empty packages of Spearmint gum. Finally, she pulled out two Snickers bars, and handed one to each of her nieces. “Just candy today, girls. Make sure to save it for later. You don’t want to spoil your big dinner.”

“Thanks Aunt Leenie!” The girls shouted together before running back into the house, through with her now that they had their loot.

“Hey!” Jake snapped, walking next to her. “Why don’t we get any candy?”

“I buy you candy all the time. I only see Rosie and Grace on special occasions.” Eileen said, slinging her purse back over her shoulder.

“It’s still no fair.”

“Yeah,” Liz added, “It’s no fair.”

“Come on,” Jake motioned to his sister, “Let’s see if Uncle Charlie brought his Nintendo 64. I want to race.”

“I call the princess.” Liz squealed, sprinting out in front of her brother.

Eileen was relieved to have them disengaged from her. She made the rest of the way into her mother’s trailer as slowly as she could manage. The longer she spent outside, she thought, the less time she’d be forced to manage all these spoiled brats or to
make conversation with her mother.

The interior of her mother’s trailer, in step with the rest of the complex, was falling apart. Eileen placed her purse on the floor near the entry way, noticing a large tuft of carpet missing near the closet door. It looked as though it had been scratched out by a cat, or a crazed puppy.

Her mother rounded the corner from the living room slowly. Her face was bright red. Sweat stains were forming at her armpits, just under the straps of her apron, stained with loose flour and a rainbow of other sauces and spices.

“Mom!” Eileen smiled, advancing with open arms. “How have you been?” Her mother stiffened against the embrace, pulling back after an awkward moment of limited contact.

“Fine, fine.” Maribel replied, turning back toward the kitchen, “Can you help me with the gravy? I can’t get the thickness just right.”

“Of course.” Eileen pulled her long hair back from her face, twisting it into a low knot at the base of her neck as she crossed the hallway to the cramped kitchen. Already, her task seemed daunting. How would she get anything done in this mess? Her mom had already pulled the good cutlery and china from the top cupboard, taking up valuable space on the counter along with open packages of every sort. She thought of her own tidy kitchen, each silver appliance sparkling bright. Charlie and Micheline, his new, younger wife, were already inside, working together to mash the potatoes that sat in a pile between the on the counter. Charlie looked up at her, dropping his knife and wiping his hands on his khakis.
“Sis!” he hugged her warmly, as though he meant it. “So good to see you. How’re things?”

“Busy as usual. The whole office has been working on this huge case. Some slip and fall in a Burger King. We’re hoping for five million.”

“Wow!” Charlie hooted, placing his hands on his hips. “I better be careful, you’ll be coming after us next!”

Charlie spent the majority of his time kissing his boss’ ass on golf courses and in fancy restaurants. He was next in line for CEO of his company—Farley’s, a fancier burger chain that had exploded in Arizona. There were already talks of expanding into California, maybe Texas.

“Not if you make sure you’re underlings know how to use a dry mop.”

“That we will.” Charlie laughed, “That we will.”

“Where’s the gravy cooking, Ma?” Eileen asked, walking up to Maribel’s side at the sink. She was peeling a carrot in long, rough strokes.

“On the stove, wouldn’t you know it. That’s where gravy usually cooks.”

Eileen ignored her mother’s feisty tone. There was no need to give her the argument she wanted. She was determined to get through just one of these family dinners without someone having an anxiety attack or smashing something valuable against a wall.

She walked up to the stove and peered down into the pot where the gravy bubbled at a rapid boil. “Geeze, ma. I hope this isn’t already burned. You know you should have it simmering.” She turned the heat down to low and grabbed a wooden spoon from the
drawer at her hip. Slowly, she stirred the gray, pasty mixture. There were no turkey drippings, no chunks of meat. Just chopped up pieces of boiled egg, broth, and flour it seemed. She thought about asking her mother about the new recipe, but decided against it. A perfect gravy was not worth the extra time in this stifling kitchen. She added a bit more broth from the opened can at her side, to thin out the clumpy sauce, stirred for a minute more and turned the stove off completely. That would have to do.

“So,” Micheline asked, “How are the kids doing? School going alright? Any extra curriculars this year?”

Eileen kneeled down and pulled a serving dish from the cupboard below the stove. As she poured the gravy from the pot into the dish she answered, “They’re doing just fine. Jake got student of the month for September. Liz got a small role in the school play. A munchkin—one of the ballerinas, I think—in ‘The Wizard of Oz.’ She loves it.”

“How nice!” Micheline smiled, looking up from her potatoes. “When does it go on? We’d love to catch a show!”

“Just before Christmas break. I’ll send you a program tomorrow. What about the twins? What are they up to?”

“Always something new!” Micheline chuckled, “One week they want to learn the violin, the next they’re staying after school to play soccer with the boys. It’s hard to keep up!”

“Are they on a team?” Eileen asked.

“Oh no. It’s nothing like that. Just a handful of kids staying late to play.”

“It’s actually really convenient for us,” Charlie said, “I’m always working late.
And Micheline has her Yoga classes Wednesdays and Fridays.”

“They just walk home with one of the neighbor boys.” Micheline added.

“Sounds like you’re raising a couple of latch key kids.” Maribel stammered from her place at the sink. “How old are those girls? And you’re letting them walk home? With boys?”

“Relax, mother.” Charlie rolled his eyes. “We live three blocks from the school. And they’re not walking home alone. Some days one of the other parents will even give them a ride.”

“Oh! So now you’re training your girls to take rides from random strangers? Just wonderful.”

Eileen placed the clear, glass lid over the gravy. What was her mother blabbering on and on about? She and Charlie hadn’t been much better than latch key kids. They’d taken the bus to school from kindergarten until she bought her own car—saving for two years working at Tuxie’s drive-thru—aﬅer her 16th birthday. Their stop was two streets over, too. How’d she think they got there? Teleportation? No! They had walked. Every day. And both ways. Maribel had never dropped them oﬀ or picked them up from school a day in her life. And she hadn’t even been working. She stayed home, cooking and cleaning and watching her soaps. But never transporting her kids to and from anything school related. What a joke.

Picking up the dish, she walked out of the kitchen to the dining room, leaving the rest of the kitchen to duke it out amongst themselves. Her walk through the hall took longer than usual because as she walked through it, she got a strange feeling. Something
felt different about the hallway. She had been down it millions of times over the course of her life. In diapers and in onesies. In sneakers and in high heels. T-shirts and prom dresses. At first, she could not pick out what had changed. The carpet was that same rusted brown shag. The wallpaper, that same twisting vine print in emerald green. It had aged some over the years, of course, but that was not what was awry. As she walked up to press her free hand to it, feeling the raised print like Braille against her fingers, she studied the wall from this new closeness. The picture frames. She reached up to touch the one nearest to her. It was slick, recently polished. But it was the same frame that had been in the hallway for decades, housing Charlie’s class picture from the—

A still life? Eileen stepped back and stared, dumbfounded, at the painting before her. A pile of fruit in a crystal bowl, their bright reds and oranges popping out at her against the brilliant white table cloth. In the next frame, which had held her own class picture from the same year, she now saw another still life in the same style. This time, vegetables poured from a large canvas bag. A beautiful harvest set against the background of a small country kitchen. All along the walls on each side of her, family photos had been replaced with these tacky prints. Where had she found them? The thrift store or a pawn shop? Of course, she had paid too much for them, convinced that anything in a frame must be good art—and valuable. Where was her senior photo now? Her father’s last portrait? The group shot they took together in Balboa Park on their first family vacation? Eileen imagined the precious pictures in a box in the attack, gathering dust and disintegrating along with the carcasses of dead spiders. She shook her head as she looked up at the rest of the paintings.
A letter-writing desk, with fountain pens and peppermints in the opened drawer. Stacks of blank pepper. An envelope, torn open.

A cat, sleeping on the floor of a pantry. Boxes of crackers and jars of applesauce. A rusted, red coffee can plastered with “SPARE CHANGE” written sloppily in black marker across a piece of masking tape.

They were the same sort of paintings Great Grandma Wilson had hanging in her bedroom in the earliest years of Eileen’s childhood. Maybe they were Great Grandma Wilson’s. Left to the family in her will. It was possible. Some of them looked familiar. Still, why actually put them up? They were so uninteresting—so worthlessly antique. Her mother would have to answer to this before Eileen left the house.

Once in the dining room, Eileen gently laid the tray of gravy down at the center of the table. She was surprised to see that the turkey was not yet laid out. She hadn’t noticed it in the oven when she’d been in the kitchen. Instead, her gravy stood out against the bright Tupperware containers on the table. She picked one up, popping of its translucent blue top. Immediately she was overcome by a terrible, rancid stench. Inside the container was what looked to be a stack of rotting lunch meat. Turkey, ham, salami—Eileen couldn’t tell. She quickly replaced the top to the container and reached for another. In this one, more rotting meat, with a slightly greener hue at the center. The meat glittered as though it were turning into something metallic. The magical green of live seaweed.

Eileen collapsed in the chair at her side, her heart thumping at a rate that alarmed her almost as much as the incident which caused it to be so.
“Charlie!” She called, attempting to mask her panic as best she could. “Can you help me in the dining room?”

“On my way,” he shouted from the hall. “What’s up?”

He stood in the doorway, his eyebrows pulled up, ready for an assignment.

She motioned him to come closer with furious little bursts of her hands. Toward her and back, toward her and back.

As he came toward her, looking confused, she began to whisper. “She’s lost it, Charlie. Really, truly, lost it this time.”

Charlie’s face relaxed, he smiled. “Leenie. The girls are fine walking home. We know the kids. We know the parents. We know everything. It’s only two days Micheline doesn’t pick them up herself, anyway. It perfectly fi—”

“No! No!” She stammered. “Not Micheline. Mom!”

“What about Mom?”

“She’s trying to poison us, maybe. Or just plain old lost her mind. Look in those containers. Just look at what she intended to serve us for Thanksgiving dinner.”

“Turkey? Mashed potatoes? What are you talking about?” He reached for the blue container, pulling off the top and releasing the putrid stench into the air once more. He looked down at it with perplexed eyes that darted from one corner of the container to another. “The fuck is this?”

“Expired sandwich meats. Deli cuts. Whatever you want to call them—they’re rancid.”

“And you’re sure Mom planned to serve this to us?”
“Did you see a turkey?”

He pulled a chair out from under the table, straddling it to face his sister. “Well, what do we do? Should we ask her about it.”

“No! No. Of course not. What can she do about it? She’s already insane. Did you notice anything strange about the hallway?”

“The hallway?”

“All the old photographs? Gone. She’s replaced them with shitty prints of even shittier paintings.”

“Paintings of what?”

“Food. Cats. Dining room tables with real, non-expired turkey spreads laid out on them. Who cares?”

“Oh. Like those paintings at Grandma Wilson’s?” He slammed his hand down on the table as if claiming a jackpot for his correct answer.

“Exactly.”

“Why?” he asked, looking more baffled than ever.

“That’s what I’m saying. There is no reason why.”

“So…what do we do?” Charlie asked.

The siblings sat in silence. Each turning over their limited options in their head.

“You and Micheline,” Eileen started, “You have that extra bedroom. The loft?”

“You mean the basement? I don’t think Mom would go for that. Besides, you have an extra bedroom too.”

“It’s not an extra bedroom, Charles. It’s an office.”
“You already have an office. You know, that place you dress up and drive to every morning.”

“A home office, Charles. And I do as much work in there as I do at my real office. I can’t afford to give it up. I won’t.”

“Settle down. You tried to pawn her off on me first.”

“Pawn her off? Really Charles? That’s our mother you’re talking about. Not an old guitar.”

“You know what I meant.”

“Well she can’t stay here alone, anymore. That much is for sure.”

“What are you thinking? A live-in nurse? How much would that cost?”

“We could look into it. My guess is too much.”

“What then? Sell the house, move her into a home?”

“Do you have a better idea? I mean, of course it’s not ideal but what else can we do?”

“I just always told myself I’d never do that. Just drop her off to die in some sterilized bedroom?”

“It doesn’t have to be like that. They have all sorts of these things. They look like apartments. Some even have a little garden patio, or a balcony.”

“If she’s crazy, you really think she should have access to a balcony?”

“Fine. No balcony. I’m just saying, it doesn’t have to be a terrible place. She might even like it.”

“Where? Out here?”
“Of course not. Obviously, she’s going to have to move out our way.”

“We’ve been trying to get her out there for years. You know how adamant she is about staying here. In this house.”

“That was fine when she could still take care of herself. Now, she’s trying to serve us rotten lunch meat. Who knows what else she’s been up to. Probably messing herself in bed. Walking around making strange scenes in public. We can’t let it go on, Charles.”

“Fine. You’re right. We just won’t give her a choice.”

“We can start looking around for a place tomorrow morning. What time can you be ready?”

“Tomorrow? I’ve got a 9 am tee time with Bert and Jeremy. And a dinner afterwards.”

“So call and reschedule. Do it Saturday.”

“These are important people, Eileen. I can’t just reschedule. This is how business works.”

“I know how business works, Charles. You’re the one who seems confused. Schmoozing those rich jerks is not business. You can do that any time.”

“I’m trying to run a company, Eileen. A rather large one. It’s much different from what you do. I have to make these connections and then I have to maintain them. You don’t just plant a rose and neglect it. You have to water it, daily. And trim the leaves.” He made little blooming movements with his fingers.

“Trim the leaves? What the hell are you talking about? Look, Charles. I
understand that you’ve got work to do. So do I. But this needs to be done and I won’t do it by myself just because you’re a misogynist and don’t respect my time.” Eileen stood up suddenly, crossing her arms over her lavender sweater.

“Oh god. A misogynist? Really?"

“You are!” She stomped her left foot into the carpet.

“Fine.” Charlie rolled his eyes. “I’ll reschedule. But if I do, we have to decide on a place tomorrow. No dragging our feet. I can’t afford any more days off.”

“I want to get this over with just as bad as you.”

“Good. So, nine work?” he asked.

“Perfect. I’ll meet you at the house?”

“Now, what do we do about…this?” he asked, gesturing toward the opened container of meat. “Should I go out and get a turkey?”

“Nothing’s open.” She said, “And it would take hours to cook, anyway. We’ll just make do with what we do have. Explain to the kids, later.”

“And when will we talk to Mom?”

“We can wait until we’ve found a place. Make a trip out together next weekend? Who knows, maybe we’ll be ready to start moving by then. Do you still have the truck?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Alright, then. It’s all settled. For now.”

Charles nodded and stood to leave. Eileen watched him disappear down the transformed hallway. She took one last look around the dining room. So many conversations had been held over this table. Between her and her parents. Between her
mother and her father, before they stopped talking to each other altogether. She knew she would remember this moment for the rest of her life—the last time she sat at this table—even though it did seem so insignificant. She was not sorry for this. She welcomed this memory to her repertoire as it had finally freed her from the actual experience. Soon, she would be freed from the house entirely.

... An hour later, the entire family gathered at the dining room table. There had, indeed, not been a turkey in the house. There had been, however, a couple frozen pizzas in the garage freezer. Eileen had them in and out of the oven in less than hour. Micheline and Charles placed two slices each on the cafeteria-style, paper plates alongside the mashed potatoes, the cranberry sauce—even the gravy got its own compartment. None of the children had raised any complaints against the alternative menu. Eileen watched George prod his pizza with a fork and knife, scowling down at the rubbery crust. She sat across from her mother, watching her chew. An incessant clicking came from her churning jaw, an ailment Maribel had been carrying with her for many years. Eileen had always found the noise insufferable. For a moment she imagined the poor nurse who would have to endure the clicking at every meal time, for the rest of her mother’s life. She couldn’t imagine anyone withstanding it for long. Not for any job. No amount of money could keep someone around it after a certain point. That would be the nursing homes problem to solve, though. Not her’s. The rest of her family talked about the latest reality show on FOX—some show where students competed in athletic feats for lifetime supplies of candy—but she did not listen to them. She did not hear with any discernment
what they discussed. Instead, she could hear only her mother’s clicking. For once, it did not bother her, nor did it inspire the deepest boiling rage of which she was capable. This time, the clicking sounded sweet. Like the clinking of tiny bells brushed to and fro by the invisible flutter of a hummingbird’s flapping wings. She could not stop herself from smiling as she watched her mother chew. She was transfixed to the image, to the entire experience.

Suddenly, her mother’s distant gaze became focused upon her. It was as though she had felt herself being studied, as clear as hearing that final tick of a detonating bomb and, at the same moment, feeling the atmosphere rush past and through you.

“What?” Maribel asked, putting her fork down on her napkin.

“What?” Eileen returned.

“What are you smiling at? You’re staring at me.”

“Sorry. I didn’t realize. Just zoning out.”

Maribel bent her eyebrows in over her narrowed eyes. “Alright.”

The party disbanded just before sunset. They had stayed a half hour after dinner to help with dishes, but didn’t linger for dessert that, in Eileen’s mind, likely didn’t exist. Eileen pushed the kid’s into farewell hugs and then out the door and back into the car. If they left now, she wouldn’t have to drive much distance without daylight. She reminded the kids to put on their seatbelts and backed down the driveway. Swinging out left to make her way back down the street, toward the highway. She put the car into drive and pressed hard on the pedal, eager to save any time possible. It felt good to get further away from that house. She accelerated more, going ten over the posted speed limit of thirty-
five. She saw a bright flash of yellow in her periphery—it darted out from the shrubbery
lining the sidewalk, toward her. The car screeched forward as she slammed her foot into
the brake. In her last conscious moment, Maribel locked eyes with Eileen. In the next, her
stiff body flew, pitched into the air like a football. Eileen gasped as a spurt of blood
projected out from her mother’s right side, champagne from a bottle, before she landed,
sprawled out, face-down on the pavement.
Emili and I weren’t allowed to stay inside when we stayed at Papa and Nana’s. That was okay. They lived on a huge plot of land in northern California. They had built the house themselves in the late eighties, just before I was born. Initially, the property looked and functioned as a farm. They raised, and eventually butchered, cows and chickens and grew everything from corn and squash to the only asparagus I would ever eat. Papa had built and maintained a pond in which hundreds of glittering orange koi swarmed around and around all day. To a kid from the suburbs of southern California, the four acres seemed as large as Disneyland and there was as much to do in all that endless yard.

Most of the time, we’d ride on the swing out by the pond for hours and hours, making up our own pop songs and reciting whole scenes of *Meet Me in St. Louis* or *The Sound of Music*.

Other times, Papa would set up a craft station in his workshop. We’d climb up on two old stools. The leather cushions were torn and I’d pull out chunks of the exposed foam when Papa wasn’t looking. Once seated at Papa’s work bench, which was always cluttered with sheets of stained glass and various tools not in their right place, we’d sit quietly as he explained what we would be doing that morning, for how long, and what would happen if we were stupid enough to disobey these orders. We were both a little scared of Papa. That’s what he wanted.

“If I ever catch one of you kids picking your nose, you know what I’m gonna do?”
He had asked this a million times. Before either of us could respond, he’d answer himself. “I’m gonna take out my pocket knife and cut off your fingers. One at a time, too.”

We knew he wouldn’t really do that. But we were convinced he would do something just as demented should he ever find one of our fingers lingering too close to a nostril.

Every evening, after we had eaten the dinner Nana cooked for us and changed into our pajamas, Papa would come into the kitchen, where we watched TV with Nana in the breakfast nook, and give us a rundown of the following day’s itinerary.

One particular evening during my third grade year, when we were staying over during our Christmas break, Papa hobbled into the kitchen in his pajamas at seven o’clock. He was better on his flat feet during the day, when he wore his trusty Reeboks. He started to prepare his nightly snack and water cup. Papa was very particular about the preparation of his water cup. He always used the same transparent, orange plastic cup. It was tall and Papa held it under the ice dispenser for what seemed like hours because it made so much noise that we couldn’t hear *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* over the ice storming around in the door.

He pulled the cup away from the dispenser and stared down into it, shaking it from side to side to compact the ice. He walked over to the sink. The noise had stopped just in time for Emili and I to hear Will Smith deliver a punch line that, to us, made no sense at all. The faucet started up. Papa let it run until it got good and cold.

He sent out commands over the streaming water. “You will go to bed at ten. That
gives you three hours to watch television, draw your pictures and play with Barbie.” He stopped to scowl at what was happening on the screen for a few moments. “After ten, you will do none of these things. You will go to bed and sleep until I wake you up. It will be early.” He took a long swig from the water cup. “Then, you’ll eat breakfast. I know I don’t have to tell you to clean up after yourselves, but you better. Have it together and outside by nine.”

We did have it together and outside by nine the next morning. Nana handed each of us two cherry Poptarts enveloped in a paper towel and sent us out the back door. It was freezing out there. I wore two pairs of socks under the tan hiking boots I had picked at Payless to match my Dad’s. My waterproof jacket was puffy and made swishy noises between my arms and torso as Emili and I wandered aimlessly around the property for the first few minutes of the day. Nana had tied a scarf around my neck that morning. Once we got out of sight of the kitchen window, I pulled it off.

“Do you want to go to the playhouse or the jungle gym?” I asked Emili.

“Neither. Let’s go to the swing.”

We usually went to the swing later in the day but I didn’t have any complaints with changing things up a little.

“Okay. Race you there.”

Emili and I ran up to the gate that closed off the pond area from the rest of the yard. While she struggled with the latch, I climbed over the wooden beams of the fence. Once over the side, I sprinted around the perimeter of the circular koi pond and got to the swing almost a full minute before Emili. As I glided back and forth through the cold air,
Emili threw rocks at the metal pole that spouted water in the center of the pond. The year before, Papa had told us that if either of us ever hit that pole, he’d give whoever threw the rock a five dollar bill. So far, neither of us had been successful.

As I swung and Emili threw, we played the What Would You Name Your Kids game. This was one of Emili’s favorites.

“If the first one is a boy,” she decided from behind me, “I’m naming it Noah. Or maybe Nathan.”

“Those are pretty good names. I like Alexander for a boy.”

“Bore-ing.” She shouted. “You should name your son Skyler.”

“I don’t think so.” I jumped off the swing and spun around to face her. “This is a stupid game. Let’s do something else.”

Emili opened her mouth to propose a new plan of action when the tortured voice of a wailing cat started up across the yard, somewhere past the gate. The moaning meow didn’t sound like it was coming from a cat and it really didn’t sound like meowing at all. This kitty was singing the blues.

I grabbed Emili’s wrist. “Come on. We gotta go see what’s wrong.”

She shook her head and started to cry. All the sudden action had made her anxious. “I’m not going over there.”

“Fine.” I rolled my eyes. “I’ll just solve the mystery by myself.”

I knew that if I said this, Emili would eventually be persuaded to follow me in the direction of the crying cat. We had been watching a lot of Mary Kate and Ashley videos that year. In one of their video series, the twins are supposed to be private investigators
working out of their bedroom. They solve strange mysteries that, in the end, are exposed to merely be absurd misunderstandings. In the only tape we actually owned rather than rented, the girls get a call from a frazzled woman who claims there is a ghost roaming around the house next door. After careful investigation, the girls unwittingly expose the willowy white figure to be the rightful owner of the house in his beekeeping gear. All of the smoke that hovered around the ghost-like man in his protective smock, as well as that weird buzzing sound the kooky neighbor had complained about, instantly became reasonable once put into the context of beekeeping.

I wasn’t surprised when Emili sprinted past me to get to the scene first.

When I got to the fence the moaning led us to, I wished I’d never come up to it at all. The cat lay on his side on the other side of the chain link. Most of his internal organs were spread out in front of him. The reds and pinks of his innards looked as though they had exploded out of his tiny, gray body like candy from a piñata. Something bigger and meaner had obviously ripped a hole right through his middle. I thought I could identify the large intestines, maybe a liver too. His eyes were wide open. He meowed on and on in agony.

“Go get Papa!” I yelled at Emili. “I’ll stay here with the cat.”

“No fair,” she whined. “Why do you get to stay?”

“I have more medical experience. Remember? Grandpa Freddie gave me his old microscope and I won last year’s science fair.”

“But your project was on oil spills.”

“So what?” I still have more experience. Plus, I’m older and get better grades.”
She glared at me but couldn’t argue. She turned and ran back to the house. I crouched down next to the fence and tried to console the cat. I sang him my favorite song from *The Sound of Music*.

“I am sixteen going on seventeen, I know that I’m naïve.” I tried to sing over the moaning. “Fellows I meet will tell me I’m sweet and willingly I believe.”

The tortured meowing wouldn’t stop. I kept singing. It didn’t seem to be helping but I didn’t dare stop. I had no plan B. I wondered whose cat this was and what they would do once they found out what had happened to him.

Papa walked up a couple minutes later and ordered me back to the house. When I hesitated, he yelled. “Don’t make me tell you twice, you stupid idiot.” He usually referred to me as Creep, so I figured he meant business.

Emili was already sitting in the breakfast nook when I came into the kitchen. Nana was cutting slices of cheese into little squares and placing them on a paper plate full of Ritz crackers. I knew the plate was for me because Emili was already assembling miniature cheese sandwiches from her own identical setup.

“Go on and sit down.” Nana told me from behind the counter where she was cutting. She hadn’t curled her hair yet. It was still hanging, wet, at her shoulders. “Papa says you two can stay inside for the rest of the day.”

I sat down next to Emili. Our crayons and coloring books were laid in the center of the table. Nana came up from behind, and placed the cheese and crackers on the embroidered placemat in front of me. I was still thinking about all the blood, all of the torturous meowing that had come from the cat’s mangled body.
I twisted around in my chair and looked up at her. “I’m not hungry right now.”

She frowned. “I’ll put it in the fridge and you can eat it later, then.” She picked the plate back up.

I nodded and turned back to the television. One of Nana’s soap operas was on. Sometimes, when the characters were kissing or yelling at each other, I liked to watch them. Nothing exciting was happening on this episode, so I pulled my favorite Lisa Frank coloring book from the stack and started coloring a picture of three luxurious kittens. They looked rich and royal sitting on soft pillows surrounded by beads and jewels. I colored them in with pinks, purples, and yellows. None of the cats were gray. They all smiled. They had no idea what was happening to their brother outside.

Almost an hour later, the door slammed open and shut. Papa stomped back into the house. Neither Emili nor I looked up from our coloring. Nana’s gaze didn’t flinch from the characters on TV. This was how Papa usually entered a room.

He didn’t come into the kitchen. He walked straight down the hallway toward the back of the house. I figured he was probably going to his bedroom.

The doorbell rang. I turned to look through the window over the sink. You could see the front porch from that window. An angry, older woman stood with her arms crossed over her chest. The door creaked; Papa opened the door. Her mouth began to flap on and on. Her eyebrows remained stuck in a furrow. Her wiry, white hair bounced wildly in whatever direction she snapped her head. Nana sighed, pushing herself up from her chair. After a few moments, the front door clicked closed and all three were visible on the porch. I couldn’t hear any spare words of their conversation with the door closed. It
looked as though the woman was doing most of the talking. Papa would shout back occasionally. Nana stood between them. Her back was to us. I don’t think she ever said anything because, for the whole five minutes they were out there, nobody else ever looked at her.

The woman shook her head and turned to leave. She made it three steps before she jerked back around and waved her finger menacingly at Papa. She barked one last decree before throwing herself in her car and driving away. Papa and Nana stood there on the porch watching her and conferring between themselves until she and her car were completely out of sight. The door creaked again and Nana walked back to her place in the kitchen. Papa did not follow her.

“Who was she?” I asked. Nana sat back down.

“One of our neighbors. That was her cat.”

“Oh.” I wondered why she was yelling instead of crying when her cat was scattered in chunks and pieces over that fence.

“She told Papa he has to put Murphy down or she’s going to take us to court for it.”

Murphy was Papa’s giant Rottweiler. There used to be two. Max, the other one, died a couple years before.

“Put him down? Like, kill him?” Murphy was always the nice dog. Max was the one who would growl when we’d get out of the car coming home from the grocery store.

“Yeah. She said Murphy’s been scaring her cats ever since she moved in. After this, she says she’s done playing around. She said she wouldn’t be surprised if he mauled
some kid to death.”

“What? The only little kids around here are me and Emili. And we’re only here until next week.”

“Doesn’t matter. She’d have anyone who doesn’t know Murphy on her side real quick.”

“What’s Papa going to do?”

Nana didn’t answer me. I knew better to ask any question twice in that house. We didn’t go back outside that day. We got to watch all of our favorite shows on Nickelodeon and, for dinner, Nana drove into town to get Taco Bell. Papa never came into the kitchen to give us the next day’s schedule but we didn’t mind.

…

Nana woke us up the next morning. She ushered us into the shower immediately. Usually we ate breakfast, brushed our teeth, and then took a shower. This new routine felt much less kind and understanding of the bedbugs in our eyes. We were thrown under the spray, given two minutes to shampoo and soap up, yanked out and thrown into the clothes Nana had chosen for us to wear that day. We had both been assigned a pair of overalls. Under my pair, a rainbow ribbed-blouse from Wal Mart stuck uncomfortably to my wet skin. We hadn’t taken the time to dry off completely.

Once we were dressed, Nana dragged us to the front of the house. She stepped into the pantry for a moment and was out just as quick with three granola bars locked in her fist. When we got to the back door, which was accessible through the laundry room, Nana didn’t just push us out of it like she usually did. She stepped out with us and started
walking towards the garden between Papa’s shop and the pond gate. We followed her, peeling open the foil covering the granola bars with our teeth. I wondered if my braid looked as messy as Emili’s pigtails. Nana had pulled both hairdos together in haste. Nana kept walking past the garden. Soon enough, it became clear that we were on our way to where we had found the cat the day before. When we reached the fence, Nana stopped and stared into the sky.

“Buzzards. They’re already circling.”

What a weird word, I thought. Buzzard.

I stepped up to the fence and wrapped my fingers around the woven wires on either side of my head. The cat was still there. Flies swarmed around his exposed eyeballs, around all those rotting insides laid down in front him. In a few hours, he wouldn’t be there anymore. I imagined that huge, orbiting vulture swooping down and hunching over what remained of the cat. He would tear into him with his sharp claws, devouring him completely without the help of a fork or knife. His eyes would be bulging and yellow, fixed to whatever piece of flesh he planned to get down on next.

“Papa shot Murphy last night.” Nana told us. Suddenly looking at me. “He figured that Imogene had a good point about the kids. That’s all we need is some little girl getting mauled out on the street.”

“Poor Murphy.” Emili said.

“He shot him right between the eyes,” Nana explained. “He thought it’d be fast and painless.”

“Yeah. At least Murphy didn’t have to feel a lot of pain. At least he didn’t die like
him.” I said, nodding at the mess over the fence.

“Well, when Papa came out to get the paper this morning, Murphy walked straight up to him.”

“What do you mean? I thought he was dead.”

“So did Papa.”

“Murphy had to go all of those hours like that?”

Nana nodded and looked away.

“What did Papa do?” I asked.

“Only thing he could do was shoot him again. And as fast as possible.”

“Where’s Papa now?” We hadn’t caught a glimpse of him yet that morning.

“Cleaning up.” Nana began to walk away. She turned her head back and told us she was going in. “I’ll bring out sandwiches for you later.”

A couple hours later, Emili and I were back at the swing. Papa came to get us before Nana had a chance to bring us the lunch she promised. The gate opened and closed. We both turned to see him coming. His light hair shined. Some sun was coming through a hole in the cloud cover. His t shirt was soaked through with sweat at the armpits. He didn’t run or walk, but his Reeboks seemed to be taking a deliberate path. I knew we were about to be assigned some task or another.

“We’re going for a drive. Get in the truck.”

We didn’t ask any questions. Emili led the way to the carport at the front of the property. In the bed of Papa’s truck, something large and amorphous sat enclosed in two large trash bags. Papa didn’t acknowledge the strange cargo but Emili and I both knew
Murphy was in there.

We climbed into the truck. Papa didn’t talk so Emili and I didn’t get to talk either. When we pulled out of the gate, Papa turned on the radio. Rush Limbaugh was grunting from one of Papa’s presets. He reached over Emili and I to grab a tape from the glove box. He slid it into the console and some gospel song started to play. I figured it was a Gaither’s tape; they were some huge praise group from the South that Papa and Nana liked to watch sing on TV. Papa never looked at us. He kept his hands gripped around the wheel, his arms stuck, stiff, out in front of him. Every few moments, at a regular interval, he would sing the refrain to himself.

“Oh… I saw the master.”

Over and over again, Papa would claim to have seen the master. When a new track started to play, he still sang the same refrain. Only his emphases would change.

“Oh, I saw. The master.”

After the tape stopped altogether, he sang it some more.

“Oh. I saw the. Master.”

We were on the highway for a long time. We passed every landmark we recognized going south: the outdoor mall of factory outlets in Anderson, Rolling Hills, the casino in Corning, and the gas station Mom and Dad always stopped at for our final restroom breaks on our drives up. Maybe it was because we didn’t know where we were going, or why, that the trip seemed to take so long. When Papa finally pulled over to the side, we were the only vehicle visible in either direction of the two-lane highway. He opened the driver’s side door and jumped down from his seat. He slammed the door shut.
Emili turned to me.

“What’s he doing?”

“How am I supposed to know?” I turned my head to watch Papa out the back window. He struggled to pull the bag down from the bed. His face turned red as he grappled with all of Murphy’s weight. I wondered how he had got him up there in the first place.

When he finally got it down on the ground, he dragged the bag further away from the shoulder. We watched in silence as he moved slowly backwards, pulling the load further and further into the field he had parked next to. He’d take two steps back, yank Murphy closer to him and repeat. After a few minutes, we couldn’t see Papa anymore. He had disappeared between the leafy green wall of towering trees.

Emili fell asleep next to me. The clock in the dash indicated that it had been at least ten minutes since Papa left us here. The keys were in the ignition, but the engine was off. I wanted to start it back up to play the radio like I did in Mom’s Honda when she ran into the bank to cash a check. I knew I’d be all sorts of punished if I tried that in Papa’s truck, though.

Papa poked back through the trees. He walked slowly, scowling up at the clouds as he made his way back to the truck. There were no buzzards circling above Murphy, yet. I wondered when they would come.

Papa smelled like sweat and dirt when he climbed back into the cabin; I started to breathe out of my mouth. Without a word, he turned the key in the ignition and pulled
back onto the road.

He rewound the tape and sang of the master all the way home.