

Summer 2014

The Age of Chameleons and Pow Wows

Marta Svea Wallien
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses

Recommended Citation

Wallien, Marta Svea, "The Age of Chameleons and Pow Wows" (2014). *Master's Theses*. 4486.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.n9hd-m4jc>
https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/4486

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

THE AGE OF CHAMELEONS AND POW WOWS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Marta Svea Wallien

August 2014

© 2014

Marta Svea Wallien

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

THE AGE OF CHAMELEONS AND POW WOWS

by

Marta Svea Wallien

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE

LITERATURE

SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2014

Dr. John Engell Department of English and Comparative Literature

Professor Peter O'Sullivan Department of English and Comparative Literature

Dr. Noelle Brada-Williams Department of English and Comparative Literature

ABSTRACT

THE AGE OF CHAMELEONS AND POW WOWS

By Marta Svea Wallien

My novel is about Toby Walter's choice to desert the life she knows and live in a place filled with death and disintegration. Her motives stem from several events and changes that occur in her life, including her mother's experience with breast cancer, her friend's death, her father's death, her dog's death, and her mother's relationship with another man after her father has died. The writing of this thesis involved trying to understand this character and why she leads the life she does. The more I worked on this story, the more Toby's motives began to surface. I want this novel to speak a kind of truth about the way in which this character lives. She learns that she cannot fully escape her past. This is one truth I felt important to touch upon in my novel—the difficult, ongoing struggle to “move on” from certain obstacles that occur in life. The choices I have made in presenting this story reflect both novels that have influenced my writing and ideas about writing held by authors I admire.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. John Engell, Professor Peter O'Sullivan and Dr. Noelle Brada-Williams for reading and providing their input as I worked on this novel. This novel would not have become what it is without their assistance and dedication.

I would also like to thank my parents for their support and encouragement during all of my academic studies, including my time at San Jose State University.

This novel is for Red and the Ignorant Rug Merchant.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	vii
2. Works Cited.....	xviii
3. The Age of Chameleons and Pow Wows.....	1

Introduction

My novel is told from Toby's first-person perspective, in a narrative order that is non-linear. It focuses on Toby recounting the moments in her life that led up to her decision to leave her husband and young daughter. At first, I did not have a clear reason for writing the narrative out of sequence. I began writing scenes I pieced together in the order I felt was natural. It was not until I wanted to find out my reason for these inclinations that I re-read a few novels with similar non-sequential structures. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* helped me to see the purpose behind my narrative through each novel's non-linear framework. In each text, the author's choice regarding narrative structure aids in the development of both character and theme. Each novel has a layered narrative, due to the author's choice in building a non-linear timeline, which shows each narrative's concern with the idea of time. Employing a similar structure helped me to see why Toby makes the choices she does, and how she evolves as a person.

In Woolf's novel, we are introduced to a day in Clarissa Dalloway's life. The story is told mainly from her perspective as she is preparing for a party she is hosting that night. This present acts as the backdrop to the jumble of memories she recalls throughout the day. A similar pattern also occurs in the perspectives of several other characters, including Peter Walsh and Septimus Warren Smith. Clarissa's direct and indirect interactions with these perspectives help develop her as a character. And again, these interactions are shown through present day scenes and memories. For example, the reader understands Clarissa's sense of herself as she is remarking on the beauty of a day:

“She sliced like a knife through everything...She knew nothing...she would not say to herself, I am this, I am that” (8-9). Later, we come to know Clarissa through other characters, as when Peter Walsh remarks on past events in his life with her: “But it was Clarissa one remembered. Not that she was striking; not beautiful at all...there she was, however; there she was” (76). The interspersing of events over time serves the same purpose in my work. My novel begins one day during the month when Toby has returned to her family after an absence of five years. The story opens with Toby feeling out of place as a mother, and the reader does not know why this is—and neither does she. But as the story progresses and the reader is thrust into moments from Toby’s past, her decisions become clear because they are illustrated through her interactions with other characters.

For instance, in one scene, the reader is thrust into Toby’s past as a young teenager in a family dealing with a mother suffering from breast cancer. It has already been established before this scene that Toby has not only left her husband and daughter, but has also, even before leaving husband and daughter, stopped speaking to or seeing her birth family. I wrote this scene not as an explanation for her current abandonment, but as a step in the development of Toby as a character, much like the scenes in Woolf’s novel. None of the scenes in Woolf’s story explicitly state why Clarissa decided to marry Richard instead of Peter, or why she made other choices in her life. But scenes from the past show the reader the way in which all of these jumbled moments have helped shape Clarissa at the time of the central action. My scene details Toby’s first encounter with her mother’s possible death. Toby’s mother, Ruth, is diagnosed with breast cancer when

Toby is in middle school. Readers are shown how Toby deals with this: “During the coming days, my siblings and I tiptoed around my mom...we pretended not to hear her hoarse calls” (56). This begins Toby’s need to avoid the inevitable and seemingly endless pain and trauma of life.

Woolf’s novel is one example of the way in which a non-linear narrative structure can work in developing characters. But this structure is also essential relative to the novel’s theme about time. Throughout the story, Clarissa and other characters remark on the motion of time and how it has affected them. The reader is given a sense of how time moves through these characters’ lives by access to their memories and their talk, and the non-linear structure is accompanied by the backdrop of Big Ben, which informs readers where the characters are in relation to actual time. For instance, the reader sees how time affects Peter Walsh through his part in the narrative: “Time flaps on the mast. There we stop; there we stand” (49). Similarly, the reader experiences Clarissa’s sense of time through her point of view: “She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself...he made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun” (186). Time in Woolf’s novel focuses on death, and death symbolizes different things to each character. For Peter Walsh it means the loss of someone he has loved, for Septimus Warren Smith it means freedom from turmoil, and for Clarissa Dalloway, death means life. In the end, the reader learns through many jumbled yet juxtaposed temporal moments, that the thought of death, a thought experienced over years, causes Clarissa to live life on her own terms.

After re-reading Woolf's novel, I thought more clearly about time in relation to Toby and the structure of my novel. Toby learns that time is an abstract concept that can mean both everything and nothing. When Toby is at the Salton Sea, time stands still, and it ceases to matter. But when she is at home with her family, she finds it is impossible to make up for time lost with her husband and daughter because death pervades her thoughts. Time in her home is a countdown to the end—to death—an aspect of life with which Toby is obsessed and cannot escape. In contrast, the Salton Sea is a place where death has already happened. I depict the Salton Sea as a place of decay and desolation. Toby chooses to escape to this place because death is not unexpected there, and therefore is less fearful.

My structural choices were also inspired by William Faulkner's use of the device of temporal disjunction. While Woolf's disjointed temporal structure centers on the notions of what death means, Faulkner's narrative in *The Sound and the Fury* centers on the disintegration of the Compson family. In his narrative, four sections present the reader with different perspectives. In the first section titled "April Seventh, 1928," the reader experiences Benjy's perspective. Benjy is a mentally challenged man who lives life colliding with memories centering on his family and the African-American servants who take care of them. In this section, Benjy encounters various stimuli throughout one day, all of which lead him into episodes of his past. The disjointed narration allows us to get a sense of who Benjy is. His memories affect him when he is thrust into them haphazardly. This is illustrated in present time when Benjy and Luster are near a golf course where golfers are calling out for caddies, which Benjy mistakes for the name of

his sister (1). This is one of many instances that lead him into his past, allowing an introduction to other characters through Benjy's perspective. This complicated narration allows readers the chance to understand the characters within their own perceptions, not merely through Benjy's.

In Benjy's narrative, as in Quentin Compson's, each character's perspective is told through stream-of-conscious narration, a narrative device I have echoed in my novel. This form of narration occurs in Woolf's novel as well, but in Faulkner's it is more intense, and not only highlights time dissolving in the novel, but touches upon this family's disintegration, which is directly seen in Quentin's narration. The reader is presented with another non-linear section that tells of Quentin's time in the present as he prepares to commit suicide, alongside his distressing thoughts and memories about his past that lead him to kill himself. This stream-of-conscious narration occurs through Quentin's present thoughts about his shadow and a broken pocket watch, interrupted by moments of the past, such as the climactic scene involving him and his sister attempting to kill themselves:

[Quentin] I held the point of the knife at her throat
[Quentin] it won't take but a second...
[Caddie] what time is it
[Quentin] I don't know. (96)

Like Faulkner, I use stream-of-conscious narration in my novel to build to a startling climax that shows the truth behind Toby's motives.

However, this truth did not come to fruition immediately. I initially began Toby's narrative as a short story, with no intentions to develop it into a novel. It centered on one instance in Toby's life—the month after she returned to her husband and daughter from

the Salton Sea—and focused on how she comes to terms with her return and tries to live with her family once more. But I could not let this narration sit as a short story. I found I needed to know more about Toby and the choice she had made to leave her family, so I began to explore each character’s perspective in relation to Toby and her actions. I wrote Peter’s narrative and a partial narrative for Caroline and believed I needed to expand my story into a novel in order to understand Toby. But I struggled to write in the various perspectives I felt were important. This was because I did not want to leave Toby’s thoughts, actions, and perceptions about herself and her life. The more I moved away from her, the more my ability to understand her choices dwindled, and I believed readers would recognize this and see this as a flaw in the novel. I did not want the novel to feel as if the choices Toby made had no meaning or value.

Another reason for the expansion of my original short story into a novel involves the question that kept swimming around in my mind about where Toby had been. This novel is definitely not about a woman’s choice to leave her family because the pressures of society are telling her she must be a mother. My novel does not focus on those issues because I do not find them to be compelling reasons for her choice to abandon her family. Toby is not a part of a generation steeped in the belief that a woman needs to fill the role of mother and wife in order to be accepted by society. This social shift relates to the truth that I want to explore in my novel. The cultural norms for women continue to shift in our society; therefore, I did not feel I could present Toby as a character who struggles to fit stereotypical roles. So I felt compelled to determine where Toby had been in order to understand her decision to leave home, return, and leave once more.

For a long time before I wrote the short story that would turn into this novel, I had an image in my mind about what it might be like to leave everything and everyone I know and live in the middle of nowhere. This nowhere would seem to be out of civilization's reach, a place like an island. I pictured what it would be like to live in a place where the only actions that mattered involved obtaining basic needs. After I wrote my short story, I thought more about this place in relation to Toby and wondered where she would go. The large themes I had already begun to touch upon in the novel—the power of death over life, and the nature of time—led me to choose the Salton Sea as Toby's destination.

I visited the Salton Sea four years prior on a photography shoot. I went back through those pictures and searched for other images depicting this place, which cemented the idea for Toby to visit and reside there. Life at the Salton Sea revolves around decomposition and decay, and Toby's life at home had come to be about life leading to death. The idea of placing her in the stark setting of the Salton Sea made narrative and thematic sense. Other places I had imagined no longer made sense, such as having Toby in jail, or having her wander perpetually on the road. Toby needed to be in a single place where she could validate her feelings, and the Salton Sea matched her needs.

Further, I wanted the setting to reveal a truth about Toby's life and character—her need for this place. Toby does not know how to move on from her past, and instead of trying to escape, she decides to perpetually live in it. The Salton Sea is her constant "now." At home, her life occurs in a continuous circle of life and then death, but at the

Salton Sea, life is suspended, and death remains. At home, death was unexpected; at the Salton Sea, death is the norm. In life, we know we all are going to die, but we do not know how or when death will occur to us or to our loved ones. This is a truth about death that Toby knows, understands, and fears. This truth causes her to choose the life she leads beside the Salton Sea.

The stark differences in setting between Toby's hometown and the Salton Sea work to reveal this truth, a concept I saw in another novel that influenced mine. Emma Donoghue's *Room* is a story about an abducted woman told through the eyes of this woman's five-year-old son Jack. Jack was born in an environment of this abduction. The narration consists of Jack telling the story of his life and his mother's spent in a confined space; it tells of their escape, and their eventual assimilation into society. Donoghue's story forces readers to experience the world through the eyes of a five-year-old, and through the eyes of one who has not been outside in his entire life. Jack's relationship to both settings—inside a single room, and then outside—also allows the reader to gain insights about the world in which we live.

The believability of the world Donoghue creates in her novel is essential in all narratives centered on extraordinary circumstances. Donoghue makes Jack's strange and extraordinary relationship to his mother and their environment believable. We see that Jack is able to exist because of the environment in which he was raised. On the first few pages, he talks about the "art" that hangs in the room in which they are held: "One is holding up *Great Masterpieces of Western Art No. 3: The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and St. John the Baptist* behind Rocker, and one is holding up *Great Masterpieces of*

Western Art No. 8: Impression: Sunrise...” (5). Readers may question how a five-year-old could read or remember the titles of these works, but in later passages, we begin to understand how it is possible through examples Jack gives about what he and his Ma do throughout the day during their imprisonment. They play games and repeat certain activities that stimulate Jack and help him learn in ways different from the nature of learning experienced through the world outside a single room.

I was influenced by the way Donoghue’s novel and Jack’s narrative compliment the setting and vice versa. After reading *Room*, I understood setting must compliment character in order to create reader identification with character, especially with a first-person narrator like Toby. Jack makes the reader see each world, one room and the wider world, as he sees them. For instance, outside of the room, Jack struggles with certain aspects of life that others consider ordinary. Jack comments on how people never seem to have any time: “In the world I notice persons are nearly always stressed and have no time...In Room me and Ma had time for everything. I guess the time gets spread very thin like butter over all the world” (296-97). Donoghue’s narrative and the world she depicts make the reader reconsider the construct of life, especially in relation to time. Jack’s struggle, like Clarissa’s, Benjy’s and Quentin’s, involves not only his character but also the environment in which he is placed. This is also true of Toby.

I want my reader to understand Toby. I feel I accomplished this through the narrative choices I have made. I have found that writing a story with a fractured timeline can reveal the truth about a character. I want my reader to understand how Toby arrives at the decisions she makes in life, to see the truth in doing what she did. Allegiance to

truth is central, perhaps most especially, and ironically, in creative writing. In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott shows why literature matters: “When writers make us shake our heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths, and even make us laugh about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored. (237). She insists we must write what is true, true to both the character of the writer and to the writer’s characters. Lamott emphasizes that a writer must follow her instincts and her heart in order to write what is true.

The way in which I have structured my narrative and chosen my settings are based upon this principle. The idea of “writing true” is essential because readers must believe and understand the characters a writer creates. My story would not have been “true” to Toby’s character had it been told in a temporally linear progression, or employed different settings than the one I chose. My goal has been to integrate setting, character, narrative structure, and emotional truth into my novel.

WORKS CITED

- California State Parks. *Salton Sea SRA*. Parks.ca.gov. 2013. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.
- Donoghue, Emma. *Room*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2011. Print.
- Duong, Joseph. "Urban Decay of the Salton Sea." 2010. Photographs. 2013. Print
- Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. New York: Norton, 1994. Print.
- Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Print.
- Poundstone, William. *Blogs.artinfo.com*. Blouinartinfo. 30 June 2012. Web. 20 Nov. 2013.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. New York: Harcourt, 1981. Print.

The Age of Chameleons and Pow Wows

I could paint you a normal routine. I was a thirty-five year old mother inside a bargain grocery store with my daughter. For thirty minutes I aimlessly walked the aisles with glazed eyes and absentmindedly put things into my cart. I couldn't find where I buried the grocery list in my purse I hadn't used in five years. I had found it sitting in the same place in the same house where I left it. It was an accessory I released from a time capsule. I thought touching the bag would cause me to jolt into a deep routine, easy like blood flowing through veins.

Caroline, my eight-year-old daughter, walked behind me. She staggered her pace and watched my every move. "What are the batteries for?" She asked the reason every object was dumped into the cart.

"I don't know." That was my response to all her questions.

"Why are you picking me up instead of daddy?" "Where is daddy?" "Are we going to eat soon?"

I don't know.

I pushed the cart down aisles, listening to the hobble of a loose wheel. It was loud, and everyone paused and turned their head towards us as we approached. I felt a sickening urge to bolt out of there as fast as I could, to keep on running until I was back where I had been before.

"Can we get a different cart?"

"No."

I got up that morning from the white futon in the living room. My husband, from whom I was separated, sat at the large dining room table to the left, crunching down cereal and grading papers. He wore a bulky grey suit and held his tie to his chest every time he dipped his face towards the spoon.

“Morning, Peter.” I said that statement as an apology every morning while folding the blankets I had taken from the linen closet the night before.

“Morning, Toby.”

He didn’t look at me. I took my time walking over to the closet and placed the blankets back inside. That was another routine I had been doing for a month.

I walked over to the table and sat down. It was dark brown, and matched all the dark shelves and furniture nestled around the house. We had moved into this house from our apartment in our late twenties, deciding to stay in the same Southern California valley town that I had grown up in. I remember Peter liked the look of dark furniture and had picked it out. I was the one who picked the house, and the white paint for the walls. The house had looked like the inside of a stale museum when we first moved in. Now it looked worn, like creases and dents across a leather boot, beaten day in and day out.

I sat with my fingers folded together on top of the table. I heard the heat circulating in the vents, the mailman pushing the junk mail and letters through the slot in the door, Peter shifting his weight in his chair, and every breath I took in and released slowly. I smelled the grains in Peter’s cereal and felt sweat moistening my hands.

Peter finished the last swallow of milk in his bowl, pushed it off to the side, and snapped his napkin up to his mouth. After he dabbed his mouth, he crumpled the napkin

and placed it inside the bowl, got up and walked to the kitchen. He hadn't acknowledged my presence other than responding a few moments before. I thought he had forgotten what I was supposed to do today, so I went to sit on the couch. I stared straight ahead at the white fireplace mantle, where a large picture of Peter and Caroline shone from a gilded frame. It was one of those pictures taken at a studio. Caroline and Peter were wearing matching blue outfits.

Peter's dress shoes smacked the wooden floor as he approached me. He stopped in front of me and handed me a pink lunch sack.

"Her door is to the left upstairs. I packed her lunch in here. I wake her up about this time. She picks out her own outfit and I help with her hair. I drive her to school at 7:40. I walk her to room twelve. Then I meet her outside room twelve again at three."

I thought about leaving and shook the notion out of my head. I could do this. I grasped the sack and felt its plastic cloth. Peter held onto it for a moment before he let go. Then he mumbled something under his breath. It sounded like, "Don't fuck this up."

"What?" I asked, holding the sack.

"Pick her up at three. Don't forget."

"Of course not." I shook my head no.

Peter sighed, dropped his grip on the pail, and turned away. He went into the kitchen.

I got up from the couch and went to the stairs leading up to Caroline's bedroom. I walked up the stairs for the first time since I'd come back. The same white carpet decked them. And the stairs were silent as I ascended. The wooden rail felt smooth and cold as I

slid my hand along this spine. I looked up and saw the looming hall. I almost reached the top, but stopped when I heard Peter pause for a moment at the door as he fumbled with his keys, then exit. I listened to the beep of his car unlocking, the opening and slamming of the car door, the engine coughing to life, the shift hitting reverse, and the tires working backwards on the pebbled driveway. My ears held onto the last moments of Peter being near as he drove down the street and into the abyss of day.

I eased in a small breath and took the last step, stood and stared down the dimly lit hall. It was reminiscent of the atmosphere inside the church I attended as a child. I liked to walk down the aisle when the church was empty. I remember the silence that whispered through the pipe organs along the walls, the blood red carpet that drenched the floors, the freshly dusted wood seats that smelled like lemon, and the cream-colored sculpture of Jesus. I liked to stare at his hollowed eyes looking out from under his crown of thorns and dig my finger into his hands where the two holes from the nails had pierced into his skin through tendon and bone.

I teetered past Peter's bedroom door—our bedroom door. It was shut, which made it easier to move on. Caroline's door was next, a few feet across from it. I approached and knocked on it lightly, hesitating. When I didn't hear a response, I opened it slowly and crooked my head inside the small gap. I saw Caroline in bed, under the covers with her sandy blonde hair tousled around the pillow like a small hood, shielding her.

Everything in her room was the same except the bed she slept in and a small robin's egg-colored desk to the left. The walls had been painted a pale pink two weeks

before she was born, with a sunflower trim around the ceiling. It was a project Peter had done himself. The white dresser I used as a child was placed alongside the desk. I walked over to her desk and ran my hand along its top. It was the same color as the home I had lived in for the past five years.

I sat on the bed and heard the same low ticking coming from the small crocodile clock on the bedside table. It was a lime green crocodile with a small, round clock carved into its belly. It lay on its back as if floating in the water, leisurely passing the time. Peter had bought the clock for Caroline when we first put her to bed in her own room. He thought the sound might help soothe her to sleep, like the small clock we had placed near our dog Cyrus's bed when he was a small puppy. The smaller arm of the crocodile pointed to seven. I crept closer and examined Caroline's small face, the face I had been looking at for a month, thinking how it was the same and how I never forgot her incredibly dark eyebrows, her short eyelashes, small dot of a nose and pinched mouth. I didn't want to wake her. I wanted to let her lie like this forever, before the moment when I would wake her to this situation yet again. I wanted her to stay in her dreams, where everything might be fine. I peeled back the covers a little and nudged Caroline on the shoulder. She had a stream of drool running down her thumb, leaving a pool on the pillow.

"Caroline." I whispered near her ear. She woke with a start and crawled away from me. "I'm sorry...I didn't mean to scare you."

"Where's daddy?" She rubbed her eyes.

"He had to go to work."

“He’s not here?” Her voice rose. She put her thumb in her mouth.

“No, but I’m here to help you get ready for school.”

She started to whimper and pounded her chest with her small fist. “I don’t need help. I can get dressed myself.”

I stared at her brown eyes, the same as mine.

“Ok—ok.” I got up and backed away.

“I don’t need help from you—only Daddy or Rebecca.”

I had forgotten about her until now. Rebecca was Peter’s girlfriend—friend—whatever you could call a woman dating the man to whom you are still legally married.

Caroline sprang from her bed. “I want to show you something.” She walked to her desk and picked up a drawing.

I looked at her small legs and feet sticking out of a miniature pink nightgown. Her slender arms held a drawing out to me as she walked over.

“This is nice. What is it a picture of?” I bent down to look closer.

“Daddy and Rebecca in a tree.”

After Caroline showed me the crayon and glitter drawing of Peter standing next to a red-haired stick figure, I went into the kitchen and took out a small, thin pan to make crepes for breakfast. I rolled back my shoulders and approached those crepes like they were the last ones I would make in my life. I mixed the ingredients together and poured out the batter onto the sizzling pan. I watched over the crepe like it was a small child. Every so often, I gently prodded the sides with a spatula to see if it was ready to roll onto

itself and become something more. This was the one thing I'd taken away from those times when my mom had wanted me to learn how to do something.

I remember my mom calling me into the kitchen that first time, and when I entered, she beckoned me with a lowered voice, looked from side to side as if someone was eavesdropping, and asked if I wanted to learn the secret to making the perfect crepe. I feigned boredom and she stood there with her leg pointed out, arms crossed against her chest and a spatula sticking out of a hand. She asked "Do you even know what a crepe is?" Her red hair was tied up and back behind a blue paisley bandana. Her bangs lay straight across her face like a ruler, measuring my interest.

I heard Caroline's small paces down the stairs and woke from the past. I smelled the crepe burning and quickly scraped it off and into the trash. I poured some more batter into the pan and smoothed it thin with the back of the spatula's plastic tip. Caroline came in and sat at the small nook I had insisted to Peter that we have installed. The neighbor across from my parents' house had one, and we had eaten, talked, laughed and made money in that area of her house, and I wanted to transfer that into this place. But I learned magic wasn't transferable.

After making a few crepes, I placed them in front of Caroline, slid some butter on top with a knife, whipped out a sifter from the counter and held it over the plate, letting the powdered sugar sprinkle down like snow. "And wah-lah! You're crepes, madam." I spoke in a French accent, gestured my hand in circles towards the plate, and backed away.

Caroline eyed the plate for a few moments, then took her fork and tried to pick a whole crepe up at once. “It’s good...but it’s not like daddy’s.” She wolfed down her whole plate in a matter of seconds and asked for more.

We left the house fifteen minutes later. Peter had given me the keys to his car and told me he would take the car Rebecca had left while she was on a job in New York. I’d asked Peter what Rebecca did, I’m not sure why, maybe to create some ease, but Peter cut that short.

“What does it matter?” he asked.

We were sitting at the dining room table, and it was late into a Sunday evening, two days after I had returned. Caroline was at my parents’ house because Peter thought it best for her to stay the weekend after he answered the door and found me standing there, with my green backpack slung over my shoulder, looking like some travelling hippie. I hadn’t had a haircut in five years, or a new pair of shoes, or clothes. My body and everything that clung to it looked like it had been exhumed the other day.

He had backed up when he saw this ghost standing outside the same red door we had painted together all those years before. He had been holding a pen and newspaper. He had been doing the crossword puzzle like I remembered he used to do on Fridays, after he came home from a day of teaching or working on his research.

“Toby...” His breath quickened.

“Hello Peter.” I took a step forward.

Peter stepped back and I looked down at my feet.

I hadn't had a plan when I got it into my head to return to the house where my husband and daughter lived. One morning, I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling in my compound and saw the faces of Caroline and Peter, an image I wasn't able to replace with any new memories I had made after leaving.

Caroline and I walked outside and I locked the door, twisting the handle to make sure the house was sealed from miscreants, like me. I pushed the button on the keys to unlock the door, and Caroline walked over to Peter's car and got in.

"I don't want to be late," Caroline said.

Did I ever say that to my mom? I gripped the steering wheel and looked in the rearview mirror. I could do this. I turned the key to start the car and pulled back the shift to reverse it. I backed slowly out of the driveway, turned, and nearly gunned down the street. We hopped along for a few feet until I got my bearings straight. I looked to see how Caroline was doing and saw a small smile on her face. I pretended I was still fumbling around with the car, making it stop and go every few feet, until we were down the street at the light.

She laughed.

"Can't seem to get the hang of this thing," I called back to Caroline.

"You're weird."

I looked around outside the car windows. Everything looked worn and had a lackadaisical feel. Riverside was a town whose growth was stunted more than half a century ago. It was largely an agricultural area, but when that commerce began to wane, modernization cropped up in patches like mold on cheese. And when visitors drove

down Magnolia, the main street, a sign welcomed them to Arlington instead. All that was left of this farm country was the name on that sign, a high school, the decrepit main street, and large plots of dry land with fences around them. I drove down one of several sections of neighborhoods to get to Caroline's school. It had been my school too. All of the houses that lined the streets were one story, and no bigger than three bedrooms each. They all had the same brown or off-white paint, and all had matching window shutters. Lawns were green or brown.

We got to school and I parked the car a block away. I watched moms and dads pushing strollers and walking with children who skipped beside them. I looked at one little girl holding her dad's hand and remembered my dad's large hand, rough and snug around mine, the two of us walking together in the cool morning air which picked up the pine scented deodorant under his flannel shirt and the cigar smoke that accumulated on his clothes.

I watched the children who carried plastic backpacks that shone in the sun with glittered pictures of princesses and superheroes, nothing more inside than their lunch pails and slim peachy folders holding that week's homework assignments. The boys wore jeans with large holes at the kneecaps, and the girls had their hair pinned away from their eyes with brightly colored clips. I glanced back at Caroline's hair in the mirror. She had pushed it back into a messy ponytail that had lumps going in every direction.

"Can we go now?" Caroline unbuckled herself and opened the door.

Before I could meditate on how I would get Caroline to class without any of the parents noticing who I was or trying to strike up a conversation with me, Caroline had

already bolted halfway out the door. I reached for her shoulder, but she was already out. She ran a few feet onto the sidewalk and turned around, proudly standing at attention. What is it that grows within children that makes them believe they have the right to do anything they want at any particular time? Why do adults lose this involuntary action and become toy robots staggering around from being wound up, falling down and being wound up again, and finally left somewhere to be stepped on?

I tried to decide what I was going to do. I stared at the parents and recognized most. They were the same people I had attended this school with, and we had followed each other into the next school, and the next and the next. And now it was our turn to carry on the town's tradition of always sticking to routines like spaghetti flung onto a wall.

"Caroline, do you know where your classroom is?" I stuck my head out the window. I looked at the parents walking their children across the street, waving to the crossing guard dressed in an orange vest and who blew instructions through his whistle.

"Daddy walks with me." She swung her pail around her body.

A tall, slender woman with a sun hat walked by and looked our way. She was with her young son who clutched her hand and galloped beside her, trying to stay at her pace. She kept her head cocked our way and slowed down. I recognized who it was under the cloak of shade that darkened her face, and asked Caroline to get back in the car quick.

"I need to go to class!" Caroline yelled as the school's bell beeped three times.

I could feel the steering wheel's ridges imprinting onto my hands as I squeezed it hard. "Caroline, please get in the car—I'll drive you closer so we don't have to walk far—"

"Peter?" The woman was beside the car window. She crouched down. I turned to see if I had any caps inside my bag, or scarves or anything to hide my face.

"Simone!" My daughter hugged the woman. "Will you take me to class?"

The woman's statuesque figure faced me through the window. "Rebecca?" She bent lower and her mouth dropped open.

"Hello...Simone." My legs shook and I wiped my sweaty hands on my thighs. She blinked at me and I turned away from her. Simone had been a friend of mine through high school and college. I had not seen her in years. The breeze blew the curls of her light brown hair over her tawny complexion. Her green eyes were giving me that look she had always given me whenever I had made an awful decision: one eye squeezed shut, the other open, and an eyebrow arched upward.

"When did you get back in town?"

I looked towards the school. All the children and parents who had been bustling about were now gone to their daily activities. The area was vacant, and the air moved cautiously around like it had in the place where I had been. Caroline and Simone's son stood behind her, playing with a few sticks they had found on the ground.

"Could you walk Caroline to class?" I asked quietly, wanting to drive off as soon as Caroline was taken care of.

"No." Simone stood there impatiently. "Where have you been?"

I didn't answer.

She tapped her foot and slapped her hands on her thighs. "I'm not going to waste my time." She grabbed her son and darted off.

Caroline stood hitting her face with a large twig.

"Caroline, get in the car. I'll drive you over."

I arrived at the Salton Sea three years after Caroline was born. I left a note on the dining room table for Peter and a tiny card for Caroline. Inside Peter's note I told him not to look for me, as it was useless because I had chosen to leave. I drew a heart inside Caroline's card and wrote our initials inside—TW+CW. It didn't matter what I said to Caroline, I wouldn't be able to control what Peter would tell her.

I had been living in a decrepit and abandoned late sixties trailer park, called "The North Shore Properties." It existed inside what used to be a resort town, named the Salton Sea. The Salton Sea was located deep inside the Southern California desert, where nothing agricultural survived except date palm farms and dirt. It had been a booming vacation spot dating back to the forties. People visited it and lived near the salty pocket of water that had accumulated from a large river's runoff a state away, and from flooding caused by a storm in the early part of the twentieth century. Women had swum the imitation sea in itsy bitsy red polka dot bikinis and men in short swim trunks. They cut across its surface in white, glistening boats, soaking in the desert sun and marveling at their luck in life. Golf courses had drawn celebrities and anyone who had money to vacation there. Vacation homes dotted the area, and mobile vacation units had sprouted up along smaller areas of land a little farther from the water.

But in the late seventies, what had been an artificial island get away became increasingly eroded until the water was poison to fish and other animal life. The rising salt levels in the water brought death and decay not only to the animals living in the area, but also to the surrounding businesses and homes, which people then abandoned in swarms. Date palms and their rotting fruit lined the main highway into town, and all the roads connecting around it. Large nosed yachts stuck out of the ground and bodies of houses with graffiti and broken windows decorated the sandy turf. These small houses lined the streets and looked eaten by time.

There was a strong wind the day I arrived, and it howled across and around my car. I watched sand blow in circular rings, and push around tumbleweeds and sharp palm branches. To the right of the road, I could see the forgotten sea, the water drained of life, of all the fish and birds. People had imagined this land as something it wouldn't allow itself to be, and I had come here to live inside this broken bubble because I needed this reality. I drove past a sign declaring "The Salton Sea Welcomes You," scrawled in red letters across the backdrop of a sea landscape. A tall, white pelican sat at its top, peering at me as I came closer, then turned its head and dug its beak into its wing. The bird knew I was nobody worth paying attention to.

I turned down one of the streets where a row of mobile homes sat, their painted beach colors aged from baking in the sun with no sign of repair. Most had missing windows and were plastered with sand around their façades. Rusted cars from every decade sat without doors or tires, along with abandoned recliners, dining room chairs, and couches with missing legs and cushions. I decided to park the car next to a long, light

blue mobile home. The paint was peeled off in large areas, and a single stump from a date palm stuck out of the ground. The top of it jutted out towards the purple sky like a switchblade.

I walked up to the house and cupped my hands on the window to look inside. The mobile was one large room, with a joint living area and kitchen. A few brown copper pots and pans sat on the stove, a tattered blanket sprawled across a rotting recliner, pillows with lost stuffing sat on a disheveled bed, and pictures of a family were tacked to the walls. The place looked like a bomb siren had gone off and everyone ran suddenly without any empathy for personal belongings. I didn't have to imagine how someone could pick up and leave everything they owned—I had done it a few days before. This family had apparently decided to erase their lives up until their departure. I turned and looked down the road at the other houses nestled in this desolate area. Some were yellow, some red, and some pink. Each looked worse than the one before it. I saw no one and heard only the heavy whisper of sand blowing along the ground and moving across junk.

I noticed a wall to the bedroom was missing and entered. The floor was covered in old toys, pictures, plates, and mounds of clothes. In the closet, black hangers swung in the breeze, and clothes dangled precariously from them, dirty from sand blown onto them each day. Pictures were pinned to the walls in this room. I walked to them, careful not to step on any particles of this family's life that looked like half dug fossils.

I took down one of the pictures and held it in the light. A smiling family stared at me. The mother and father stood behind three sitting children. The young girl had her

hair in braids twisted along her scalp, and wore a navy blue dress. She held her baby sister decked in a ruffled pink dress. The boy who sat next to her was dressed in a striped shirt and black slacks. The mother matched the older daughter in a blue floral dress, and the father matched the son. I wondered if the picture was taken before or after they came to this place. Were those smiles real or yet another imitation that grew from the sea?

“Can I help you?” A voice crawled up from behind.

I jumped around, slamming my back into the wall. An older woman stood dressed in red overalls. Her grey hair was tied in a ponytail, and she had long, purple gardening gloves on each hand.

“I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to disturb this place.”

I ran to the open wall where I had entered, sliding over all the items on the floor. When I got outside, I raced to my car and the woman followed behind. Her feet crunched the dirt. I got inside my car and locked the doors.

“Wait—wait—I want to talk to you.” She rapped on my window.

I couldn’t drive off.

“Please, don’t leave. I can help you.” The woman tapped on the glass again and looked into the back of my car, surely noticing the white garbage bags holding my clothes.

I rolled down the window an inch to speak with her. “I was looking for something...or someone, but I’m leaving now.” I started the car.

“Are you here to do a story on us?” the woman yelled over the engine. A strand of hair wisped across her face. She tucked the hair behind her ears and placed her hands on her hips. “Or are you here to stay?”

I turned the ignition off. I could open the door and let this woman either help me or kidnap me. Or I could drive off and head back home. But doing that was the safe choice, and I was tired of doing what was safe.

“I was looking for some people I had heard lived out here.” I didn’t want to tell this woman I had escaped my life and run away just as the people I had heard about had done by coming to this place.

“Could you come out of your car? I’m only a little old lady.”

I had heard this place was a refuge for drifters between one town and the next, for people running from their problems and waiting there to ease into another life somewhere else, somewhere they would go as soon as life for them here no longer added up.

I got out of my car and closed the door. The woman smiled at me. Crow’s feet circled her hazel eyes.

“I’m Penelope,” she said, taking off one of her gardening gloves and extending a hand. “Let me show you around.” She took my arm in hers and walked me back down the road.

“Over there—that’s my house at the end, with the little flower garden. There’s about six of us living here, and a family. I’ll introduce you to everyone later. Are you hungry?” She led me past one decrepit place after another, until we finally got to her house. “I’m sorry about the conditions, but this place was like this when I got here.”

The house was a muted yellow, faded so I had to focus on it to see the color. It had two windows. One still had its glass pane encased inside, while the other had a blue tattered blanket hung up to cover the empty square. There was a small deck on the outside with a broken rocking chair and several potted plants surrounding it. Penelope continued to hold my hand and led me up the stairs to the deck and a screen door with a ripped center. It was a thin metal door from the fifties. It looked like the one that was on the front of my parents' house. It had a tiny handle with a push lever and no lock. I learned later that this was the only door to the place. The back of her house had an entry with a missing door. A plastic tarp covered it. All the walls to the house were intact, and as soon as I walked in I was inside the living room. To the left was the kitchen, into which Penelope led me. Her kitchen table was one of those large spools used to roll steel cables. One wooden chair and a grey metal stool were pushed around its rim, and each looked like it had been left to crust in a salt bathhouse. Penelope sat me in the wooden chair. My clothes caught on the rough surface as I slid onto it.

“Would you like something to drink?”

“Some water would be great.”

I looked around her kitchen. She had a tiny icebox that resembled the one in a picture my grandma had of her parents' kitchen. The box was smaller than the table and couldn't contain much food, let alone cold drinks. I had assumed these houses didn't have running water or electricity. Her hand went into the icebox and retrieved a plastic water bottle. I recognized the label. The water came from a company in Washington. I took the bottle and it was warm. I'd been right. There was no electricity. I noticed a

candle collection on the table, and looked for other signs of antiquated light and energy. Candles decorated the living room on small tables and makeshift shelves formed from what looked like found wood nailed together.

Penelope leaned over the stool, took off her other glove, and plopped it down on the table. “Are you hungry?” She got up and moved over to the kitchen counter, where waterlogged cabinets jutted like white rocks from the walls covered in years of grime.

She opened cabinets at the top and stretched on her toes to peer inside. The cabinets looked dark and empty from where I sat. I wondered what I had gotten myself into. Penelope might be a squatter who lured me in here to take from me whatever she could. I pictured her turning around with a knife or broken glass to rob me.

She turned around and patted her thighs. “Morris hasn’t been by yet, so I don’t really have much.” She smiled.

“I’m not hungry anyway.” I unscrewed the cap from the water bottle and took a drink.

Penelope sat back down. She stared and gave an imploring look trying to suck out information about why I was there. I thumbed the cap to the water bottle.

“I’ve been here for about twenty years. People come and go, but me and Morris have been here the longest.”

“Is Morris your husband?”

Penelope chuckled and cast a glance to her side, looking a little embarrassed.

“No, no. He’s the guy who brings us food whenever he comes around. He’s cute, but cut

short, like those stumps outside my house.” She burst out laughing, flailing her legs in the air and slapping her thighs.

“I’ve come to take up residence, if space is available.”

She shot her head back to me.

“Space? Of course there’s space. Have you seen how many vacant properties are standing outside?” She leaned towards me and squinted. “What would you want to be doing in a place like this?”

“Visiting.” I wasn’t planning to stay very long, only until I could figure what to do next. I didn’t know how to fully live outside of Peter and Caroline, and this place was the between.

I was reminded of this place by an article I found a few weeks after my father died. I was in my attic when I came across it, trying to clear some space for all of the collections my dad had accumulated over the years—books on any topic imaginable, newspapers, Lampoon magazines, gun magazines, articles cut out from these periodicals and stuffed into multiple manila folders, comic books, old gum wrappers with comics in them, old cigar boxes, half smoked cigars, pipes, tobacco, glasses, flannel shirts with missing buttons meant to be fixed...the list went on. At first I told myself I was doing this so my mom wouldn’t have to—I couldn’t picture her sorting through his whole lifetime by herself. So I started to sift through boxes. Everything my dad had touched had value, and I couldn’t weigh which things had more worth and which things didn’t.

I came across the article in a manila folder inside one of his large black trunks. Peter was irritated at me for making him hoist all three of these coffee table-sized trunks

up there. “Get rid of the stuff, Toby. You’ll never look at any of this again once it’s up here,” he’d said. Peter told me this over and over, and I ignored him over and over. I didn’t care. It wasn’t his dad who died. Besides my dad had cared enough about Peter to save some article he had written seven years prior. Caroline sat in my lap while I read the story about people living together in this decrepit cul-de-sac at the Salton Sea.

“What did you say your name was?” Penelope grabbed me back to attention.

“Toby.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Same here.”

She leaned back in her chair and placed her arms around her head. “I’d show you to the place you’ll be staying at, but you beat me to it. I hope it’s ok. We don’t have much better.”

“It’s fine.”

“Morris should be here in a while with some groceries, so until then why don’t you tell me exactly what you are doing here. We have time.”

I drove around to the back where the gate enclosed the school near the main office. The gate was open, and I knew Caroline’s room had to be down the hall a few feet away.

“I’ll pick you up at three.” I turned to Caroline. She was hunched over with her arms wrapped around her chest. I thought she was pouting, but her frozen facial expression read differently. It looked caught in disbelief. “Caroline? I have to do

errands..." I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, trying to think of other phrases to get her to leave the car. "We're out of milk... we need more toilet paper."

"I don't like you." Caroline's brown eyes sunk into mine.

I couldn't think of anything to say. She opened the door, stepped out, closed the door, and walked off to her class while swinging her lunch pail wildly around in a circle and letting it launch into a wall. She ran and kicked it across the floor a few times, then turned down the hall.

I left when she was three years old.

The night before I left, Peter and I were sitting in bed with Caroline. I had a thought that kept replaying in my head. "Does this matter?" I said it aloud, although I hadn't meant to. Caroline was sitting between my legs, playing with a small toy train. Peter was reading a book about the ruins in Greece. He would head off soon to help assist and photograph the preservation efforts taking place at a new site discovered a few months before. Something was always being discovered. Peter always discovered things outside of our life. There wasn't anything more to discover here. Before we were married, he discovered I deserted my family for five straight years, and then he subsequently helped bring us back together. Now that my family was fixed, we could resume life. I could watch Caroline grow up and Peter and I could retire into old age.

Before my family and I began to patch ourselves back together a few years back, I had already been with Peter a couple of years and was pregnant with Caroline. Peter and I lived in a yellow Victorian divided into seven apartments. Our unit consisted of a living room converted from a bedroom, a kitchen converted from another room, and a small

bedroom where all we could fit in it was a futon for our bed. We each had to crawl on at the foot of it to get to our respective areas, and do the same backwards to get out. Rent was decent. Our apartment was what we could afford on his salary as a lecturer in the Anthropology department at Rose Crest University, and mine as an administrative assistant in the same department.

My parents and older brother appeared at our door one day after Peter had called and told them I was six weeks pregnant. Peter had been after me for weeks about finally meeting my parents, and I skirted around the situation for as long as I could. They knocked on our door during an argument Peter and I were having about our dead dog.

Our dog died at two in the morning. Simon the Vet informed us a month before that the dog had cancer, showing us where the masses were.

“They’re right here, under these matted clumps of fur.” Simon took my hand and slid it under Cyrus’s stomach. The masses were hard and the size of golf balls. I had thought they were only clumps of fur. I had meant to brush those clumps out that week.

“I told you we needed to comb those out.” Peter stood with his back straight. He folded his arms across his chest. “How are you going to take care of a baby if you can’t even take care of a dog?”

Simon looked at us, took out a pen and anxiously clicked it. He attempted to put the situation in perspective. “Combing would not have mattered at this point. We will do a few x-rays, but chances are he will have to be put down.”

I covered Cyrus’s ears. Why hadn’t I taken care of Cyrus? Why hadn’t Peter combed his fur? Cyrus had two owners. Our baby would have two parents.

“Do you recall my being gone these past few months doing research at Oxford for my paper?” asked Peter.

There was one picture on the wall near the door of horses galloping across a pasture. The room was cold and white, and overhead the air-conditioner rumbled through the vents. Cyrus sat like a lump of carpet and shivered on a metal table. He made the kind of pant he did when he was nervous. It was a fast pant, his mouth pooling loads of drool. I patted his back and began to cry. Simon said he would be back in a few moments to gather Cyrus to get x-rayed.

I had carried Cyrus home after finding him in a sealed postal box under the freeway bridge near our house. I had been walking to work when I passed the box scooting itself along on the pavement. I heard small yips between the roar of fast moving cars above. I bent down to the box and took out my keys, using one to slice the taped seams. Once the box was open, a brown, scruffy mutt stared at me, wagging his tail. I pulled out the tiny brown mass and hugged him to my chest. He was warm and smelled like anything new—fresh and inviting. I put him into my tote, zipped up the closure to where his head stuck out, and walked home.

Once inside our apartment, I grabbed a bowl and poured milk into it. I set Cyrus on the floor, and he went to the bowl and sniffed it, then tried to stick his paw into the liquid, almost cat-like.

“You’re mine, mine, mine,” I whispered to him.

After the results showed surgery would not help Cyrus, we took him home. We would consider only two options—letting him die on his own or forcing his death by

putting him down. Putting him down? If they had called it something else, maybe we would have thought about that option more. It didn't help that once we got home Cyrus jumped onto the couch to his blanket and pushed it around with his nose like he always did, making a cocoon to hibernate in. We put off the decision until after dinner, which became after work the next day, then after grocery shopping on the weekend. Then it became a topic that we avoided day to day. And Cyrus didn't show any pain—at least any that we as simple dog owners could see. If he had shown signs of discomfort we would have concentrated on making a decision.

At the start of summer, a heat wave began to spread, and Cyrus slowed down. He wasn't able to jump on our couch anymore, or sleep with us on our bed. I set up a little bed for Cyrus in the kitchen. I bought a dog mattress at the pet store and placed it by the sliding glass door in our kitchen. We left it open so the cool breeze could fan over his body. I got up one night to get some more water and went to check on Cyrus. I stared at him from a distance, growing nervous because I couldn't see his body rising and falling as he breathed. I hesitated, then tiptoed over, bent down, and ran my hand along his body. It was hard like the floor I was standing on, and I shot my hand back to my chest. I had never experienced losing an animal by myself. When my childhood pets had died, I had parents to take away the body before I could see what death looked like, felt like, and smelled like. I sat on my knees and felt as if it were the end of the world. I thought about how Cyrus felt the moment before he died and how I hadn't been sitting next to him in the kitchen, constantly running my hands along his body to comfort him and tell him he would always be mine.

Peter woke to my howls and came into the kitchen. He went to the computer and read on an animal humane website that we could keep Cyrus inside the fridge overnight. We wrapped him in the blanket that he had slept with on top of our bed, then placed him inside a brown department store bag. Peter said he would take Cyrus away before he went to work that morning.

When I got home from work the next day, I opened the fridge to get some water, and found Cyrus still inside. I went to find Peter, and he was going through papers and mementos from his travels, which he kept in clear, plastic bins. I was agitated because I had to face that brown bag when I opened the fridge.

“Hun—” I tripped around the bins coming up to Peter.

“Yes?”

“Are you going to take Cyrus to the vet? Or do you need me to take him?”

“I will tomorrow.”

I didn't want to take Cyrus. I remembered when I was eight and my cat Patty died. My parents placed her inside a box that held my mom's boots. After they came home from the vet they explained to me the cremation process. I pictured her body scooped up with a shovel and tossed into a fire, burning with other countless cats, dogs, and rodents. But I knew Peter was struggling with the situation himself since he didn't take Cyrus the next day either. He kept him for two more days in the fridge. I hated the idea of having Cyrus in our fridge, but I understood how hard it would be for Peter to dispose of our pet. Cyrus was like our child, our first child. Cyrus was the first child I failed to take care of.

I came home the next day and Cyrus was still at the back of the fridge like a bag of leftover takeout with grease stains beginning to eat through the paper. I pushed the food in the fridge out of the way and lifted the wrinkled bag. I carried it into the bedroom where Peter was watching television.

“Peter!” I held the bag towards him. The bottom of the bag had turned a dark brown.

He grabbed the bag and stood up from the bed.

“Forget it! I’ll take him!” I lunged at the bag, and Peter pulled it away from me.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I asked you to take him two days ago!” I reached for the bag again. “Give it to me!”

“I’ll take him right now!” He shoved past me into the kitchen towards the living room.

“Wait—wait!” I went to grab the little ball Cyrus liked to chew on.

The ball was in the kitchen, next to where his bed and his bowls for food and water sat. We hadn’t cleaned up the little arrangement. We didn’t because it felt like we had only let Cyrus out to the yard to bark, or if I was home alone, I imagined Peter and Cyrus went for a walk and would both be back soon.

I went to the bedroom and found a box. I came back and placed the box next to Cyrus. Peter opened the bag and we both gasped at the smell. Cyrus smelled like death, like any other animal that dies, a smell that sweeps into the nose, the brain registering the

suffocating and pricking aroma of curdled blood and other bodily fluids left in the open for too long.

I grabbed a towel from the bathroom and placed it inside the box. Peter pulled Cyrus out of the bag, and placed him inside the box. I placed his ball next to him.

“Are you going to come?” Peter put the lid on the shoebox.

“No.” I began to sob.

“I’m not doing well with this either.” Tears were forming in his eyes.

“I can’t.”

Peter nodded, grabbed the box off the table, and went to the door. He paused before he opened it and looked back at me. I looked at the floor. He opened the door, and said “Hello.” I thought he was saying hi to one of our neighbors. But when I looked, I saw my mom, dad, and brother standing there.

“This may not be the best time,” Peter said as he backed away from the door.

I stood stuck to the floor. All three put a hand to their nose and turned their heads away from Peter and the box.

“I’m Peter,” he said. He asked them to come in. “I apologize for the smell. Our dog has passed away.” Peter placed the shoebox on the table.

My family huddled against the wall. My mom hugged her purse to her chest, looking like she wanted to run out the door. My dad appeared skeptical and stood as if he were a little boy watching a magician interlocking rings. My brother looked the worst. He stood pulling at his shirt and staring around the room. I wondered what Peter had said

to get them here, and I wished they were gone. They each cast a look towards Peter and then to me. Peter beckoned them to sit on the couch.

“Could I offer anyone something to drink?” Peter walked into the kitchen and opened the cabinets. I heard the clanking of glass, the opening and closing of the fridge, and the pouring of water. He came back and set glasses around the coffee table for each of us. I was attuned to every movement and cough and adjustment of a body on the couch cushions. I couldn’t imagine what I was going to say since I hadn’t spoken to my family in over five years.

“Are you going to say anything to us?” My mom crossed her arms over her chest. “Or are we going to continue for years not speaking until I get another phone call from your fiancé saying you will be married soon and would we like to attend?”

Peter turned to me. “I’m going to take Cyrus to the vet now.” He stood up. “I’ll let you guys talk.”

“I’ll come with you.” I stood up and followed him to the table.

“No—you stay here. I’ll be right back. I want you to stay here and talk with your parents and brother. We need to tell your parents the news, don’t you think?”

“Now?” I turned towards where they were huddling on the couch.

“Is there a better time?” Peter picked up Cyrus and turned toward them. “I’m sorry to have to run out, but you understand. Ruth, Bill, Dirk, we would like you to stay for dinner.” He walked to the door. I followed.

“Don’t leave me here with them,” I whispered, grabbing his arm.

“Are you going to talk to us Toby?” my mom pestered.

“Peter, please.” I pulled his hand away from the doorknob.

He pulled away. “I was going to have to meet them sometime.”

“How could you call them without telling me?”

“Don’t worry. We’re leaving. I don’t know why I bothered to come,” my mom chimed in, putting her purse across her shoulder and grabbing my dad’s arm.

“I didn’t mean to upset anyone.” Peter stood there holding Cyrus.

“It’s a bit overwhelming. We haven’t spoken to Toby in five years. She stopped talking to us when she moved out. And she wasn’t even the one who called for us to drop by.” My mom’s hands rose into fists and she began to shake her head. “I don’t understand any of this!” She hit her hands to her chest, “What did we do Toby?” She stood bracing herself for an answer, and when I failed to speak, she pushed herself past Peter and out of the apartment.

I stood listening to her shoes hitting the stairs as she stormed down. I heard the back door open and slam. I didn’t go after her. My dad looked at me and called to my brother to leave. Peter set Cyrus down on the table.

“Please wait,” Peter called to them.

My dad turned to face him. “It was nice meeting you, although a bit strange.” He looked at the bundle on the table and back at me. “I don’t think your mom is ready, Toby. But you have to be the one to come to her. You know that. It’s a little odd the way you’ve acted.”

I looked down at the floor, away from the gaze of his brown eyes. When I was growing up, my dad could never stay mad at me. Whenever I got into trouble and was

sent to my room, and my mom told my dad it was his turn to deal with me, he would sit down on my bed with hunched shoulders. He would say how upset both he and my mom were at my actions. His voice would be low when he spoke to me and I would brush off what he said by telling him not to smile. He would tell me to stop doing whatever it was I did to make him smile. I did this because I didn't want my dad to continue speaking to me in somber tones. I wanted him to hurry up and let it go.

He could be quick to forgive, while my mom would pace around the house for hours, banging pots and pans in the kitchen, or shuffling furniture in the living room, ignoring me when I came into her vicinity. She was good at pulling the guilt out of me slow, like pulling taffy. She would pull and pull until the thread of guilt grew skinny and broke. After things settled down, my actions stuck in her heart. There was nothing I could do to make my mom forget my transgressions quickly.

My dad was different. I could make him forget the situation. I would grab his face and start bouncing up and down on the bed, and repeat, "Don't smile dad, don't smile! Whatever you do, don't smile!" He would take my hands off his face and push his glasses back up his nose, squinting to make a serious face. He would try to hold his smile back. I used the same trick he used on me whenever I pouted. While my mom left me alone to sulk, he would swoop in and ask me what was wrong. "Nothing," I would huff, and he would lift me into his lap. "Now Toby, whatever you do, no matter how much you want to, you are absolutely not allowed to smile. I don't want to see or hear your teeth coming out of that pout." It was a trick that worked every time. He would have me smiling and giggling uncontrollably. Everything wiped clean.

I wished I could use the trick right now. But even though it always worked between my dad and me, it never did with my mom. I would have to drag my feet, slowly approach, and apologize.

“I’m sorry. I wanted space. But I let it go for too long.”

He patted me on the shoulder. “You’ll have to make more effort,” he whispered and went out the door, followed by my brother, who had said nothing the entire time, but stood like a spectator.

“I was hoping that would have gone better.” Peter closed the door.

“I don’t know what you expected, Peter.” I could smell Cyrus.

Death was around me at work. I scanned pictures of human and animal skeletons from textbooks at the specific request of different professors who needed copies for their students. Sometimes I scanned pictures or information pertaining to different plagues that wiped out populations, or modern diseases that took and continue to take lives because of industrialization. And death could be new and stale in the same day. I dusted both yellow skeletons from cadavers dating back to the seventies and stuffed monkeys used as models to explain evolution, with dilated eyes and smiles frozen on the sound made before they died. I put mail away each day and saw all the different taxidermy catalogs each professor subscribed to in which order forms were attached so the professors could order new supplies. Then I would catalog all the different human and non-human corpses when they came. I broke from death at noon, and ate my lunch of yogurt and a tuna fish sandwich alone. I ate alone for one year before Peter Crupe asked

if he could join me. I noticed that he watched me throughout the day, whenever he could. But he never spoke to me for long periods of time until he finally did.

“Toby, could I have 50 copies of this article?” Peter leaned on my desk with one foot crooked on top of the other. He liked to play it cool. He had a dark brown ponytail, and wore thick coke bottle glasses. And he always wore red Nikes, slacks, and a white t-shirt.

I got up from my desk covered in plants that hid most of me, and walked down the hall, dangling the paper between two fingers. I heard Peter skipping after me, trying to begin a conversation.

“I took the photos in the article.”

“I didn’t notice.” I placed the paper on the glass and closed the copy machine lid. I turned around and drummed my fingers across my thigh.

“Did you see what it was about...at least?” He wobbled back and forth on his feet, casting a small smile.

“I didn’t.” I turned back around to the machine’s output tray, picked up the copies, and banged them on the copier to straighten the pile. Then I handed them to Peter, who was looking at the floor.

He cleared his throat, and toed his Nikes on the carpet. “It’s about this band of people living in dilapidated houses together.” He grew excited as he explained this place to me. “The people there are different ages and have different backgrounds and stories. But each found it too difficult to associate in society for long periods of time. They abandoned their lives and went to the Salton Sea, a middle of nowhere desert town next

to a polluted lake. It was a booming resort town, but now the hotels are skeletons of themselves, yachts stick out of the sand like they are surfacing from some type of hell, and the streets are lined with mobile homes boarded up with family possessions still inside.”

I took the paper from the copier, and glanced at it. It was titled: “The Many Stories Floating in a Ghost Town.” I thought the title was terrible. I looked at the picture depicting the houses. They looked like transients had built them. Each looked like it could collapse from a small gust of wind.

Peter pointed to a woman in a picture. “This woman is one of the wealthier ones.” She looked to be in her mid-forties, and was captioned as Penelope Reynolds. She wore a navy blazer, pearls, and hushpuppies. The picture of her had been taken inside her mobile unit. She had rugs on the floor, a tall lamp in the corner, a white desk, chair, and a couch.

After that time, Peter began approaching me more and more, trying to have conversations with me about the problems an Amazonian tribe faced, or he would simply rattle on about his day, waiting for me to look up from my computer if I was at my desk, or while I was making him copies. I ignored him. I liked my seclusion because it was comfortable. It gave my life a routine. Peter crept into this routine more and more every day, his conversations extending to other topics besides the humans he studied, into talk about his weekend plans and other trivialities.

One day he followed me as I was heading to the arboretum on campus. After leaving the office, going down the escalator and out of the building, I abruptly turned around to him.

“Peter, why are you following me?” I stood with one foot pointed, hands on each hip. I noticed he was holding a crinkled brown bag.

He toed the ground. “I thought you might like a lunch buddy. I brought salmon.”

“I don’t like salmon.” I tapped my heel. I felt a twinge of sympathy for him because he didn’t have friends among the department faculty. He broke an anthropological rule years earlier, which many of the professors still scoffed at. Evidently Peter had married—and later divorced—a woman who belonged to a tribe in Africa he had studied for three years. He did what anthropologists should never do.

“You don’t have to eat it. I merely thought we could be seafood chums for the afternoon. If not, that’s fine with me.” Peter dropped the bag to his side. He looked like one of the cadavers I dusted—his emotional state froze across his face.

“Ok. Let’s eat.”

Peter and I sat on a bench near the small, man-made lake. It was tranquil and I could barely hear the sounds from the freeway over the tall orange and lemon trees.

“This is nice,” Peter said, taking out his packable container of salmon encrusted in a mix of flour and spices.

“Yes.” I took out my tuna sandwich.

“What do you like to do for fun?”

It always starts this way—one person begins a boring topic. Peter took out a fork and stabbed his fish. His meal looked unappetizing. The rice was soggy from the moisture of canned green beans and his meal looked like slop.

“I like to go for runs.” I wanted to take the conversation away from what we did in our spare time. I didn’t do anything in my spare time—not even runs. I came home from work each day and took a shower, made dinner, then went to bed. “Do you like being a teacher?”

“Sure I do. I get to hold the attention of a small audience each day and talk about different cultures and compare them to my life.”

We sat and watched the loons swoop around the lake, trying to be the first to get at the bread a mother and daughter were doling out to a pair of ducks.

“Damn loons,” Peter said. One trotted past, catching up to the others. “You’re nothing but a loon,” Peter called after.

I laughed.

He turned to me. “And you’re a loon.”

“Me? Why am I a loon?”

He smiled and nudged me with his hand.

One week later he rang my doorbell to pick me up for our first date. I was twenty-eight, and I lived in an apartment complex where no one tried to get to know anyone else. I realized I didn’t know much about Peter other than what I learned from work and our lunches together, which mainly consisted of us watching the ducks and loons fight.

I peered through the peephole. Peter was standing a good distance away, leaning against the back wall. I stepped into the hallway and saw Peter's hair was tied back into a bun. He was wearing a rumpled brown suit that looked a size too small. He had on a red tie and black dress shoes. He held out a sunflower to me. I was wearing a collared shirt, jeans, and flats. Peter hadn't told me where we would be going. I took the flower.

“Sorry about my suit—I bought this for my undergraduate ceremony years ago and I haven't gotten around to buying another one.” He took his hand and flattened it over his jacket, trying to smooth out a few of the deep wrinkles. “And I couldn't find the iron this morning.”

“I'm not dressed any better. I'll put this flower in some water.” I turned back toward my closed apartment door, and sensed Peter moving to follow. I hunched my shoulders to block his way, cracked the door open a few centimeters, and inched a foot in. “I'll be right back.” I slid through the small gap and closed the door fast, almost clipping Peter's fingertips. I slid the security lock quietly into place.

Peter called through the door, “That's all right, I'll wait out here. It's a nice day.”

My apartment smelled like a sweaty gym. Clothes sagged at the corners of my living room couch. T-shirt sleeves and the legs of jeans wept down the side of the couch, faintly calling to me and looking like fallen bodies. The one bathroom matched this room—the floor, sink, and bathtub were covered in hair, and white toothpaste splotches decorated the mirror and sink, while shampoo spills crusted on the walls of the shower. The toilet was the only part I kept clean. The kitchen sink was always clean too, and

never had a dirty dish sitting in it for more than a day, but the floor was crusted with food spills. I didn't walk barefoot in my house.

I heard the faucet drip water into the sink. Drops hit the bottom and went down the drain with deep, guttural sounds—like someone alone and relaxing on a porch swing in summer, sipping iced lemonade, and exclaiming with a drawn out breath: “this is the life.”

Peter knocked on my door and called my name. His hand turned the doorknob. I ripped off the lower stem and sank the sunflower into a cup of water on my dining table. I walked to the door and quickly slipped out.

“My apartment’s in a bit of disarray,” I said and let out a low chuckle.

“That’s ok, I don’t need to see it—yet.” Peter smiled, took my hand and we walked down the hall.

My breath quickened and my throat dried up like it had swallowed a handful of flour.

“Are you alright?” Peter asked.

My hand was sweaty. “I’m fine.” My voice was hoarse.

Peter and I walked around downtown. This area of town was decorated with antique stores owned by elderly women who lined the windows with white Christmas lights all year long, highlighting several large, handmade doll houses for sale. These stores were filled with old dishware, doilies, and button jewelry. There was a small deli and a candy store filled with barrels of colorful saltwater taffy. A few stores sold carpet and cabinetry. There was a locksmith and a tiny music store advertising piano lessons.

The downtown area was not exciting. There wasn't much to do or many ways to spend money in the shops. When I was a child, the only pastime my friends and I had was walking to the local liquor store for a slushy, or going to the one-room library down Magnolia where the floors were thin like cardboard.

Riverside was where I lived and where I went to work, not a place where I did any recreational activities. Hardly any renovations happened in the town, and even when they did it took only a few years for freshly painted buildings to become disfigured like the rest. The paint on most buildings was sunbaked and letters were missing from store signs and never replaced. Riverside made me crawl back into bed in the morning and imagine somewhere where people bustled from shop to shop all day, where there was always something exciting to buy in the window. Hatred of the town hit me every time I left my parent's house while growing up, and every time I had left my apartment. The town existed in a limbo of decay from which I felt I could never escape. But when I was with Peter the stale buildings became the 'place we ate at,' the 'place where we found that music box,' 'the place where we had our first kiss,' and the 'place where we had our first argument.'

"Why did you come to teach in a place like this?" I asked him on one of our early dates, after I had learned he was originally from San Francisco, a city that had a much better reputation for beauty, culture, and nightlife. We were at an ice cream hut, sitting on a red bench to its left, watching the small kids reach into their pockets for crumpled dollars for a packed cup of ice cream loaded with candy or a scoop of vanilla dipped in cherry coating.

“Why have you stayed here?” Peter licked at his cone. He had a swipe of chocolate across his cheek and acted as if he hadn’t noticed.

“I’m not planning on staying here for very long. I’m working to save some money before I venture on.” I reached over and wiped his cheek.

“Where will you go?”

“I’ve wanted to travel. I want to see Paris, London, Venice—”

“Those are all exciting places. I’ve been to each.”

“You have?”

“Yep.”

Peter and I had been seeing each other for over a month and I had not let him into my apartment and I had not been to his. But then one morning at work he asked me over. He came into the department, and smiled at me. A few days before he had tried to come behind my desk to kiss me, but I’d retreated. I didn’t want to give the professors more gossip about Peter. That day he leaned in towards me and came close to my face. I backed up and looked around to see who was near us. He stopped and pretended he was getting one of my pens to use, and whispered, “What are you doing for dinner tonight? I thought you’d come to my place, we’d have some pasta, and watch a Hitchcock film.” It was Friday, and he told me I could bring my toothbrush. He smiled when he said that and played with the pen in his hand.

I glanced at him, then back to the excel spreadsheet across my computer screen. It felt hot in the office. I didn’t want to start a relationship with Peter. I knew if I kept dating Peter he would expect me to invite him over to my place, exchange keys, have

extended sleepovers...and eventually move in together, get married, and have a family. I looked at Peter, and he pulled a rubber ducky from behind his back, and set it on my desk. It had a plastic mold on its back that looked like bread. I thought it wouldn't be bad to see how I felt going over to his place.

I arrived at a quarter to six and Peter answered the door wearing an apron that said, "I'm the Chef" with a red arrow pointing towards his face. He took my coat and led me into the living room and told me to relax on the couch while he got some wine for us. I looked around the apartment, and I could see the differences between my way of living and Peter's. The walls of his apartment were a dark blue, the furniture the typical black leather with matching end tables and a coffee table. I scanned the magazines stacked on the coffee table. Peter had *National Geographic*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, and *People*.

Peter came into the room with two wine glasses on a tray. He noticed me staring at his periodicals. "Those are for my research. I put away *Maxim* before you came. I got tired of explaining to women those magazines are for research."

"*Playboy* as well?" I grinned and took the glass Peter offered.

"Only for the articles." Peter sat next to me and slid his hand up my thigh. He scooted closer and began to kiss my neck.

My eyes wandered over to the coffee table. It was a perfect coffee table. There weren't any particles of food crusted on it, no dust accumulated, no scratches from cups or silverware. It looked unused. My eyes moved to look at the bookshelves with neatly lined paperbacks and dust free shelves. The apartment was silent, different from mine. As soon as I got home, I heard the leaking faucet in my kitchen. In the living room, I had

a futon with a ripped seam. I kept an assortment of crumpled magazines stained with rings from mugs on my coffee table.

We spent the next forty-five minutes watching television. I continued to survey the apartment. I looked at the floor and tried to find particles left over from food or trash. I found none then spent time trying to discover any cobwebs hanging about or lingering dust bunnies in the crevices between the floor and walls. There wasn't clutter of any kind—no excessive pile of books that are never read, no old electronics lying on top of tables underneath stacks of old magazines or newspapers. I excused myself and went to the bathroom, scanning the area in there for any sign of defective cleanliness. The toilet looked as though it had been installed the previous day, the tub had no mildew growing up the sides of the caulk, the sink was free of toothpaste and soap scum, and there weren't any little hairs on the floor.

We ate dinner early. Peter's kitchen was even more sterile than the bathroom. The walls were painted a sharp white that glared into my eyes. The table had a thick, white linen cloth draped over it, which looked like the sheet on a clean hospital bed in a psyche ward. The food we ate sat on white plates, glasses of wine had no smudge marks, and cloth napkins were rolled in ring holders. I was impressed by it all, but this atmosphere was a little clinically claustrophobic. There wasn't anything dirty or out of place. The plates had no chips or wear that I could see. The table didn't wobble and the chairs matched. I wondered where Peter was in the middle of all of this—where were his African trinkets, his collections of art from South America, some bongos from Cuba—anything that would focus attention on him. No pictures from his travels, or any

snapshots of his friends or family. Something didn't add up. Peter was hiding in his own apartment. I wanted to figure him out.

“This is nice. Did you learn how to make it from your travels? Or from a family member?” I asked as I watched Peter slide his napkin out from the ring holder, snap it in the air and let it fall across his lap. I left mine in the ring holder and picked up my knife and fork. “It reminds me of the story my dad liked to tell of when he and my mom were first dating. My dad came over to my mom's apartment and she had spent her whole salary for that week on steak and wine. Do your parents ever talk about when they first dated?”

“I've never met my dad. I talk to my mom every once in a while. My mom and I had a better relationship before my divorce. I think the strain of my divorce caused our relationship to fall apart. She was close to my ex and devastated when we ended our marriage. So are you going to tell me more about yourself?” Peter scooped up the last bit of baked catfish that sat on his plate—seafood seemed to be the theme of our union. We were at the end of the meal when eating can't excuse silence.

What could I tell him? I hadn't spoken to my parents in five years. Peter stared at me and waited at attention like a dog searching for food to come his way. I changed the subject to something more titillating to draw him away.

Within the next hour we were lying in his bed, naked from sex. Peter's brown hair looked like a bird's nest. He nuzzled his face and legs up against mine, twirling a strand of my hair between his fingers. I was relieved when he hadn't asked how I felt. Peter made me feel at ease in a way. I let myself slip. I believed I was searching for a piece of

Peter to make me turn away, but it became easy to let Peter warm to me because I had been tightly wound for too long. But I had this plan of living alone. I was going to live alone in a deserted place where nothing could bother me again—I didn't want to make connections with another person, put roots down, collect unnecessary possessions—anything that could fall apart at any moment. It wasn't worth it, not in the end.

I didn't know how to spend my time. After taking Caroline to school, I had gone back to the house. I unlocked the door and walked in. The air was stale. The furniture stood hunched like wild animals in a darkened forest, trying to find food to survive. I went to sit on the black leather couch. The silence reminded me of the time I spent alone growing up at my parents' house when the only noise I heard came from the ticking of the clock above the television. I hated hearing the red numbers inside the black box, ticking slowly away.

There wasn't a clock above our fireplace. The only object on that slab of brick was the picture of Caroline and Peter. They were hugging each other with big half-moon grins across their faces like Cheshire cats saying, "Jokes on you. We're doing just fine." I hauled myself up from the couch and walked around. I took off my shoes and padded around on the fluffy white carpet. There were shoe marks here and there, remnants of food spilled, and crumbs missed by the vacuum. The table in the living room was scattered with the electric bill, car payment, mortgage bill, and credit card statement. I picked up the credit card statement and scanned the list of items Peter had purchased. I noticed they had gone on a trip to Hawaii a month before. I set the bill down and headed

upstairs. I had been in Caroline's bedroom, and now decided to push myself into Peter's—our bedroom.

The door was ajar and it looked dark inside. I pushed the white door open, and the blinds above the bed cut through the dark with slits of light. The bed was made. A dark shadow hovered over the room giving everything a frozen appearance. I turned to the left of the bed and saw my desk against the front wall. It was the desk my grandpa had given me. I went over to it, and the top was covered in drafts of research Peter was working on. The drawers smelled of stale mints when opened, and were filled with more papers crammed in, pens, sticky notes, packs of gum and tins of almonds. I heard everything shuffle when I pushed the drawer closed again.

The closet drew me to it like the prick of a needle. A sliver of light pointed into it and I lurched forward. My feet made the floor moan, so I tiptoed slowly, not understanding the motivation behind wanting to avoid noise. Peter had suits encased in protective sheaths of plastic wrap from the drycleaners, and his shoes were stacked on the floor next to the closet's opening. I went to the dresser that sat below the clothes and pulled out the three drawers that had been mine. I lifted his shirts and slacks and saw my clothes lay as I had left them. I looked down at my clothes creased from salt, dirt, and other muck that had collected onto them throughout the days in my manmade bio dome. I took a pair of pants and a t-shirt. Then I felt a familiar strap of fake leather at the bottom of my folded clothes. I tugged on it and out slipped the purse. Then I spent time walking aimlessly around the house, seeing what else was different.

Later, I sat in the parking lot in front of Caroline's school, in the same spot where I left her in the morning. Parents whizzed by with strollers and children ran out of classroom doors into the late afternoon. I noticed a small girl with brown hair wearing a red dress and trying to run alongside an older boy who looked like her brother. I thought about running alongside my brother to greet our dad who always stood outside the gates smoking one of his cigars.

I stepped out of the car and into the crowd, which hummed like worker bees. Everyone jabbed each other here and there with corners of lunch pails and binders. I walked past the same fence my dad had stood behind, and went to her classroom, like Peter did. I thought how Caroline didn't have to struggle through a crowd to get to him. She would never know what it felt like to see her Dad after the search, like mine, to at last see a red and brown flannel shirt with an arm moving towards the face obscured by a puff of cigar smoke. It was a reassuring image for me, signaling that all was well. It was different for her.

Caroline stood outside her classroom door, clutching her lunch pail, wide eyes underneath her blond locks. Her brown eyes moved with the rapid direction of her head as she scanned everyone who passed by. I walked up to her.

"Sorry I'm late." I bent down to her and saw the whites of her eyes were red.

"Where's Daddy?" Her voice whined.

"He had to work. Remember? He'll be home later tonight."

"When will that be?"

"Later. Come on, we have to go to the store."

She walked along side me, taking me in. “Where did you get that purse?”

Rebecca’s car was in the driveway when I pulled in with his car. My eyes glanced toward the front window to our house. Peter stood there, holding a drawn curtain. Within a blink, he was out the front door, and at the car. I watched Caroline rush to unbuckle herself.

“How was school?” Peter swung open the car door, and Caroline lunged into his arms.

“Where were you?” Her hands curled around his suit jacket, and gripped his shoulder like the hands of a small gorilla to the back of its mom.

Peter then held Caroline’s hand and walked alongside her into the house. I grabbed her backpack and lunch pail and follow after them.

“Guess who’s here?”

We walked through the door, and before Peter could answer his own question, Caroline shouted “Grandpa!” and rushed over to the man sitting in one of the dining room chairs. It was Abraham, the man my mother thought she needed a year after my father died. Caroline sat on his lap.

“And how was your day?” He stroked Caroline’s hair out of her face.

Caroline batted her legs around, and answered. “Ok, except I was late for class.”

I pretended I was busy clearing out her lunch pail, so I wouldn’t see the expression on Peter’s face.

“It’s ok to be late sometimes,” the man answered. He was wearing sneakers, ironed chinos, a dress shirt, and a blue baseball cap.

“How are you, Toby?” He couldn’t ignore the elephant any longer. He set Caroline down, and she ran off to bring him a picture, probably the one she had shown me earlier. He took off his hat and ran his hand through his thin, grey hair.

My dad wore flannel shirts and jeans with worn knees. His hair was black and he had a thick mustache. My mom loved that mustache. She had a plaque above her kitchen sink that read “Kissing a man without a mustache is like eating an egg without salt.” Once I asked my mom how she could stand being poked above the lip with those black hairs and she replied, “it feels good.” Her lips always puckered to prepare for the boar-like hair.

I watched them kiss each other in the morning when my mom was at the stove frying eggs. My dad would curl his arms around her waist as she flipped the eggs. I caught their kisses as they watched television, or walked anywhere together, my mother’s arm cradled in his. He led my mom around like a grand prize he’d won the other day, his good fortune still making his mind buzz. Peter liked to look at their wedding photo on the record cabinet in the living room, and he always said, “Your dad knows he won the lottery.”

I looked around for something to clean or put away. Peter walked out of the room to answer the phone and I followed, leaving Abraham. He wasn’t alone long. Caroline stumbled down the stairs and skipped to him.

Peter hung up the phone as I walked over.

“Was that my mom?”

“Yes.” He walked around the living room, and set down his jacket and briefcase at the table, then began to rearrange some papers.

“Is she coming over?” I knew the answer already.

“She wants me to bring Caroline and Abraham over. Caroline is going to spend the weekend with them.”

“She is?”

“I thought it might be a good idea so we could settle a few things.”

“Like what?”

He stared at me as though the reason for our impending pow-wow should be obvious. “I see you found some of your belongings.”

I heard Abraham admire Caroline’s artistic achievement. “This must go on your grandma’s fridge.” I walked into the kitchen as Abraham was kissing Caroline on the cheek.

Peter came into the kitchen and said they better get going. Caroline jumped off Abraham’s lap to get her backpack filled with weekend clothes. Abraham slid slowly out of the nook, and Peter went to help. “Thanks, Pete. My legs like to decide when they want to work and when they don’t.”

“I’ll be back in a little while, Toby.” Peter looked at me and both he and Abraham walked to the living room where Caroline waited. I stood in the kitchen and heard the beep of the car remote and the opening and slamming of car doors. I went to the window and peered out the blinds, watching Peter and Abraham talking and Caroline in the back swinging around a stuffed polar bear. Then they were gone.

I remembered Peter and my dad during the times they sat together in the front seat. They argued about where in the world they believed the Eucharist was. My dad talked about the rise in socialist values demoralizing our culture. Peter enticed my dad to speak about his time in the military, and my dad enticed Peter to talk about what I was doing with my life. I would interrupt the conversation when it got to those parts. There had been other conversations, before Peter, other times when we sat around as a family and had discussions on various topics. Then there were the conversations that weren't conversations, and instead were the kind of thing listened to on the news—someone talking at you instead of with you, speaking in monotone and spouting out statistics.

It was late September. I was in the eighth grade. My parents had bought me a new sweater for school, a red hoodie with white strings. It was a sweater most of the girls in school had been wearing that year. It was an amazing feeling not having to wear either the blue 1970's hand-me down given to me by my dad or the Christian themed sweater my cousin Shelley had bought for me, which had a sleeve that proclaimed in cursive lettering that all God's flock must "Walk in the Spirit." I was content until I was asked why I wore the same red sweater every day.

It was almost noon when my dad sat my older brother, my younger sister, and me down for a talk. Everyone had slept until his or her usual time. My younger sister Maxine got up at seven to watch all her children's shows, my older brother got up at five because he always got up that early, and my parents woke up at nine, and sat in bed talking until ten. I always slept past everyone else. We sat around the dining room table, and my father had his arms crossed around his chest. He wore the same brown work

boots with the steel toe tips that we all had to watch out for when he walked near us— there was always the chance that one of his feet would run into ours as we came around the narrow hallway to the bathroom, or swung around the living room to the kitchen. His blue jeans had faded, and had worn out knees from the plastic pads he wore over them when installing carpets, and he chose to buy his shirts from cluster packs bought at discount stores where you could also buy food, books, office supplies, cookware, and gardening and hardware supplies. His hands were always raw and chapped with gashes and bruises on his fingers. These workman wounds never truly healed. Cuts would crack open again and again, and bruises that had begun to fade would be replaced with fresh, green ones.

I could sense something was wrong when he had his arms crossed at his chest and his hands weren't examining some new scab. I would catch him picking at them while he watched television, or when we sat around for these family meetings. If the picking happened during our meetings, my brother, sister, or I would take turns to tattle on him to our mom. My mother would turn and say, "Do you want an infection?"

Everyone had dressed except my mom. She was still in her pajamas. She had straw-like, red hair past her shoulders. Across her forehead above her strawberry blond eyebrows sat her trademark bangs. Whenever I looked at pictures of her growing up, the bangs were plastered across her head, at times held down by another one of her trademarks, a paisley bandana. She cut her own bangs, as she did the rest of her hair, my sister's, and mine when we were growing up. We had hair past our shoulders during the fall and winter, and bobs that fell to our chins when the weather turned warm.

But the year of the red sweater was the year I had the gumption to tell her I was too old to have my mother cut my hair. I had already refused to have her cut my bangs years earlier when I was in the fourth grade. One morning at that age, my mother cut my hair before we were going to ride the bus to the store. She sat me down on the toilet after washing my hair and she combed my hair so it was slick straight against my back, over the wet towel draped around my shoulders. She pulled from her back pocket the kitchen shears used to cut through meat cartilage and chicken bones. I recognized the scissors she always used and scrunched my shoulders towards my neck, grabbing my hair and telling her I liked it the way it was. “Nonsense,” she said, and grabbed the ends out from my grasp. “Look at all these split ends.” She snapped the scissors around in the air to prove how sharp and good they were to cut hair. This motion also told me to sit still.

After she trimmed my hair into a bob, she went to work on my bangs. She slid the scissors along my forehead, working her way from one side to the other. My mom finished and shouted “wah-lah!” and whipped the towel off my back as she had seen the bull fighters do with their capes on television. Then she pushed a pink mirror with a missing handle towards me, and I grabbed it. “Take a look!” my mother exclaimed, smiling. I studied my reflection. The length of my hair looked relatively even. And my bangs were straight until the middle of my forehead, between my eyebrows. The top layer of hair was missing, only a thin patch was left. Its outline was shaped into a long rectangle and it looked as though I was five and had chopped my own hair with safety scissors. I tried to brush out the shape with my fingers. “You look so cute!” my mom squealed.

Later that day at the bus stop, a bald man who was barefoot stared at me.

“Your bangs are crooked.” He touched his bare forehead where hair should have been.

He was wearing a white t-shirt with lots of small holes at the bottom, and his green shorts looked like underwear. He had no shoes on, and his feet were dirty.

“They won’t let you on the bus without shoes,” I said, pointing.

My mom grabbed my arm and led me to the end of the line of passengers. “You shouldn’t care so much what people think.”

My dad still had his arm across his chest, and he was holding my mother’s hand.

“Your mom has breast cancer,” he said.

I looked at everyone’s facial expressions. I didn’t know what my dad’s statement meant. Everyone was silent for a long time. I listened to the swamp cooler blasting out cool air. I heard the refrigerator humming. I could hear kids running around outside and the sound of the ice cream truck moving by, playing the song it always played through its bullhorn, the same refrain of an elderly voice saying “Hello?” then starting over again. My mom said it sounded like my grandma, startling her every time she heard it.

I stared at my dad who was looking at the floor. I vaguely understood that cancer was bad. I had seen commercials on television with bald women wearing pink beanies and scarves, and walking in groups to raise money, and other commercials with bald children hugging celebrities who asked the viewer to donate money to save them. I looked at my little sister. She sat on one of our many broken dining room chairs. It was missing its upper back, split off from years of being leaned on, and passed down from my

grandma's house. The half spokes stuck into my sister's shirt as she swung her legs up and down. She was eight years old and in the fourth grade. In the month after school started, she had been moved around the classroom three times for talking.

"Do they cut out your boob?" my brother asked my mom as he slid his finger across his chest. He always had a delicate way of putting things. He was about to graduate high school within the next year. He had a shaved head, was barely five feet tall and 110 pounds, but believed he was tough, like a rap star. He wore jeans and a black jean jacket that were made for someone who was six feet tall and three hundred pounds.

My brother thought everything was literal, and he believed what anyone said. We understood that, but everyone outside of our immediate circle did not. My grandpa was the worst when it came to understanding him. He would say sarcastic comments meant to be funny, but which my brother took seriously. After my brother began work at a bulk mail business through the Regional Occupational Program at his high school, he excitedly told my grandpa he had opened a bank account. He felt like an adult, equal to kids in school who had jobs. But my grandpa turned on the little switch that my brother could never turn off. My grandpa told him banks could not be trusted and that he better watch his money.

The next day my brother hopped on a bus to the bank and withdrew all his money and closed his account. Then he came home and told us what he had done. "Banks can't be trusted," he said again and again when my dad questioned why he would do something like that. "I don't understand what you mean!" my dad yelled, and the switch inside my brother wouldn't turn off and he yelled back, "They can't be trusted! They take your

money for no reason!” “Who’s taking your money!?” my dad screamed and there was a yelling match back and forth until my dad learned who had told my brother this information. Later my dad called my grandpa who responded, “He doesn’t understand the joke?”

“Yes, Dirk. They surgically remove my breast, but I will be asleep during the surgery so I don’t feel anything,” my mom said. “Then I go in for medicine and blood tests once a month. It’s called chemotherapy. I’ll start to lose my hair and the doctors said I will experience other side effects, like being tired and not wanting to eat.” She turned to my dad, “And I will probably have to quit my job at American Expressions.”

She worked at American Expressions, a greeting card store on the local Marine Corps base. No one but the elderly in motorized wheel chairs came to the store. They zoomed down aisles, knocked over displays, and didn’t acknowledge the mess they had made. My mom cleaned up their messes, worked as a cashier, and stocked the shelves with seasonal and holiday products. She brought home holiday cards and decorations that didn’t sell. Every holiday we had every kind of decoration imaginable and we used the leftover cards. On Halloween, we set out candles and giant plush candy corn figures that sang the “Monster Mash.” At Christmas we had dozens of advent calendars push pinned to walls, and ornaments hanging off bookshelves and tacked to other walls because our plastic Christmas tree couldn’t bear one more ornament. On Valentines Day, our house was decorated with different sized Polar bears with hearts stitched to their bellies that said “I love you Beary Much,” when you pushed their stomachs.

Every holiday was over the top in those years because my parents didn't like to throw anything away, even if it wasn't ours to begin with. This holiday décor was present months before any holiday as a way to cover the disarray in our house. The decorations hid broken chairs, the piles of books overwhelming bookshelves made with compressed wood, the different colored carpet my father had sewn together from carpet samples and installed himself.

It was difficult for my mom to be ill in all this household disarray. A few weeks after we sat down in the living room and listened to this news, my mom arrived home from the hospital. Earlier in the day we each tried to help clean the house as best we could. My brother washed endless loads of bathroom towels, and hung them outside to dry on the clotheslines. My sister vacuumed the carpet with the broken vacuum my dad had found in a dumpster at a hotel where he had installed carpet. I did the dishes in the sink and stacked them to dry in the dishwasher that no longer worked. After we finished our tasks, we looked around to see if there was anything more we could do. But nothing could be done. Our home looked like one of those Halloween haystack mazes, except instead of hay we had stacks of books and furniture, and bags of things my parents had said they would donate to charity a few years before when we had failed to have a garage sale. I grabbed most of the bags and stacked them behind the couch on top of other crap like a typewriter from the 1980's, baskets filled with empty wooden picture frames, and others filled with family photos. It wasn't any use moving or shuffling anything around—we all still had to walk sideways to squeeze around each other and any object in each room.

All three of us kids watched the clock throughout the day, and we asked each other what time Dad had said he would bring Mom home. After we were done cleaning, we sat on the couch looking at each other wondering what to do. Every car we heard go down the street made us spring off the couch to look out the front window. Whoever got there first would turn around and say “Not her.” The other two would echo, “Not her.” “Not her.”

At last they came as it was getting dark. My sister had fallen asleep on the couch. My brother and I went to the door, peered outside, and saw our dad collecting our mom from the passenger’s side of the car. He placed his arm around her back, and led her inside. She was wearing a blue hospital smock. Her left arm lay in a sling across her chest, and she had a small IV tube attached to her arm running along to her chest. Her face was pale and contrasted her red bangs. I unhitched the screen door and my dad slowly led my mom into the house like a ninety-year-old woman with a walker. My dad’s hair was greasy, and his shirt had splotches of dried blood here and there. His work pants looked more faded than ever.

“Hi, honey,” my mom croaked as she walked past.

“Hello,” my dad said as if they had been away on vacation for a few days.

My brother and I stood silent, and my dad led my mom to the couch. My sister had woken, and was sitting with her hands folded in her lap. Her eyes were wide like they were on those nights when she sat straight up in bed and hysterically talked in her sleep until my dad came in the room to calm her down. We all sat, my brother and I trying not to look at my mom or at each other, sitting with our hands fidgeting together,

looking as though we all didn't know each other and had only met for the first time moments ago.

But then my brother made a disgusted face when he saw the tube filled with yellow pus, and said, "What is that?" He squeezed his shoulders into his sides and pointed at the tube.

"Dirk!" I hit his arm.

"It's ok. The tube is there to drain the fluid that built up." My dad patted my brother on the shoulder and my brother released his shoulders, though his face was still tense.

"Everything is ok." My mom's voice was barely audible over our heavy breathing.

"The surgery went well and your mom will go back in a few days so the doctors can remove the tubes and continue with chemotherapy." My dad rubbed my mom's leg.

"I think I need to go lay down." My mom turned to my dad who stood to help her up.

They walked together towards their bedroom, and my brother and I got up and walked a few paces forward, like we were creeping up to something we weren't allowed to see.

"I'll be alright. I need to get some rest right now, that's all," said my mom, her slippers making small slaps on the floor. She and my dad turned sideways to slide around one of the bookshelves that stood out from the wall, a few feet from the dining room table. My mom hit the side with her arm.

“Careful, Ruth, careful.” My dad reached over to protect her arm.

“I’m ok.” She rounded the corner and the tube connected to her arm snagged on one of the oversized books on the shelf. It popped out of her skin and fell to the floor. The fluids began to drip out, and her hospital gown became soaked in red and yellow colors. My parents continued to make their way to the room, oblivious to the liquid flowing out.

“Mom!” I shouted and ran to her, but stopped before I got too close. Panic heaved from my chest.

My sister screamed. My brother made a howl.

My dad turned and looked at her, noticing what had happened. He turned her around as quickly as she could move with him, and said, “That’s all right; we’ll go back to the hospital.”

My mom hobbled to the door, the left side of her hospital gown damp and creasing wherever blood had soaked through. I felt nauseous.

My brother turned away and yelled “God Mom!”

My sister screamed higher and ran to the couch.

“It’s ok,” my mom said and tried to reach her arm to my brother. My dad told her to stop before she opened the stitches any more.

“Geeeeessee,” my brother said and hunched his shoulders. “Why don’t you be careful?”

“Dirk, it’s ok. Toby, go and get a towel for us.” My dad opened the front door. “Can you step down Ruth?” My dad held onto my mom as she slowly stepped down on our front porch.

“Toby get a towel now!” my dad turned to me. I didn’t move. He said to my mom, “I’m going to set you in the car, Ruth, then get a towel. I’ll be right back.”

“An old beach towel,” my mom whispered.

“All right.”

I leaned against the bookshelf, and my dad rushed past me back inside. He slammed open the closet door and grabbed the first towel he got his hands on. “We’ll be back.” He went to the car, which then squealed down the street, the engine coughing with speed.

I moved away from the bookshelf and stepped into blood that had dripped onto the floor.

“Why couldn’t Mom be careful?” my brother asked and went to the kitchen. I lifted my foot and stared at the blood soaking through my sock. My brother came back with a roll of paper towels and began to wrap his hand and arm into a paper boxing glove. He swiped the floor back and forth and my sister came over to watch.

During the coming days, my siblings and I tiptoed around my mom. I went to school in the morning and when I came home, I immediately rushed off to my room. If my mom was lying in her darkened bedroom, keeled over from a day of chemo, we pretended not to hear her hoarse calls to us through the door. Other days she would lie on the couch and we couldn’t avoid seeing her. She would try to make jokes about her hair

that flew around the house and collected in small tumbleweeds. “I’m like a cat,” she said to us. We only nodded. It was winter when she stopped shedding. During the day she wore a wig three shades too dark, and it made her scalp itch all day. At night, she wore a knitted cap that looked like it belonged on the top of a newborn’s head. But then one day during the spring, when it was humid, she took the cap off. My mom, my brother, and I were sitting on the couch watching television.

“That makes me uncomfortable, Mom,” my brother said. “Can you please put a hat on?”

“It’s ninety degrees, Dirk. I’m not putting a hat on.”

My brother puckered his body together and pinched his face. His legs shook and he kept sneaking peeks at my mom. I sat between them holding onto a metal bowl of popcorn.

“Dirk it’s all right.” My mom bent over towards me for the popcorn bowl and my eyes fell inside the nightgown she was wearing.

I saw her flat chest and gasped.

“Mom, we can see everything,” my brother said and hurried off to his room.

“Well I’m sorry, Dirk,” she called after him.

I picked at the bowl of popcorn, slowly putting kernels into my mouth. I heard the laughter on the television. My mom asked for the bowl of popcorn. When I didn’t move, she got up and plucked it from my hands. I looked at my mom watching television and then felt my chest. I rubbed my breasts and tried to picture what it would be like to have one gone.

“Toby, can you come to my room for a moment? I have something to show you.”

I turned to my mom. She smiled at me. Her eyebrows were gone. She waited for me to follow, and we both went to her room. She shut the door behind us and opened her dresser drawer. The handles jingled the familiar sound they’d always made whenever I followed my mom to her room to borrow some nail polish or a headband or a brush. Now she was bent over in her pink nightgown pulling out a long white box. She set it on the bed and patted the sheets for me to sit down. I crawled on the bed to where she sat and she opened the box, unfolded the white tissue paper inside, and pulled out a bra. It was shaped like a regular bra, except the left cup was completely padded.

“Touch it.” My mom held it out to me. I hesitated. She lay the bra across my hand. “The cancer society sent me this to wear. It’s a bit heavy on the one side, but at least it’s not itchy like my wig.” The left cup felt like a water balloon. I handed the bra back to my mom and she put it away. She pulled out a blue scarf from her drawer and tied it onto her head. She turned around and she almost looked like she always had. Then she placed her hand on the flat side of her chest, patting lightly. “This is not something to be scared of. The time to be scared is over.”

A week after her surgery, I came home from a trip to the mall with friends and headed to the bathroom. I pushed the door open and found my dad inside giving my mom a bath. He was on one knee and my mom was sitting in the tub, her body slightly bent forward. Her red hair was damp and long past her shoulders. Her bangs fell in her eyes. I looked to the wall. Our bathroom had been in the middle of a renovation when

my mom was diagnosed. The renovation halted and we took showers and baths surrounded by paint peeling off walls, exposed beams, and mildew.

“Sorry, Mom.”

“That’s ok,” my dad answered, “We’re having a little bath.” I watched my dad soak a yellow sponge in the water. He raised my mom’s right arm slightly and gently dabbed around her right breast. He squeezed water down her left shoulder where it flowed over her healing skin.

I remember the moment when my mom told me about Abraham. She met him at one of her cancer survivor meetings. He had survived lung cancer and went to those meetings because he had no one else to speak with. My mom began attending them consistently after my dad died. Before she’d only gone on occasion. After my dad died, she used the meetings as a network for people whose spouses died.

“You’re supposed to go there to talk about your experiences with cancer—not pick up men.” I had come over earlier in the day with Caroline to inform my mom that I had finished sorting through all of my dad’s things. We were in the kitchen she was having renovated—a promise my dad had made to her several years before.

“I didn’t plan for this to happen, Toby.” Caroline sat in her lap, and my mom was feeding her a banana. Caroline mushed the pieces in her fingers and licked her hands.

“What about Dad?” I looked around at the fragmented kitchen. Boards from the old cabinets were stacked outside the house, and grey laminated countertops were nestled in a pile alongside them. Inside, the window shades had been taken down, the fridge

removed, the pantry my dad made out of stacked plywood was gone, and the walls that had been white were now half painted in mint green.

“What would you like me to do, Toby?” My mom handed Caroline to me, who whined when being placed back into my arms. My mom grabbed the bowl of mashed bananas and walked to the sink.

“I’d like you to think of Dad.” I walked to where she stood over the new sink, which you touched to turn on. It replaced the swan shaped one my dad had installed a year after my mom got better. “We’re half way there to your new kitchen,” he had told my mom.

“Isn’t this amazing?” my mom asked, showing me the new sink the day it was installed.

“Where’s Dad’s sink?” I asked and went outside and found it on top of the pile of countertops.

“Oh, your father wouldn’t mind,” she had said after she followed me to where I had found the old sink.

“I’d like you to think how Dad feels about you seeing some other man.”

“He’s dead, Toby. How can he feel?”

I didn’t answer. I grabbed my purse and collected Caroline. I pushed in the chair to the bench the workers had set up to cut wood on. I was about to go when my mom stopped me.

“The cancer came back, Toby. And I can’t do it alone.”

“How’s my mom?” I asked Peter, getting up from the couch as he walked past.

“She’s fine.” He set his keys down on the coffee table and took off his coat. He unbuttoned his collared shirt and I glanced away. He caught me glancing away and huffed. “Why do you care? We’re still married.”

“I’ll sign the divorce papers.”

He laughed.

“Did my mom ask about me?”

“I told her you were in one piece.”

I was sitting on the couch, my feet touching the side. Peter sat across from me on top of the coffee table. I used to hate when he did that. He always left scratches on the lacquer. The house was dark, but it was always dark because the windows didn’t face the sun. There was a light stand in the corner by the fireplace, but Peter didn’t go to turn the light on.

Peter didn’t know that I had left him once before. It had happened on our wedding day seven years before. We were getting married at the Lutheran church I had been brought up in. I was four months pregnant, and we had chosen September because we thought the weather would be nice enough—not too hot and not too cool. But it was a sweltering day. The gown of my frosty green dress stuck to my belly like papier-mâché. I felt like those chalky mints they set out as party favors, the ones that melt in the mouth after five seconds. I wore a halo of daisies and sunflowers wrapped around my head, which had drooping petals. My hair stuck to my neck. My feet were swollen and I couldn’t get them into my shoes. I walked around in flip-flops at my parents’ house. I had decided to stay at my parents’ house those few days leading up to the wedding, and

Peter had stayed back at our apartment. My mom had left earlier in the day to make sure everything was ready at the church, and my brother and sister had gone with her. Peter had phoned earlier to let me know he looked like James Bond in his tux.

The only person in the house with me was my dad. He stood on the porch smoking a cigar. I went to the screen door and opened it. He turned around to the creak of the thin metal, and I stepped out, letting it bang on the doorframe.

“You don’t want to smell like smoke.” My dad puffed on the brown wad, turned, and blew smoke away from me.

“I don’t care. I already smell anyways.” I walked over to where he was. He put out the cigar and swatted away the leftover swirls of smoke. He was wearing the suit he had worn for years on occasions that required one. His hair was combed and looked like he had smeared a bit of grease in it to get the cowlicks to stay smooth. His mustache looked combed, too, and the rest of his face was clean-shaven.

“So you’re going to be married, huh?” He huffed and squinted his eyes at me.

“Yep.” I walked up to his chest and lay my head on it. He smelled like spiced deodorant and cigars.

He took my hand in his palm and sighed. “I was telling your mother yesterday about the times I would drive around on errands and you were sitting in the front in your little bassinet car seat, watching me with those moo-cow eyes. You watched me to make sure I didn’t make any mistakes.” He brushed my slender fingers with his rough calloused hands. “You never took your eyes off me.” The sun filtered through the plastic sunroof he had added on to the front of the house when I was little. The heat from the

sun hit the top of my head and my face sweated onto my dad's suit, leaving makeup behind when I lifted my face.

"Sorry, dad," I said as I tried to wipe it away with the hanky my mom had given me earlier.

"That's all right." My dad patted my back and began to walk inside.

I called to him, "Why haven't you asked why I left?" He turned to me and I played with the lace layered over my dress.

"It doesn't matter. You came back."

"You and Mom aren't mad?"

"We are never mad." He opened the screen and it squeaked once again and hit the doorframe as he let go of it and walked into the living room. I stayed on the porch and rested my hand on the wooden beam holding up the sunroof.

I stood there and thought about what Peter had said earlier over the phone.

"I wish my mom could be here." He exhaled into the phone.

"I know, but it was nice of her to send those dishes for us."

"Yeah."

"Did you find your red pocket square?" I tried to move the conversation away from his mom.

I looked across the street to the house of an old friend, another person who couldn't be at my wedding either. Her name was Melba. She was a neighbor who worked as a sales rep for a gym. Growing up I had spoken to her on occasion, and usually the conversation started with her yelling to me from across the street as I walked

home from school. She lived alone. The rumor down the street was that her husband left her for someone younger. But I learned he left for a different reason. This reason came to light after our relationship developed into something more than shouting back and forth to one another. One day I was walking home with Simone from high school, and she called to me from across the street.

“How’s your mom feeling?” she called from the yellowed grass she was watering. Her hair was in tight curls around her head and she wore a pair of glasses with clear rims. She wore a tight dress and her finger and toenails were painted bright red.

I didn’t think anyone knew about what had happened with my mom. She never spoke about it outside the house, and even at home we regarded the topic like a piece of leftover fruitcake from Christmas.

“She’s fine.” I kept walking.

“You like that sweater a lot?” she called, and Simone giggled. I was wearing the same red sweatshirt I had been excited about two years earlier, which now had frayed sleeves and stains decorating the front.

“What does it matter to you?”

Melba set down her hose and walked back inside her house. I thought I had hurt her feelings and was at first glad about it until Simone nudged me and told me I should go and apologize.

“What for?” I said. It was the last thing I needed—to feel sorry for someone I barely knew. But before I could begin to cross the wet grass, Melba opened her screen

door and pulled out a brown bag labeled with an expensive department store name across the front. She walked over and held it out to me.

“Here,” she said. “I bought this jacket a few months ago and I never wear it. I thought you might like to have it.”

I wrapped my hands over the twisted handles. It was the bag I saw certain girls and women carry around the mall whenever I went with Simone or my parents. I pulled out a cropped blue denim jacket with small sequins on the pockets.

“Is that what I think it is?” Simone gasped and grabbed a sleeve in her hands.

“Yes. It’s the jacket that made the company famous. It might not be your style, though...” Melba stood with her arms folded at her chest.

The jacket was soft between my fingers and smelled like a department store—new and absent of lavender or jasmine detergents. I placed the jacket back inside the bag. The strings molded to the inside of my hand.

“Thanks.” I took off my backpack and bent, stuffing the paper bag inside. Then I straightened to face her. I walked away and she called to me. I turned back around.

“Toby—if you ever want to make a few extra bucks, I need some help around this time. I sell gym memberships to people by phone and I go to different businesses to market the memberships. Maybe you could use the money for something.” She glanced at the backpack slung across my shoulder.

“Sure—maybe.” I turned and walked.

“That was weird,” Simone said when we were a good distance away.

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to help her?”

“I don’t know.”

“If you don’t I’ll go over there and make some money. There are these shoes I want to buy at the mall.”

“She asked me, not you.”

“I wonder why.”

“I don’t know.”

The next day, Melba was sitting on her porch swing as I passed by coming home from school.

“You ready to make your first cold call?” she shouted.

“I can’t—I have to get home.” I lied. I was startled by her presence. She spoke to everyone on the street and yet no one knew anything about her except for her name.

“You like the jacket?” she called.

“It’s ok.” I replied and looked away. I had forgotten to take it off when I got to our street. I didn’t want her to see me wearing it. I had gone home the day before and carefully placed the jacket in my closet, after leaving Simone’s house where we had taken turns trying it on in front of her bedroom mirror.

“I thought you were going to help me.” Melba scratched her forehead and I watched wisps of brown curls float down to her shoulders.

“I didn’t say yes.”

“Are you scared?”

I shook my head no.

“Well, come on, I only have a few hours to get these calls done.” She walked to her house. “I’ll make you a sandwich. You ever eat prosciutto?”

I told her I needed to tell my mom where I was and I’d be back in a few minutes. I found my mom lying on the living room couch, a wet washcloth across her eyes.

I touched her shoulder. “Mom?” I whispered.

She adjusted herself on the couch. “There’s pinto beans and white rice on the stove if you’re hungry.”

“Ok. Are you feeling all right?” The room was dark.

“I have a little migraine.”

It was one year after she recovered from cancer, but the after effects from chemo lingered.

“I’m going to go help the woman who lives across the street plant some rosebushes.” I didn’t want my mom to know what I was actually doing.

“Who? Melba?”

“Yes.”

“All right. But before you go can you make me some hot tea?”

“Yes.” I went to the kitchen. I boiled some water, poured it into a mug, and placed a tea bag inside the cup. I walked back to the living room and set it on the coffee table my grandma had given us when she finally moved out of her apartment that had caught fire a few years ago and into a condo. The table had scratches dug into its laminated surface and stains from food and drinks decorating the top.

I set my backpack in my room and walked through the house past my mom sleeping on the couch with a hot towel on her head, not having stirred yet to sip her tea. I opened the screen door quietly and clicked it shut. I walked across the street and onto the lawn where I saw Melba wave from the window, holding up a plate with food on it. I nodded and went inside a gated porch to her front door. Above the door hung a plank of wood with cursive lettering, which said: "Shit goes fast."

She opened the door and let me in. I looked about her empty house. I imagined our house would look like this without all our stuff. She had only a couch and a TV in the living room, and a tall lamp against the wall to the far right. She led me into the kitchen. It had been recently renovated. Everything was oversized. The cabinets were abnormally large, the refrigerator was a beast, and the dining table took up the most room.

"Sit here." She pulled out a stool from the large black table. I went over and she placed the plate of food in front of me. The sandwich was hot and had layers of prosciutto and pastrami underneath cheese and pesto. It was salty and the meat soft.

"You like it?"

"Yes." I took another bite and shoved a few cheese puffs into my mouth. The only chips we had at home were pretzels.

"Good." She pulled out a stool and sat beside me, sipping on a coke and sliding one to me. We had only apple juice as a sweet drink in our house. She turned to the counter and picked up a black phone and placed it on the table in front of us. "Have you ever had a job before?"

“No.”

“I didn’t think so. Well, it’s time to learn.”

“Why did you ask me?” I said between bites of food.

“You looked like a good kid. All you have to do is dial this list of numbers and read from this script. It’s ok if no one takes you up on these memberships the first time around. You’ll get better with time. Then after that, I need you to write some business postcards. I listed the addresses on this sheet here, and I need you to copy this sales deal I wrote at the bottom here.” She pointed to all of the paperwork I would need to follow. “I have to go make a few phone calls myself, but I will come back and check on you in a little bit.” She got up and went into another room.

I looked at the sheets of paper on which she had written everything. I finished the sandwich and took a swig of coke. I turned to where she had gone. I heard the faint sound of the TV in the room and turned back to the table and all the work that lay before me. The phone gleamed under the lights from the ceiling fan above and I picked up the receiver, dialed the number, and grabbed the paper I was supposed to read from. I was skimming it as someone answered.

“Hello?”

“Hello. May I speak to Mr. or Mrs. Kans-st-no-pie?”

The person on the line sighed and I heard a click then the dial tone. The next few people either yelled at me for calling or told me that ‘for the hundredth time’ they were not interested.

After hearing insults and angered voices from people I'd never met, I set down the phone and went to tell Melba I quit. I knocked on the door. There wasn't an answer, so I pushed the door open and went in. The television was on and the light from the screen pointed at Melba lying asleep on her bed. She had her arms across her chest positioned like someone in a coffin.

"Melba?" I crept closer and noticed bandaids on her arm where blood had been drawn. Her tank top had fallen low to her chest, and she had a bump I recognized on her chest. I knew that was where the doctors inserted the needles for chemo. I looked around her sheets and saw the pillows were blanketed in scattered hairs. I gently touched Melba and she coughed herself awake.

"I'm leaving." I said and stepped back from the bed. "I quit."

"What happened?" She blinked her eyes and grabbed her glasses from the bedside table.

"People are rude. I don't want to make money after all."

"You can't give up so easily." She lifted herself off the bed, but stood up too fast and sat back down.

"Are you ok?"

"No, I'm not." She rubbed her forehead. "Wait here." She walked to her bathroom and closed the door. I heard small heaves and something cascading into the toilet. She came back out wiping her mouth with a towel. "Look—I need your help. I'm having trouble working since the surgery and the chemo. They told me I could work from home, but it's been difficult." She sat on the bed and threw the spit-filled towel in

the corner of the room. “I had heard about the situation with your mom and thought you might be able to understand and help.”

I remembered when my mom was sick I had avoided the situation as best I could. I had never seen or heard my mom throw up. She had kept such a scene locked in her bedroom, and I only ducked in there on occasion. Even then I hadn’t stayed too long in the pitch black room where an empty ice cream bucket sat beside the bed she lay on, a white trash bag lining it and glinting in the slit of light from the drawn blinds.

“I can pay you a hundred dollars a week to start. Just don’t take what people say to heart—they don’t know you and you don’t know them.”

The only time I ever had that kind of money was on my birthday and maybe at Christmas.

“Fine, I’ll do it.”

“Good.” She got up from the bed. She went to her dresser drawer and took out a small change purse. She turned and handed me a crisp bill. “Here’s something for today and for taking that jacket off my hands.” I felt the paper and walked out her door.

“See you tomorrow,” I said and looked at the bill. It was twenty dollars.

I learned Melba had bone cancer. I went to her house almost every day for five years. I helped her make calls and fill out cards until the gym let her go for an extended vacation. I remember the day they fired her. She came home from the gym, gunning down the street and into her driveway. She had given me a key, and I was already at the kitchen table dialing a number when she slammed her car door and rushed inside. She opened the front door, slammed that too, and went to her bedroom. She closed the door

and I heard a scream and objects thrown around. I walked to the door, knocked and went inside.

“What am I going to do now?” she asked, mascara streaming down her face.

I gave no answer. I wanted to leave, but I couldn't stop watching her bat around the room. After a few moments, she calmed down. She sat on her bed, pulled the wig off her head, and launched it defiantly across the room. “I don't need that anymore.” She wiped her face and smiled. “There's always disability.” She got up and beckoned me to follow. We walked to the kitchen where she took out a bottle of vodka and two shot glasses. “Drink,” she said and handed me the glass. That was who she was—even on days when she wasn't fired and her cancer hadn't made her sick. She set problems aside and moved on. And later when she learned there was nothing more that could be done to prolong her life, she screamed and then accepted death too. At least I believe so because that was the Melba I saw. I didn't want to think about the Melba I didn't know, the Melba who experienced illness by herself, whose friends had come over less and less as things got worse.

I found Melba one day on the bathroom floor, her body curled around the toilet. The bathroom smelled like hot garbage. I touched Melba and her arm was hard like a piece of wood. Her eyes and mouth were open, and there was spit on the floor. I ran across the street to get my mom, who came over and told me to phone the police. An ambulance came and the police found pills clenched in her fist. They covered her whole body with a sheet, lifted her onto a cart, and pushed the cart out of the room.

My wedding gown covered my body like that sheet. I wanted to get out of it. I left the porch and went back inside. My mom had turned on the box fan before she left, and my dad turned on another small metal one, and pointed the air towards me.

“Thanks, Dad.” My makeup beaded down my face to my neck and I wiped the sweat with the white hanky, stained with lipstick, mascara, and foundation. I looked out the window to Melba’s house, now sitting vacant. Last I’d heard her family was still fighting about who got what.

The clock in the living room beeped and told us it was time to get to the church. My dad sat on the couch with his eyes closed and I went to wake him up.

“Daddy?” I pressed my fingers on his chest.

He stirred and opened his eyes.

“It’s time to go to the church.”

“Ok.” He smiled and his eyes began to water.

“I was having a dream about the time you left me standing in the mall alone. We were leaving the mall and you noticed some toys in the window at one of the stores, yanked your hand out of mine, and ran over. I called to you and said we were leaving. You turned and waved to me. You had your thumb in your mouth. I said, ‘Ok, bye Toby’ because I thought it would make you come—the fear of being left there. But no, you only stood there and waved. My heart went to a million pieces.”

I kissed his wet forehead. It was hot like he had a fever. “Are you feeling all right?”

“It’s only the heat.” He got up and walked to the kitchen. I heard the fridge open and he came out with my bouquet we had placed in there to stay fresh. “Maybe we should put this inside the cooler with some ice.”

“You remember our wedding day?” I asked Peter.

“A little.” He picked at the cuticle on his thumb. “I remember the heat the most.”

“Your tux was soaked.”

“Your bouquet wilted.”

“The best man was late. Good choice by the way.” I smiled. I remembered how his friend Craig rushed down the aisle after Peter and I had to skip putting the ring on our finger.

“You were late too.”

“Yeah.” I looked away.

“I should have known then.”

“I’m sorry,” I replied.

“And you left that time Caroline had the flu.”

My breath quickened. My chest felt like someone was sitting on it.

“You could have spoken to me.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t.”

“So can you tell me now?”

“What?”

“Where you were this time?”

I was taking Caroline to the day care when I received the news from my mom. I drove up to the house and everything looked the same. There was the porch with the plastic roof, the metal screen door, the potted cacti with pinwheels spinning around in the fall wind. Caroline was in the back seat babbling at me, and I turned to look at her. Beady eyes stared back at me and I got out of the car, opened her door, picked her up, and walked up the drive. The gravel crunched underneath my feet. I noticed a cigar sitting inside a potted plant. I opened the screen door and stepped inside.

My mom had all the lights on even though it was bright outside. I looked around and could tell there had been other people in the house—stacks of junk had been moved around to accommodate moving a body out. I turned to the couch and saw my brother sitting with his hands folded on top of his lap. His right leg bounced and he kept glancing around the room, first at me, then at my mom, then at the wall, then at his hands. He kept asking my mom over and over again what was going to happen to his dad's body, and my mom finally turned to him, her voice sharp, and told him she didn't know. Caroline looked around at all of us and instantly began to cry. I picked her up and swung her back and forth in my arms. I looked toward the bedroom. I asked if Maxine was coming home from Europe; my Mom said she hadn't called her yet. Then we sat there and I watched the sun move across the room.

It's different when another relative, like a grandma or an uncle, dies. There is a distance. This death was too close. It felt like someone was crushing my chest. There were four people in the house, but it felt empty. Our ears were fixed on every sound as if any sound could be the sound of my dad sitting in the next room. I listened to Caroline

breathing comfortably in her sleep. My brother rocked a bit on the couch. My mom sat at the table and stared ahead. This was the first time I hadn't seen my mom doing something—whether she was reading a newspaper, watering her plants, making food, or watching television. When her mom had died and we all went to her house to stay with my grandpa until the funeral, she was constantly doing something: running a load of laundry, washing dishes, sweeping the floor, taking a walk. But now she sat and we all sat too.

A week later we sat across from each other again, trying to decide what to do next with our lives. We were sitting at the dining table. I kept asking my mom what we were planning to do.

“We don't need to have a funeral,” my mom said.

“Don't you think Dad's relatives will want some kind of closure?”

“What closure? He's not here anymore. They can come over if they want to make sure.”

I had never heard my mom speak like this before.

“I can organize a little something, Mom. You don't need to worry.” I reached over and patted her hand. My mom's hair hadn't been brushed in a few days. Her hair had grown back brown and wavy after the chemo was over. It looked thin and it was messy around her scalp, making her resemble a disgruntled child who had been awoken too early from a nap. She didn't have a bra on. Her right breast hung low and grazed the table when she leaned forward. She looked frailer as passing days spaced more time away from her life with my dad.

“Aren’t you going to take off?” She stared at me.

“What?”

“Aren’t you going to do what you normally do?” Her green eyes looked up to my face. She laughed. “Your dad told me not to pester you. ‘Don’t pester her about it. She’s back now,’ he said, ‘that’s all that matters.’ Well he’s gone now, so I want to know.”

“Does it matter?” I asked Peter.

“It would help me move on,” he said.

Morris was around the same age as my dad had been when he died. Morris had wrinkles wrapped around his blue eyes and a white mustache. He drove up in a rusted blue pickup. Penelope opened the front door and led him inside. “We have a new tenant.”

He carried in two paper bags and set them on the table. “Hello, I’m Morris.” He stuck out a hand to me. He was wearing jeans and a blue collared shirt.

I got up from the table and took his hand in mine. “I’m Toby.”

“What are you doing out here?” He began to take food from the bags and put it away in the cabinets.

“I heard about this place from a friend. I thought I would come and check it out.”

He turned around from one of the cabinets. “You don’t come all the way out here to check it out. There’s a reason.”

“I need a place to hide for a little while.”

Penelope walked towards Morris. Morris looked at Penelope and Penelope at Morris. I didn't know if I had said the right thing.

"We can help you with that," Penelope said, putting an arm around Morris's shoulders.

We sat around the table and Penelope and Morris opened cans of fruits and vegetables with rusted can openers.

"This was the most I could get today," Morris said while eating.

"You did good," Penelope said, patting his shoulder. "Toby can you pass me some crackers?"

I slid the package over to her. "Where did you get this food?"

"When you're done eating we'll walk you around and introduce you to a few people." Penelope eyed me while taking out a cracker. She slid them back to me and I took one out. I looked at Morris who was eating slow, watching me.

"Ok." I didn't ask any more questions.

Penelope took my hand and led me outside. It was now late afternoon and the temperature had dropped with the sun. Everything had a blue tint. Morris stayed back at Penelope's to clean up the food and take a bath.

"You guys have running water?"

"Not at the moment. We take water from the sea and boil it."

She led me onto the porch of the first house, a slender, metal mobile home with dents and brown rust along its sides. It looked like the skin of cows grazing at a destitute farm I had driven past coming here. There were smashed soda cans hung from strings

that clanked against one another when the wind picked up. Stacked to the side of the mobile were a large kitchen sink, a table with a few box television sets with turn dials set on top, a couple of frayed lawn chairs, a small green refrigerator, and a collapsible baby stroller with red handles.

Penelope knocked on the front door. It looked like a plank of wood found by the side of the road. There was a chunk of it missing at the bottom left corner.

The door opened and a large woman stood holding a small child, a girl about Caroline's age. "What is it Penelope?" She looked tired. Her hair was hanging in her face and she was wearing a peach colored nightgown.

"I wanted to introduce you to our new neighbor."

The woman stepped down from the porch and set her child next to her. The child wore a red tank top with blue jeans cut into shorts, and sandals on her feet.

"Toby," Penelope pointed to me and then at the woman, "this is Barbara. Barbara this is Toby."

"Nice to meet you," I said and extended a hand. Barbara took it and we shook.

"Would you like to come in for some tea? Morris brought it over a little while ago."

"No, no, you enjoy that. We just ate." Penelope bent down to the young child. "And how are you, Sylvia?"

"She wants to be called Patricia today," Barbara said, putting her hands on her hips. Penelope looked up at her. Barbara nodded her head then looked at me.

"What's Jeff been up to these days?" Penelope asked Barbara.

“He stopped in a few days ago. He doesn’t like to stay long.” She bent down to her child. “He doesn’t like to stay around here much anymore. We might be leaving with him the next time he comes back.”

“It seems about time.” Penelope sat on the floor next to the child. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you Patricia?”

“She likes to be called Patsy for short.” Barbara sat down next to both of them and stared up at me. “What is she doing here?” she asked Penelope.

Penelope stared up at me. “I don’t think she knows quite yet. Not like you or anyone else. It takes time to figure that out.”

“Don’t I know it,” Barbara huffed. “Jeff brought us out here about three years ago and I didn’t know what to think. But now he’s the one who comes here less and less while I sit inside or walk around here with Patsy.” She brushed the little girl’s hair out of her face. “Do you have any children Toby?” She turned her gaze towards me. The whites of her eyes were yellowed and when she smiled I saw there was tar collected on the outer edges of her front teeth.

“One.”

“Is she here with you?”

“No—she’s at home with her dad.”

She nodded like she understood.

Penelope nodded, handed the child another stick to put on top of the small castle she was building, spread her hands on her knees, and hoisted herself back up. “We’re going to go meet the rest of the folks. You want to join us?”

“No—it’s going to be time for dinner and then bed. Where are you staying Toby?”

“She’s staying at the Pinkerton’s place.” Penelope answered for me.

“Nice place over there.” The woman nodded at me.

I nodded back.

“See you around.” Penelope grabbed my hand again and placed my arm inside hers. “Let’s go see who else is around.”

During the next few hours Penelope took me to more houses to meet more people who were either living alone or had brought someone out here with them. Some of the homes were mobiles much like Barbara’s. Others were bigger homes like Penelope’s and the Pinkerton’s. Each had junk in front and within. Old television sets sat blank with inches of sand caked on their tops, the screens dusted with similar sediment. Couches with missing arms looked like they had baked in the sun. There was a dishwasher in the front of one house, its drawer open, like someone had forgotten to close it after putting clean dishes away. Here, there was no use for these things and so they sat. These people were like the homeless back home that lived each day pushing their possessions either in shopping carts or baby strollers. I wondered what they did with any of it. What use was a metal sink? What use a blender? A microwave? A television?

Penelope took me back to the Pinkerton estate, as she called it. It was dark now and she led me inside to the kitchen where she took out some candles from underneath the sink. The wind howled and curled itself around the house. Penelope lit a candle and

her face turned white behind it. She was a ghost and all these people living here were too—phantoms of people they used to be.

“You can look around the house for anything you need, and if you need something you can’t find you can come and ask me or Morris for it.” Penelope handed me the candle and put a few others onto the table next to a matchbox. “In the morning, you can come over to my place for breakfast.” She nodded toward me, waved, turned out the door, and was gone.

I sat in the house reddened by the glow of candles. It was cold and I went to the car to grab a jacket. I pulled out my belongings that were stuffed inside the white trash bags. I had brought a week’s worth of clothes, some food, and a couple of blankets in case I had needed to sleep in the car on the way here. I looked out the open door, towards the sea. I heard the faint sound of flies hovering over the decaying fish. The smell of these fish and salt water nauseated me. As night brought the smell, I paused from pulling my things out of the car. I brought the bags from the car into the house and sat on the easy chair in the living room. I felt something crawl over my feet and I climbed to stand on the chair. I thought about how far I was from civilization. I didn’t want to learn what these people were like. I wasn’t an anthropologist. I didn’t come here to study these people. This was a mistake.

I hurried back to my car and got in. I looked at the house and heard the sound of a child crying in the distance. Peter appeared in the kitchen of the house, cooking over the stove. I was at the table with Caroline. She was sitting in my lap, and I gave her some green beans to gnaw on. Peter came from the kitchen and set plates on the table.

He walked over and kissed my forehead. I looked up at him and kissed his lips. Caroline whined and we turned our attention to her. Peter picked her up and carried her to his chair and they both sat down. We ate and talked and laughed and ate some more.

I woke to Penelope drumming her knuckles on the window. I picked up my head from the steering wheel and felt a sharp pain in my neck. I looked at Penelope, who smiled at me and began to speak. I rolled down the window.

“Don’t you like the house?”

“The house is fine.”

“Then what are you doing sleeping in your car?”

“There was a rat.”

“They won’t bother you as long as you let them be.”

The wind picked up and the fish smell seeped through the open window. I rubbed my neck and opened the car door.

Penelope stepped back to let me out. “How ‘bout some breakfast?” she asked. She was wearing an apron. She scooped my arm in hers and I closed and locked the car. “No one is out here to steal cars. You seem ready to leave, but I want you to think about it at breakfast.”

I felt exhausted. My whole body seemed to sink to the ground as we walked in the glare of the early morning sun to Penelope’s dilapidated beach home. I heard the water moving along the pocket of sand it had carved itself into. It was a small rustle. The air was still and I could tell it was going to be a hot day. The backs of my shoulders were warm in the sun.

She sat me at her table once we were inside.

“Coffee?” She held out an electric kettle. It was white with a large chip down its side. Its black cord dangled to her feet and she stepped on it as she walked over to me, causing her to trip. “Damn cord,” she said as she set the kettle on the table.

She didn’t wait for a response from me, and poured the coffee into one of the small, diner-looking mugs. The cup was lukewarm and there was writing on its face: “Dingo’s Diner: Open 10 am to midnight.” I sipped the black liquid, feeling a gritty texture on my tongue and teeth. I spit it back into the cup after Penelope had turned to the stove. I didn’t know why I expected something better.

“Pancakes?” she asked and opened the oven. She lifted the lid to a tall pot, picked out something with her hand, and plopped it down on the plate resting on top of one of the stove burners. She turned around and I sat like I hadn’t been trying to decide whether to run now or stay put. “They’re a little thicker than I normally make them, but I figure you need a pick me up.” She slid the plate in front of me. “There you are. Loaded with nutrients.”

She turned back to the stove, opened the door, reached her hand into the pot, plopped a pancake down on her plate and walked over to the chair opposite me. I glanced at her, and her eyes told me she was waiting for me to be the first to cut out a piece, and let her know how delicious they were. Penelope handed me a plastic bottle of syrup. I soaked my pancake, letting it float in a pool of the sweet liquid, figuring it might help with whatever taste or texture the pancakes were going to have. I picked up the fork next to my plate and used its edge to press out a piece. Penelope grabbed a cloth napkin

from the table and laid it across her lap. She then placed her hands under her chin, and smiled at me. I put the slice into my mouth and paused before I chewed.

The tension in my stomach died with the relatively normal taste and consistency of the pancake. It wasn't fluffy or full of air pockets like the delicate pancakes my mom made for me or that I made for Caroline. It was dense but it wasn't atrocious. My stomach wanted more and I shoveled it in. I had not eaten since early the day before, and my body wanted anything.

"You're welcome," Penelope said to my eager appetite.

I cleared the last of the pancake and sipped the coffee.

"Satisfied?" Penelope got up and swooped my plate up from in front of me. I nodded and she went to put it in the sink. It was filled with dishes. I stared at them. "I usually do these every few days. It's a lot of work constantly lugging in buckets of water and then waiting for it to boil. And I have a large stock of kitchen ware so I never have the problem of running low on clean dishes." She sat down across from me and placed her hands underneath her chin. She stared at me and I stared back until I felt I needed to look in another direction.

"Now that you've had breakfast you can tell me the story of why you are here."

Penelope reached a hand to my arm to grab my attention.

I looked at her and she was smiling. "I don't know where to begin."

"Tell me about the day you left."

"I don't like that part."

"Then tell me what you want for right now. You'll say it all eventually."

I picked up my head and stared into her eyes. “I might not.” I didn’t like to be told what I would do—didn’t like it when I was younger, and especially didn’t like it now. But her face read like that of an old soul, someone who would pat my arm after I was done, give me a cookie, and tell me everything would be all right. She seemed trustworthy, but the sureness of her words made me want to scream.

“We’ll see.” Penelope let go of my arm, and sat back in her chair. “At least tell me something. After all, I welcomed you here with open arms, fed you, and gave you a place to stay. I’m only asking for a little, only a little bit for right now.” The wrinkles around her eyes creased even more as she smiled.

I leaned forward on the table and told her what I thought had brought me here. My dad had been dead for three months. My mom decided within that time to begin work to complete projects my dad had started but never finished. She called a few home improvement companies, compared estimates, shopped for selections of carpet, and bamboo floors. She tried to decide which color tile to fill the bathroom with, what type of furniture would look best inside the house. She worked on the bathroom first. She had the whole thing gutted, carving out all the work my dad had put in. I went with her occasionally to the hardware store, and she gleefully pushed around one of the large orange carts, making her way past all the people who had worked with my dad, strolling back and forth past his desk without batting an eye, stopping at aisles of paint, picking up sample pallets, turning and asking me, “Which do you like better? Mint green or pistachio?”

The bathroom wasn't the only renovation my mom worked to complete. Soon the house looked like a skeleton of its former self. My mom didn't want to finish one project before beginning the next. She wanted to rip it all out at once. I would drive over for a visit and every day see a new piece of our life on the porch, baking in the sun or growing mildew from the rain. Our couch cushions turned from a deep orange to a light yellow. The refrigerator, microwave, blender, toaster oven, lamps, sinks, toilets, and cabinets littered the area, looking like the garbage heap at the outskirts of town. People would walk up and knock on the door wanting to know if any of the things were for sale. My mom wouldn't even bat an eye, and she'd exclaim, "Take what you want!" One day I came over and she had hauled everything to the curb. She taped a FREE JUNK sign on the fridge.

Five months into all the projects, I came over to ask if she could watch Caroline while I went to the store. I couldn't find her in either of the rooms with the demolition men. The last room I checked was my parents'. She was sitting on the bed. The room still smelled like it had when I'd opened the door coming home from school or popped it open in the morning to find my parents talking in bed—a smell of both face cream and tobacco. The shelves lining the walls were stacked with books and photographs. I hadn't been in the room since my dad had passed, and his dresser hadn't been included in the things I went through. It still had a pile of papers, cigar boxes, and other trinkets on top. I opened the top drawer. It was filled with a few flannel tops, and pictures of my brother, sister, and me.

I glanced at my mom, and she had a photo in her hand. I went to the edge of the bed and sat next to her. The picture she held was inside a gold frame. It was our house. My mom, dad and brother were standing outside of it.

“This was taken the week we bought the house.” My mother pointed at the picture. She had a tissue crumpled in her hand.

“Dirk is picking his nose.” I pointed to my brother, then a small toddler.

Mom laughed. “He was always picking his nose.”

“Look at Dad’s mustache.”

“He had that when I met him, along with long hair. And a peace sign painted on his pickup.” She smiled.

I looked around the room. My mom’s desk was covered in old newspapers and a basket of clothes. Among the photographs on the shelf above was a picture of my dad dressed in his orange smock from work. It was the kind of picture the company where my dad worked wanted everyone to hang on the wall behind the registers. Underneath the photo my dad had written on a post-it note: ‘The Ignorant Rug Merchant.’

“What are you going to do to this room?”

“Not sure yet.”

“You don’t have to do anything.”

“He told me to do something.”

I looked around the room. “It could use some de-cluttering.” I turned to my dad’s dresser and pointed. Mom laughed. “I can help with that.”

My mom got up from the bed and went to the bathroom. I heard her pick up the small trashcan. She went over to her desk. “First I’ll get rid of my junk.” She lifted the newspapers and put them in the trash. There was no room left.

“I’ll go get the kitchen trash.” I left the room.

I passed the living room to go to the kitchen. My brother had Caroline in his lap, and he was reading to her. He read slowly and paused after every couple of words to breathe. I thought about the time when he was in high school and was reading to our younger sister. He had the same stammer. I was sitting at the table doing homework, and I turned to him and said, “I—am—Dirk and—I—read—so—slow.” He laughed with embarrassment. “Don’t make fun of how I read.” He pouted and kicked his legs.

Now Caroline was sitting in his lap, trying to turn the page. “The cow went—to the lake to drink—and it met its friend—along the—way.” He caught me watching them. “I’ve read this to her three times.”

“It’s her favorite.”

“I’m tired.”

Caroline gripped the page with her hand, and hit my brother’s with her small palm.

“Be a good Uncle, ok?”

“I’m always a good Uncle. What’s Mom doing?”

“Cleaning her bedroom.”

“Did she tell you that she’s in the middle of doing my room too?”

“You told me yesterday on the phone, remember?”

“It makes me sad.”

“Why? You wanted Mom and Dad to renovate your room for years.”

Caroline kept hitting Dirk’s hand.

“Hey. Ok—ok, I’ll keep reading.” He patted her hand off the corner of the page.

Dirk began to read again and I continued to the kitchen, grabbed the trashcan, and went back into my mom’s room.

I got ready to leave later in the evening after my mom had cleared off her dresser, and gone through most of the drawers in the two dressers she had. When she turned to the piles on my dad’s dresser, she said she would save that for another day.

I was folding some clothes when my mom came up to me and placed her hand on my arm. I turned to her.

“Thank you for helping today.”

“You’re welcome.” I smelled a whiff of tobacco and shook my head away from it. I glanced around the changed room. All that was left were a few of my mom’s cookbooks and the framed pictures. We’d hauled my dad’s shelved books out earlier.

“Thanks for sticking around. I know Dirk is glad—you guys were always close.”

“I’m not going anywhere mom.” I turned away from her. “Why do you keep saying that to me? That was in the past.”

“I’m saying I forgive you.”

She tried to put her arm around me and I walked out of the embrace. “I’ll be back tomorrow. It’s almost time for Peter to come home from work.” I went to the living room and noticed how bare the house looked. I had never noticed before how white the

walls were. The walls were even whiter where the pictures had been, inside the outlines of dust. Our home was large enough to accommodate all of us now. All we had to do to get rid of all the junk was to have someone die.

She followed after me. “Why don’t you call Peter and ask if he wants to come over here for dinner?”

I turned to her and her face was tense, and she had her arms wrapped around her chest like she was protecting herself from what I would say next.

“No mom. I need to get Caroline home to give her a bath and get her ready for bed. I’ll be back tomorrow.” I went to scoop Caroline off the couch. She was asleep in Dirk’s lap.

“Aww—why do you have to take her? She’s sleeping.” Dirk reached for her.

“She needs to take a bath, eat, and get into bed. It’s late.”

“How about she stays over for a sleepover?” Dirk smiled.

“No.” I grabbed her and placed her head on my shoulder.

Dirk’s smile faded. He looked embarrassed. “Maybe this weekend.”

I nodded. He smiled and handed her blanket to me. I covered her and turned back to my mom. She had her arms pinched to her stomach.

“Mom, I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Don’t leave.” She walked towards me, arms out.

“Are you leaving Toby?” Dirk got up from his chair.

“I told you both—I need to take Caroline home.” I grabbed the diaper bag on the kitchen table, its top littered with different colored tile and paint samples.

“She’ll come back tomorrow, Dirk.” My mom patted my brother on the head. He went back to the couch to watch a television show that followed cops. “I’ll walk you out,” my mom said.

I placed Caroline in her car seat. My mom lay a small object beside her. It was a green angel, one of the many duplicates she had that were in every room throughout her house. They were no bigger than a quarter and glowed in the dark, which made them look like little fireflies when all the lights were out.

“Mom, Caroline can’t have that—it’s too small for her.” I picked it up and turned to hand it back to her.

“You can put it in her clothes drawer—where she can’t reach it.”

“Fine.” I stuffed it inside my pocket. “See you soon.” I opened my arms for a hug.

“Tomorrow!” My mom jumped forward, pointing. “You said tomorrow you’d be back.”

“Tomorrow—I meant to say tomorrow.” I held my arms open.

My mom leaned in to my embrace, wrapping her arms tight around me.

“Promise?”

I sighed. “Mom—things are different now. I’m staying. I promise.”

Mom patted my back and laughed. “I know. I know you will. I only get worried sometimes.” She pushed herself away from me. “You would tell me if something was wrong, right?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“You were always so quiet, growing up. You never told me about things.”

“There was never anything to tell.”

I glanced at the curb. All that was left was the fridge. It was short and skinny, too old and too small.

“I’m sorry to hear about your father.” Penelope got up from the table and scratched her back.

I had been talking for a few hours. The glare from the sun was gone. The desert outside looked blanketed in a soft, yellow hue.

“Would you like some tea?” Penelope began to walk to the stove.

“No—I think I am going to go to the Pinkerton’s and clean up a little.” I got up to leave.

“Might as well. You’ll be here for a little bit anyhow.”

I nodded and walked out of her house. I felt nauseous and empty. I figured it was the heat from inside Penelope’s home. As we sat there, sweat had dribbled down my back, and I’d watched as sweat caught in Penelope’s bushy brows. I could smell the dirt baking outside through the small puffs of air that carried it in. I noticed the dirt that collected in corners on the floor in the kitchen, and collected in layers on the walls. My eyes drooped as I spoke, and I was exhausted at the end. There was more to say, but I didn’t like how I thought I’d feel sharing these details with Penelope. I wasn’t much for sharing. I wanted to come here and hide out for a bit. I didn’t think I was going to come here and be forced to share my life story.

Outside the heat wasn't any different, but a slight breeze felt good as it hit my face. Pieces of sand filed across my skin as I walked to the Pinkerton's shack. I glanced around at a few of the houses and noticed a man staring at me from a chair in the middle of his grey porch. He was smoking a pipe and wearing a red flannel shirt. His eyes followed me as I walked by, and he nodded. I nodded back, called out to him. "Hot enough for you?"

"I'm used to it!" he called.

I walked towards him. "How long have you been here?"

"About six years." He dumped his pipe and wet tobacco fell in clumps to the ground. I reached the porch and looked at the floor. I saw that tobacco residue littered the wood floor.

"That's a long time." I looked at his face. His skin was leather, like Penelope's. "That's almost as long as Penelope's been here."

"I've been here longer than her." He rocked his chair back with his toes.

"She told me she's been here ten years."

He laughed. "Penelope always tells wild ones."

"What do you mean?"

He didn't answer. He swung his chair back down, took out some tobacco and began to stuff his pipe again.

"My dad used to smoke a pipe. He wore flannels too, but not in the heat."

He struck a match on his foot, and brought it up to his pipe, puffing a bit on the tip to get it going. "I'm not your dad. Get off my porch." He got up from his chair.

I stumbled backwards. “What?”

“Get off my porch!” He threw his arm out toward the sky.

I padded fast down the steps and sprinted away. I could hear laughter behind me. I turned around and he was bent over his chair, holding his hands to his stomach. “My wife would kill me if she saw me smoking,” I heard him say. He continued to laugh.

I tripped on my feet heading back to the Pinkerton’s. I was going to grab my stuff and leave. I went inside the open wall and to the couch where I had left my things inside the plastic bags. I looked around for the rat and a voice from behind startled me.

“Sorry—sorry.” A woman came close. She looked about my age. She had on a doctor’s smock decorated with cartoon bears. “I’m Lucy.”

“I’ll be out of your way in a moment.” I grasped the bags in my hands and hurried outside.

She followed after me. “I hope Owen didn’t scare you too bad. He’s not quite right in the head.”

I opened the trunk of my car, dumped the bags in, went to the driver’s door, and felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Please don’t leave. It’s been a while since I’ve had someone my age to speak to.”

“I have to go. This isn’t for me.”

Her shoulders slumped. “I know how you feel—I was new once too.”

I held onto the top of the car door, pausing. Lucy had hair like Simone’s.

Lucy reached a hand forward. “Let me try this again. I’m Lucy.” She held her hand stiff, thumb pointed straight up. Her wrist had red bangles wrapped around the small bone, each hitting against the others. “I’ve been reading this etiquette book left here from the fifties. It says to extend your hand with thumb straight, wait for their hand, grip and shake with two pumps.” I didn’t move my hand. “Here, I’ll show you,” She grabbed my right hand and placed it inside hers. “I think that’s right.” She moved her arm up and down. “Nice to meet you.”

She held on to my hand. I wriggled it out.

“I held on too long. The book says five seconds is long enough.” She looked at me and smiled. “I’m sorry I scared you.” She looked back at Owen. He was still sitting on the porch. “He’s always like that, even to Penelope.”

“Well she’s a bit off herself.”

“She thinks she’s everyone’s mom.”

“And who are you?”

“I don’t know. I’m Lucy for now. And you are?”

“Toby.”

“And who do you think you are?” She folded her arms to her chest and smiled.

I shook my head. “I don’t know.” I laughed, making her laugh.

“I saw you walk over here from my home over there.” She pointed to a yellow home with red trim. “Penelope mentioned you were going to clean out the place. I can help, if you want.”

“I don’t know what the point would be now. I think I’m leaving.”

“I can help you clean for that amount of time. Not much for me to do at my place.”

“What do you all do during the day?”

“Whatever we want. I think that’s why some of us have stayed for so long.”

“Doesn’t that get boring?”

“Come on,” she grabbed my arm. “I’ll help.”

I closed the door to my car and locked it.

“No one is going to steal your car out here.”

“I’m starting to understand that.” I tucked the keys inside my pocket.

We walked inside the house. Lucy made tisk noises. I watched her.

“We should probably do this in some type of order.” She walked to the stove, lifted a few pans, set them back down. Then she went over to the table and lifted up a box, set it back down. It looked like she was calculating something inside her head. She kept moving her fingers over her mouth each time after she set an object down.

“Maybe we should bring some stuff outside first.” I looked at the floor. The red carpet was covered in dirt. “I kind of want to sweep the floor.”

“No point in that—it will blow back in.”

“Then let’s start by putting things away—like the pots on the stove.” I walked over to the oven.

Lucy stepped in front of me and put a hand to her head. “I know what we should do now.”

I tucked my hand inside my pocket on top of my keys.

“We need to get some water first, so we can start boiling it to clean.” She grabbed my hand and led me out. “I’ve got a clean pot at home.”

This seemed logical. I pulled my hand out of my pocket.

We began the trek to her place. The sun lowered to the mountains in the distance and our shadows stretched to our sides. I thought about what Peter and Caroline were doing. Peter got off work about this time. He would pick Caroline up from day care, perhaps go to the grocery store before they went home. We were out of milk and eggs.

“What are you doing out here?” Lucy asked, waking me from my thoughts.

“Taking a break from life, I guess.” I was getting tired of people asking me what I was doing here.

“Me too.” She nodded her head and stuffed her hands inside the front pockets on her smock.

“Why are you wearing a hospital smock?”

“I work in a hospital back home. These were the clothes I left with.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Three years ago this June.”

“Why did you leave?”

“I think I got tired of trying to please people. You’re always trying to please someone out there.”

I nodded my head like I understood. As we got closer to her house, I noticed the paint was lime green and the trim pink. All of the windows, doors, and walls were intact.

The house was in good shape. She didn't have any old furniture or appliances sagging in the sun and dirt.

“This house is pretty new—well, new compared to the other ones. I think it was built in the late eighties.”

“It doesn't look too damaged.”

“I did a lot of repairs myself. Most of the other people let their houses sit the way they are.”

Her house didn't have a porch like the others. She opened the front door and waved me inside. Dark shades were drawn on all the windows and the air felt cool on my face and shoulders. The living room was ahead of me, and I walked into it, looking around. The room was shaded in grey. Lucy had two recliners in the middle of the room, a small table between them. I walked over to the table and saw she had a few magazines on it. I thumbed through them and noted that each was dated three years ago. I saw a piano in the corner, and walked towards it. Its white keys were darkened with age and the wood looked like it would crumble any moment. I touched a key and it was silent. I heard a flush down the hall. Lucy re-emerged as I turned around.

“I thought there wasn't any running water in this place.”

“I don't know about the other homes. My toilet works.”

I backed up and sat on the piano bench. I was confused.

“You play piano?” Lucy walked towards me, cracking her knuckles. “My mom used to have me practice every day of the week when I was young.” I got up and she

placed her fingers on each of the keys, and began to move them back and forth. “I used to be real good.”

“I don’t understand...”

“Oh, the thing hasn’t worked in years. Morris and I hauled it out of the golf resort a year ago.”

“No, I mean—where am I? No electricity, no water. A toilet works. We can get food, then we can’t get food. I don’t understand the rules of this place.” I looked at her.

“There aren’t any rules. That’s the beauty of it.” She kept moving her fingers back and forth across the keys. She turned around after I hadn’t said anything for a little while. She came and sat on the couch next to me. “Look,” she set her hand on my arm. “Some of the people here are squatters who haven’t been kicked out yet, like Morris and Penelope. And some, like me, came here and bought property a while ago. That’s all. I don’t want to scare you or anything. This isn’t a magical or mysterious place. Some of the people may be, but that’s not how this place works. The only thing we all have in common—squatters and those who aren’t—is that we’re deserters in some form or another. I mean, look at you—what did you desert?”

It seemed to make sense. But in the article Peter had written six years before, he hadn’t mentioned anything about home buyers—he’d only talked about squatters. I felt dizzy. I wasn’t sure what to do next. Lucy walked to her kitchen, opened a drawer, and pulled out a couple of papers. When she came near, I saw the papers were photographs printed from a computer.

“Here,” she handed them to me and sat down on the arm of the couch. The large one had a photo of a man smiling, with short hair and dark sunglasses perched on his head. Large palm fronds were in the background. “That was taken when we were in Hawaii.” She pointed at the picture. “That’s my husband.” She moved her finger across his face, rounded his chin, then drew her hand away. I looked at her face. She was smiling.

She set the picture on the table next to us and brought out the other. It was a small girl with curly hair and a pink bathing suit. “That’s my daughter. She was six.” Lucy traced over the little girl’s smile and laughed. “She loved Hawaii.”

“Where are they now?”

“There was a boating accident three years ago in Hawaii. We lost our daughter. My husband lost his right leg. Then we lost our marriage a year later.” She picked up the photo from the table, placed it with the picture of her daughter, walked to the kitchen, and tucked them carefully into the drawer again, to be pulled out another time when she felt it was necessary. I pitied this woman. It seemed like she was showing me the pictures to get me to talk about a story I was supposed to have. But there was nothing to my story. I’d left my husband and daughter. Neither one had died. Our relationship didn’t deteriorate because of some pain suffered, or because we couldn’t stand each other anymore.

It had happened on instinct. It started out as a plan to leave for a week. I figured Peter wouldn’t be too mad and Caroline wouldn’t be damaged from that absence. But then three years in that place had come and gone. Even though it was filled with

squatters and deserters, there was a sense of community and also a sense that nothing could touch us here. We watched fish and birds and houses continue to die and crumble away back into the earth or into the place they were molded from. I had a sense of time standing still. We watched the sun move across the sand. We spent days sitting on rotting decks and dragging our toes along the dirt like our feet were miniature rakes tilling a Zen garden. Warm lemonade was passed around—unless Lucy had made a batch and paid her utilities that month, in which case the lemonade was cold. Morris handed out whatever baked goods he could find at the liquor store—prepackaged apple pies with the goo filling, or toaster pastries. Flies buzzed by our ears and we swatted them away and laughed when Owen caught them with his hand.

At night, you couldn't see an inch in front of you. That was when we had our meetings. All you heard were the legs of crickets rubbing together in a monotone like they were listening, saying mmm-hmmm. They sounded like the dead air between songs on a cassette tape. No one ever saw one another's face and everyone was silent when it was someone else's turn to speak.

Penelope told her story the first night I went to a meeting. Readymade packets of crackers and processed cheese were passed around. We drank tepid cola and the air felt like a sauna.

She began by telling us her full name. I wondered how many of the people there had heard this whole speech. How many times had she said it? Did she repeat the whole monologue to each newcomer, word for word, or did she mix it up a little each time, to keep everyone on their toes? I wondered how a squatter becomes a squatter.

“My name is Penelope Mary Broquette. I was born in nineteen-forty-five. My parents were from Los Angeles. My father left my mother and me when I was young. My mother and I lived in a small apartment downtown and I went to a school a few blocks away. My mother was the nurse at the school, and we ate lunch together down the street at Philipe’s. It’s still there and still serves you purple pickled eggs. My mother wanted me to become a nurse like her, and to do that I would need to go to college. I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to become a film star like other young women had. My sights were grand and didn’t set well with my mother. She told me it was college or a real job, none of this shim-sham acting, as she called it. Last day I spoke to her was a day in nineteen-sixty-three. They were filming a movie on Olivera Street. I had graduated high school three months prior and had saved some money working at one of the local hamburger joints—Tommy’s. I took all the money I had, rented a one-bedroom apartment in Chinatown, and went to the set to try and see the director. The film shut down two days later due to budget shortfalls.

I didn’t go back home. Lulu—a high school friend—knew where I was and had come to see me the day before. She begged me to come back and start college with her in the fall. I refused. Instead I continued to live in my one room mansion and tried to get a few acting auditions. That was my plan until I met Jim. Everything after him was a blur, and it all led to my bankruptcy, and alcohol dependency. He fooled me right from the beginning. But in the end I sure fooled him. I packed up and moved out here. He’s probably still scratching his head, or he’s in the grave. That was over ten years ago.”

Penelope coughed, and I heard her gulp soda. She glossed over her life with Jim—her husband? Boyfriend? I wondered what these people had heard last time. I wondered if we could ask questions. I asked.

“Who was Jim?”

I heard a cough. No one spoke.

“Penelope—who was Jim?”

“I don’t want to share that tonight.”

“You’ve mentioned Jim every time you tell you’re story. It’s time you told,” Barbara said.

“Why don’t you tell your husband you’re not ready to leave this place then? Huh?” Penelope hacked and spit.

Barbara didn’t respond.

“That’s what I thought.” Penelope made a noise like she was heaving herself up. “I’m going to turn in. See you folks in the morning.” She walked off, her feet crunching the sand.

“She never mentions who Jim is?” I asked.

“Nope. It’s like she assumes we’re supposed to know or something. But if Jim was in our story, we would have to explain who he was,” Lucy said.

“Why does she care so much about your stories and won’t share everything about hers?”

“We don’t know,” Lucy said.

Owen spat. He gulped down his soda and asked if there was any more.

“Nope—that’s the last of it,” Morris responded.

“Well shoot. I’m leaving too if there is nothing more to wash down these stale crackers. You could have brought us some pastries, Morris.” Owen sounded like he got up. I heard the bottom of his cane scratch the floor.

“Those were too expensive this time.”

“I think it’s about time you learn how to cook, Lucy, seeing as you’re the only one with a working oven. You could make us some edible food instead of this crap.”

Why was Morris in charge of groceries?

“Well, looks like we won’t hear your story until our next pow-wow, Toby. I’m off to bed too.” The wood Morris sat on creaked as his weight was lifted. Owen and Morris walked back to their homes, their talk dying off into the blackness.

“Lucy?”

“Yeah?”

“Why are you here?”

“Why not?”

“Why don’t you tell me an actual reason?”

She sighed. “Why don’t you tell me the reason you’re here?”

I was tired of our back and forth conversation that went nowhere. “What the hell kind of place is this?” I got up to leave. “I’m leaving in the morning. I can’t stand being here any longer.”

“Wait, Toby. Please? I relate to you more than those other people. They talk about the past and that’s it. Their present is here, and there is nothing else. We still have

connections back home. I told you what happened with me. We weren't even out here when I did. I don't need to sit in the dark to tell my secrets."

"I'll think about it, Lucy. I'm going to bed." I walked away.

That night, I lay on the bed inside the Pinkerton's. I'd brought a blanket in from my car and spread it out on the top of the bed. The air was still warm, and I was dressed in a tank top and a pair of boxer shorts I'd taken from Peter a few years before.

I could hear Caroline in her crib, turning over. She was three years old. Peter reached around my stomach.

"Don't touch me." I inched away.

"It's been a year..."

"I don't want to." I grasped my stomach.

He brushed the hair from my face.

I turned to him.

"He died alone. Mom was out shopping. Dirk was at the mall. Dad had called earlier trying to see if we could come over for dinner, and I said we weren't able to. That was a lie—we didn't have any plans."

"It's not your fault."

"Melba died alone."

"She lived alone."

"All I cared about was the money she gave me."

"You know she meant more to you."

“I let Mom lay in bed covered in her vomit one day. I let her lay there for a good thirty minutes. She called my name and I pretended I didn’t hear her.”

Peter was silent.

“I let Cyrus die.”

“Cyrus was ill.”

“Next it will be you and Caroline.”

“We aren’t sick.”

“You’re going to die,” I said. “What’s the point?”

“Stop, Toby. None of that was your fault.”

“You’re all going to die and I’m going to be left alone.”

Peter wrapped his arms around me, but there was nothing he could do. Caroline woke and began to scream.

I did it. I had come to this bubble where nothing could touch me. To lose human connection was the reason they all came. Lucy had run away from her crumbled family. Owen’s wife had passed away six years before and he ended up here, trying to find salvation. Peter’s article tracked down Penelope’s history. Half of what she had told us that night was true. She never made it as a film star and she did have a husband named Jim. What she didn’t say was that she had been in prison after she and her husband Jim tried to fake his death and collect on his insurance policy. He abandoned her after he got out of prison. He claimed he had nothing to do with it. Their children took his side and never questioned his trust.

I woke to the calls Penelope was making at my door.

“I said hello about four times.” She turned and pointed to the open wall where a plastic tarp lay flat. She went to the table. “Did Morris bring you any coffee?” She had the cup with the diner logo in her hand.

“No—and I don’t like coffee anyways. Too strong.”

“Suit yourself. Did he bring you over any supplies? Food? Water?”

“He hasn’t been by yet. But I have my car. I can go and get some groceries.”

Penelope stared at me hard. Her eyes didn’t blink and she set her cup down on the table.

“There won’t be any of that.”

“Won’t be any of what?”

“You going into town.”

“Who says?” I crossed my arms at my chest.

“I say.” She raised an eyebrow.

“And why is that?”

“Because if you start driving in to town and telling people at the store who you are and where you live, our place is ruined.”

“What are you talking about? You think you guys are hidden? Everyone knows about this place. I read about this place in a magazine.” Not quite a lie. Peter had his article published in a small anthropology journal.

Penelope sighed. “Of course people know about this place. But as long as people aren’t interested, then the developers remain uninterested and we have this place all to

ourselves.” She got up from her chair. “I’m not losing my home on account of you.” She started to walk away.

“This place isn’t all abandoned homes and squatters. I know that for a fact. And I also know I don’t have to listen to you.”

“You do if you want to stay here.”

“I’ll leave.”

A smirk swiped across her face. Her lips were dry and cracked at the corners of her mouth.

“And where do you think you’ll go? You belong here just like the rest of us. This is the no man’s land for people like us. There isn’t anywhere else.”

“I’m not like you.”

“Sure you are. I knew you were the moment you pulled up in that minivan.” She glanced over her shoulder at my car, the red sheen it used to have dulled by sand. “You left your family because you can’t let things pass.” She tapped her head as she spoke, like she was telling my fortune. “And you left everything to come here. We’re not so different. We both left families. I understand.”

“None of my family wanted me to go.”

Her grin dropped.

“I’m leaving today anyways. So you have nothing to worry about.” I turned around from her and went to the bedroom to gather my things. I heard her leave.

A little while later, Lucy came over as I was putting the last of my things in the car.

“Penelope told me what happened.”

“Sure she did.”

“She told me what you said. Is there anything I can do?”

“No, Lucy.” I opened the car door to get in. But I couldn’t leave without asking.

“Why do all of you listen to her?”

“I wouldn’t say we listen to her—we humor her mostly. Well, I humor them mostly. I sympathize with them, I guess.”

I began to understand what she saw in the others. “Those people can’t replace who you lost.” I got in the car.

Lucy stood looking at her shoes. They were the white, slip on shoes that nurses wore. They had air holes at the top and were made out of some sort of foam material. I never understood how nurses could wear such flimsy shoes doing the job they did. They reminded me of the shoes the nurse had worn the night I took Caroline in to the emergency room because she broke out in a fever and wouldn’t stop coughing. She felt like a hot water bladder against my chest. I was in a panic because there was no one else to take care of her—her getting better was all up to me. Peter was away on a trip for a few days, and I was left to see this through.

“I didn’t come here with that notion in mind. But they’re all I have right now.”

I nodded and started the car.

“What can I do to get you to stay? You name it.”

I didn’t want to feel tied to a place. I wanted the freedom to run if things weren’t going my way—and have the option to come back. At that moment, I didn’t have the

option to go back home. I had messed things up too bad to go back right then. I needed this place to be somewhere in which I could recall what had happened. Not so much an escape as repentance.

“Get in the car with me.” I turned to Lucy.

“What?” She bent lower to hear over the engine.

“Come for a ride.”

“And that will prove to you that none of these people control me?”

“Yeah—it will prove this isn’t some sort of cult I’ve walked in on.”

“It’s not.” Lucy crossed her arms.

“Then get in.”

She ran to the other side of the car, checked her surroundings, and got in.

“I saw that,” I said as I sped off.

“Look, we’re not a cult. Its only easier if I humor them, like I said.”

I didn’t answer.

“Where are we going?”

“To get some decent pastries for Owen tonight.”

It was dusk outside. The sun had set. Everything looked like it had been covered in a blanket as if put to bed for the night. This time of evening calmed the place down. The surrounding area didn’t look bad because the ability to see diminished little by little until it became another desert town one drives through on the way to somewhere else, a place where no one stopped to reminisce about what had been.

I opened the windows to let in the night air, and the rush of it blew through our hair. Lucy leaned her arm out the window and felt the air with her fingertips.

“Nice night,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“When’s the last time you were in a car?”

“Since before I got here.”

“Do you know where the nearest store is?”

“I haven’t a clue.”

I hit eighty miles an hour. No one was on the road. I had no idea how far or where any civilization was.

“Now that we’re out here—are you going to stay?” Lucy glanced over to me.

“If I take you back and they don’t have a fit over it, I will stay for a month. But I’m not sure if I can last that long.”

“That’s how I felt when I first got here too.” She pulled the seat back and sprawled across it.

We were about ten miles out when I came across a small store called “Bargain Mart.” I pulled into the parking lot. Across the street was a gas station and a diner sat next to it.

The parking lot hadn’t been repainted in years, and I couldn’t make out where one spot ended and another began. I pulled in, turned off the engine and we both climbed out.

“You haven’t been here, right?” I asked Lucy.

“Nope. But it looks to be a real winner.”

The outside of the store was painted a deep brown color. The front doors were covered in aluminum foil, as were some of the windows. Carts sat around the lot. Some were rusted everywhere and others had missing wheels. I had to tug at the store's door to get it open. It opened with a cough and I smelled an interior that felt vacuum-sealed, the environment dated. Rickety metal shelves held dusty cans of food. One woman stood behind the checkout counter. She had on a pink ruffled apron. She glanced at us from her newspaper, sized us up, then turned her attention back to it.

I grabbed a small yellow basket and headed into the abyss. The lights were out in a few areas and I tried to read the signs hanging above the aisles.

Lucy turned to me. "Owen likes those apple pie things with the thick jelly like consistency."

"No—we're going to get some ingredients to bake some real pie."

"I don't know how to do that."

"It's easy." I motioned for her to follow me down an aisle marked "Baking."

She trailed behind me as I scanned the white shelves looking for baking soda, flour, salt, sugar and cinnamon. I dropped these items into the basket and went to find eggs, butter, and milk. I couldn't locate any. The next item we needed was the most important: Granny Smith apples. We walked in circles trying to find where the fruit was—but didn't see fresh food of any kind. After we walked back and forth in front of the woman several times, she asked if we needed help.

"We're looking for some dairy, like milk, eggs, and butter." I said.

“Don’t have any,” she said and looked back down at her paper. She scratched her rear.

“You have any fruit?”

“Sure—we have the canned variety on aisle seven.”

“Nothing fresh?”

“Not enough people to buy that stuff out here. We have some powdered milk. You could use some gelatin for an egg replacement and Crisco for butter.”

“I see.” I walked to the aisle she indicated and grabbed some canned apples—the label touted a juicy red variety inside. “This will have to do.” I looked back to Lucy, who nodded in agreement. I went to grab the other replacements and headed back to the register.

“We only take cash.” The woman folded her paper and moved it off the conveyor belt.

“That’s fine—I believe I have plenty.”

“If you don’t we can start a tab for you.”

“Thanks—but I don’t live here.”

“Just passing through?” She took the food out of my basket and began to bang the keys on a register that looked like it belonged in an antique store.

“Yes.”

“Where are you both from?”

“Up north.”

“What are you doing down here for?”

“I heard about this place and thought I would come to check it out.”

“You heard about this place? I’m surprised this place even has a name in any guide book.”

I nodded my head like I understood the dilemma.

“You like this sort of thing?”

I didn’t answer, but took out my wallet.

She continued to talk. “Reminds me of my son. He had to go cross-country travelling too. Wanted to see where other people lived and how. Won’t catch me doing something like that.”

“Why not?” Lucy asked.

I glanced at her, then the woman. She stopped bagging our groceries and turned to us.

“For people like us—the old ones—this place is like molasses. It sticks you in and you never want to go. It’s a slow, easy way of life out here.”

Lucy and I both nodded.

“That’ll be fifteen dollars and sixty-two cents.”

I handed her the money. She pushed another large button a couple of times, and hit the side of the machine. After a few hits, the drawer popped open with a wilted ringing sound.

“It gets stuck sometimes.” She placed the money inside and gave me change. “Is it ok if I don’t give you a receipt? We ran out of paper refills a month ago, and Morris hasn’t ordered any yet.”

My head shot up. “Morris?”

“Yep. He’s my husband. We own this place.”

I looked at Lucy. She raised her shoulders like she didn’t know what this woman was talking about.

“Well—I shouldn’t talk like that, I guess. I haven’t seen him in a couple of days. I haven’t had the right mind to do all the stuff he did.”

I grabbed the paper bag. Lucy looked at her shoes.

“Thank you for coming in. You’ve been the third customer this week. I don’t think we—I—will be open much longer. I’ll probably go back to my family back east soon—or at least try to.”

I nodded my head like it was a good idea. We went outside. I grabbed Lucy’s arm. “What the hell?”

“I didn’t know Morris had a wife—has a wife.” She picked at her pointer finger.

“I’ll take you back, but then I am out of here.”

Lucy was silent.

When we pulled up in front of Lucy’s house, everyone was standing around in a circle, talking. They turned around and stared at us. Penelope had crossed arms. Morris was holding a paper bag filled with something. And Owen puffed on his pipe while Barbara kept watching her daughter wander around Lucy’s property.

“I came to drop Lucy off.” I had the window rolled down.

Lucy opened the door, looked at me, and slowly got out.

“You wouldn’t want to stay for our evening snack?” Penelope said with a forced smile.

“No. I want to live in shit and this isn’t it.”

“We are shit. Haven’t you seen the flies?” Penelope’s shoulders dropped.

Owen puffed his pipe. Barbara grabbed hold of her daughter. Morris placed the bag at his feet. I saw it was filled with white paper.

Lucy spoke: “Don’t be mad because we like to live easier. Isn’t that why you came out here?” She walked away. “I’m going to bed.”

Penelope followed her.

Morris walked up to my car.

“I met your wife,” I said as I began to roll up the window.

He didn’t look stunned, only nodded and spoke above the closed glass. “I divorced her five years ago—she still hasn’t accepted it.”

I shook my head, started the engine, and remembered what was in the trunk. I got out and went to the rear of the car. I opened the trunk and pulled out the grocery bags filled with ingredients that I knew would never make anything. Instead they would sit on a shelf and expire, like all the people in this place.

I handed the bag to Morris. “Here—maybe you guys can use Lucy’s stove and make something for Owen.”

Penelope came back outside. She walked over to Morris and me.

“Lucy doesn’t know all our secrets. It’s not like we lied to her—we only didn’t want to be judged right away. With her it worked because she didn’t think she had

anywhere else to go. But you were skeptical from the start since you already had it in your mind that you could leave at any moment. You'll only see who we are by the lies we let ourselves believe."

Morris stepped closer. "I divorced my wife Tamra because I couldn't bear to be with her any longer. I told Lucy I was a lonely man who came here because of some past delinquencies I couldn't escape."

Owen interrupted. "You want me to get us some chairs?" He walked away before any of us could answer.

"No one knows the reason I left."

"You don't have to say now, Morris." Penelope put a hand on his arm, her eyes pleading.

"No—I've got to. For Lucy's sake." He looked at me. "I can see a change in her with Toby here."

I stood waiting to hear his story. I glanced at Lucy's door, and I could see her figure through the screen. Penelope looked where I was looking, turned back to Morris, and asked him to save his story for another time.

"Now is good." He patted Penelope on the hand she had placed on his arm.

She nodded and turned to look at me. I looked at Morris.

"I killed a baby."

My stomach dropped.

"It was our son. He was turning one. I put him to sleep one night and went to check on him a few hours later. He didn't feel like a baby. I picked him up and I felt his

weight had changed. He didn't cry or make a sound. I rushed to turn on the light in the room. His face was a greyish blue. The doctor said it happens to babies....” Morris cleared his throat. “I bring Tamra supplies sometimes.”

Lucy came out and went to Morris's side. She wrapped an arm around his waist, drew her head to his shoulder. “It's ok.” She said.

“Sweet Lucy.” He patted her shoulder.

Penelope turned to me. “There's some truth for you. You're free to go now.”

I couldn't move.

“You can go.”

I stood with my arms hanging to my sides, deflated.

“Go on now, before it gets too late and you're stuck here for the night.”

I couldn't move.

Owen came back with two brittle lawn chairs folded under each arm.

“This was all I could carry.”

“That's good enough, Owen. We don't need any more.” Penelope went to him and took the chairs. She unfolded them and brushed them off with her hand.

“Goodbye, Toby.” Lucy walked over to Penelope and Owen.

Morris patted my shoulder and drew a small smile across his lips. He handed me the bag and said, “If you're headed that way—could you bring these to her? I don't think I can after tonight.” His voice withered away. He coughed and drew a white kerchief from his pocket. He wiped his face, rough, like a farmer after a long day's work.

I grabbed the bag from his hands. I turned to the huddle they had made sitting in broken chairs and other seats planted in the dirt. Barbara's daughter, who now wanted to be called Brittany, ran around their circle tapping heads for duck-duck-goose. Everyone smiled at her but kept talking to one another. They spoke like I wasn't there. It grew darker by the minute. The longer I stood and watched, the more their features disappeared into the background. The sea vanished, as did the dead fish, the squawking of diseased birds, and the houses enveloped in dirt and surrounded by rusted sculptures of found objects. The only light came from Owen's pipe. It moved up and down in the blackness like a beacon shining its way through to me. It pricked the scene with its orange hue and I walked closer.

The mumblings stopped as my feet patted the ground. I put the bag down and sat next to the beacon. No one spoke. But then—

“Now that we are all here, I'll tell you the next part to my story.” Penelope cleared her throat and continued.

I wrapped my arms around my knees and leaned in closer.

It was winter. I had been here at the sea for five years. Each day I woke up and went over to Lucy's and had breakfast with her and sometimes with her and Penelope, and sometimes Morris too. Owen woke up in the afternoons. We ate two-hour breakfasts then went outside to do whatever we wanted. Depending on the season, Penelope worked at her garden. I never knew why she did because every time she planted, the seeds would fail to sprout from the ground. This place stunted life. Lucy spent her days working away at her piano, trying to fix it with Morris's help, or going for

walks that she alone liked to take. I spent the first few months cleaning out the Pinkerton's—the house soon became “Toby's” a year later when someone else drove up, got out of their car, looked around, and was greeted by Penelope. The cycle would start again. It felt like it would never quite finish.

After I gave up cleaning when the wind continued to billow in dirt, I went to work hauling the remains collected from the front of all the houses, except for the cars and boats that remained glued to the ground they sat in.

“I don't know why you bother,” Penelope said one day as Barbara was helping me clean out the area in the front of her property.

“Gives me something to do,” I said as I lifted a large toaster oven and walked to where I dumped everything.

The mountain of junk grew each day. The sun glinted off the different colored metals that remained untouched by rust, while the rusted parts reflected like specks of glitter. There were refrigerators, stoves, microwaves, toasters, dishwashers, and a few soda dispensers stacked one on another. It took me a year to finish. Each day I liked to look at the brokenness of it all. I liked to sit in front of the mound and look at all the failed dreams collected into one spot.

Peter's hair was a mess. He had been scratching his head throughout my story, a nervous tick he tried to hide, but always failed to. It was late. Peter got up, said he would put on some coffee. I told him I thought it was time to head to bed. He turned to me and nodded.

I walked after him. “Peter?”

He turned around.

“I’m sorry.”

Peter smiled but it fell away faster than it appeared.

“I should have been honest with you a long time ago.”

He stepped closer and for a brief moment I smelled his cologne. He turned and went up the stairs. I thought about the time Owen and I went out to see the mountain of Christianity, located a few miles from the Salton Sea. I was sitting at my mountain when he walked up to me.

“You’re not the only person who likes mountains.”

I didn’t know what he meant.

“Have you heard of Salvation Mountain?”

I nodded.

“I’d like to see it before I die. One of these days.” He leaned his head back, and his glance travelled all the way up. “Man, this sure is big.”

“I’ll take you there,” I said as I got up.

I kept the windows in the car rolled up. During the winter it never grew hot. Owen sat with his hands clasped in his lap, and watched the desolate land pass outside the car.

“Nothing, only nothing.” He shook his head. “My wife and I came to vacation here once, back in nineteen-sixty-five. This place was crawling with people—a real Fort Lauderdale. And it was hot. I swear you could see the steam rise off the pools at times. Everyone walked around in bathing suits and everyone talked about never leaving.”

“It must have been strange to come back and see it like this.”

He didn't answer. We continued along the highway, one car traveling along an empty road. A few miles in, we had to turn off the highway and drive onto dirt, heading deeper into dry land.

“Woo—eee! Would you look at this place?” He smiled as the mountain came into our vision. “If it don't get any crazier than this, I don't know how it could.”

The man-made mountain looked like something that belonged at an amusement park. It was overly colorful which made it look happy to be in a place like this. We walked towards the heap of papier-mâché painted together with a mash up of all the colors of paint the artist, Keenan, could find or have donated to him. The sun was tucking itself just below the heap and highlighting parts of the message at top: “God is—a sinner—Come upon my—heart.”

Owen and I walked into the blue, red, purple, yellow, green, and white caverns inside. It was cold, a good ten degrees cooler than outside. Keenan was gone, a volunteer had told us. The volunteer also told us we were free to roam around because it's what Keenan wanted his visitors to do. “This place is free,” the volunteer said and turned back around to a small yipping dog sitting next to him.

Owen walked around while I parked myself on one of the clay benches carved out of the walls. There was no electricity or running water. No heat or air conditioning. Keenan woke up when light hit, did all his work during the day, and went to bed when the environment told him to. I thought about what it was like to follow that pattern again and again. I wondered what drew this man out here to build something like this.

Dirt collected where caverns met. I followed a line of dirt with my eyes to a room whose inside looked like the color of clotted blood. I walked into this room. It was only about ten feet by ten. The walls were painted a burgundy color. Ahead of me stood a plaster Jesus sculpted from clay and painted white. It melted into the back of the wall, and around its body were streaks of yellow paint. I walked closer. The room was still. There were a few clay benches before the sculpture. I went to look in the face of the man some believed had died for us.

His eyes protruded from his face like black holes. They cast their glance at the floor like they were ashamed to look at what we had all become. I reached out and touched his arm.

Owen found me asleep against the carved figure. He shook me awake.

“Come on. Time to go.”

I got up and looked at Jesus. His head bucked out from his chest. There was an inscription across it. It said: “Can I forgive?”

I watched Peter reach the last step. He turned and nodded at me, then disappeared inside what used to be our bedroom. The light from the hall was still on, and my body went to the stairs and began to ascend them. My body involuntarily went to our room. I listened at the door to Peter walking around. I pushed the door open, and caught sight of him retiring to bed, the side where the closet was. He was staring into its dark abyss, and I opened the door more and slid inside.

He turned his face around. “Toby?” His voice cracked when he said my name.

We lay in bed, silent for a long time. I felt like I had after taking communion at church. The Pastor held out a tray filled with small glasses of red wine, proclaiming it as the blood of Christ. The liquor smelled like the breath of the homeless men who wandered the parking lot after service let out, asking for money. I always expected to feel something, invigorated, but instead I only felt an astringent heat slide down my throat into my empty stomach.

“Are you ok?” he asked.

“After I talk with mom, I’ll be gone.”

“If that’s what you feel you need to do.”

My mom, my sister, and I made apple pies together once. Mom used to make them by herself until we began to complain about who ate more than who. One day, she collected my sister and me from the front of the TV and told us we were going to be put to work that day. She handed each of us a bandana to tie our hair back, then sent us to the sink to clean under our fingernails and scrub our hands. As we did that, my mom walked to the record cabinet my dad had constructed, and pulled out a Joni Mitchell album.

My brother groaned, and turned the volume up on the TV.

“Tough,” she said.

He got up.

“You could always help.”

He shook his head no.

Mom turned to us and said, “Bet he’ll help eat it.”

My brother smiled in embarrassment. He went to his room.

Mom had all of the ingredients out on the countertops in the kitchen. We went to work to make the dough. My sister and I held a measuring cup or spoon and poured the wet ingredients in the mixing bowl first, then the dry. Our mom used an electric, handheld mixer, and each of us struggled to keep the blades from hitting the sides of the bowl. We giggled, and Mom held our arms to direct us. Soon we were covered in flour. After we made the dough, we went into the living room to the dining table. Mom had spread out clean bath towels across the table, and put out a large cutting board. There were three rolling pins set up. She pulled apart the dough and gave us each a chunk. Then she showed us how to roll it into a ball, then flat as a circle.

“We are making five pies today—one for each of us so you know who ate it when it’s all gone,” Mom said as she sprinkled flour onto the cutting board with the side of her hand, and sprinkled more into the dough.

It took a lot of effort rolling out the dough, and my mom showed us how to use our weight to lean over the table, pushing ourselves into the dough. When our circles of dough were large enough, she handed us each a full sized pie tin to lay the dough in. Next we peeled, cored, and cut apples. We cut more apples than we ever thought we would eat. When we were done, we spread them around and poured cinnamon, lemon juice and sugar on top, and placed on the upper pie crust. Mom went to each pie and slit the top with a butter knife—a knife bought at the dollar store recycled from some airline silverware set. It said: “Fly the sky!” in cursive lettering across the blade. Then Mom

marked each pie with one of our names, buttered the crust, sprinkled the top with sugar, and one by one they went inside the oven.

It was early fall. It was still seventy degrees in the middle of October. My mom's hair was bright red and long, tied back with her bandana. Her bangs lay thick across her forehead like a broom. We were sweating from the oven and the heat outside, but we didn't care. The house was bright and smelled good. My brother sat in his room watching TV and got on my mom's nerves by repeatedly shouting to ask if his pie was done. My dad came home from work as the last pie was removed from the oven.

"My word," he said and his laugh echoed in the kitchen.

"A pie for each of us." My mom set the last pie on the stove. One was on top of the dishwasher. Another sat on top of the washing machine, another sat on the dryer, and another rested on top of the counter. "No fighting this time." My mom smiled as my dad walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. He nuzzled his face into her neck, and she rested her hand on his cheek.

"Yuck," my sister and I said in unison.

"Get a room," my brother said as he walked into the kitchen. He had learned that phrase at school and had been repeatedly using it ever since.

My dad began to sway back and forth to the record playing. I grabbed my sister in a similar fashion, and we began to imitate our parents. Dirk walked away, impatient that it wasn't time to eat pie yet.

We had pie at every meal for a whole week. This was the one time when Mom asked what we wanted to eat and when we said "pie," she didn't refuse. "Go ahead, but

you'll be sorry eating it so fast." We ignored her and ate and ate. It was the best time in our lives. Everyone smiled while they ate and no one fought over who had more. I was twelve. It was two years before Mom had her breast carved out and spent days in bed. It was before my dad stormed into my room, grabbed me by the shoulders and scolded me for not taking better care of Mom. One year later, I walked in on the corpse of a friend who had also needed my help.

I first disappeared because the closer I got to death the more I needed space. Then the routines of life met me one day. I had a husband and we had a child. But then Dad died. I realized the older I got the closer I got to death, ever closer because you start to remember every detail: the vomit collected on the chest, the sallow skin, the hair stuck to the tub, the slow breathing, the stiff body.

I packed my backpack in the morning. I asked Peter if I could pick up Caroline and bring her back.

"If you want to." He handed me the keys, and I took them and left.

I pulled up to my parents'—my mom's—home and parked at the curb. The house looked vacant. My dad's collection of immobile cars was gone. The driveway pebbles were now brick. The porch my dad had made was gone and a more permanent structure was attached to the house. The house was painted in a lilac hue—a color my dad never would have gone for. There were two rocking chairs, one on either end of the porch with a pillow on each—one stitched with red lettering, reading "Abraham" and the other "Ruth."

I stepped inside the house and rounded the corner to the living room. Abraham was on the couch, reading to Caroline. He saw me and rose to his feet, lifting Caroline off his lap to sit on the couch pillow next to him.

“Hello, Abraham,” I said, looking around at the blank walls. The pictures of our family were gone. The couch was smaller.

“Hello, Toby.”

I turned to Caroline. “Hi, sweetie.”

“I’m not your sweetie.” Caroline got up from the couch, and ran down the hall. I’d known it was too late for her the moment I’d come back a month before. It was too late from the start.

“She was up late last night, that’s all.” Abraham tried to reassure me, for what reason I didn’t know.

“It’s fine. Is my mom here?”

Abraham didn’t answer right away. He stood there contemplating some answer he could give. And before he could muster one up, the bedroom door opened and my mom walked out.

“Are you going to come home, Toby?” my mom asked me when I phoned her a week after I left. I called her from a payphone at a convenience store a mile away from the sea.

“I can’t.”

“Caroline needs you.”

“I’m sure she’s fine.”

“I don’t understand. What’s happened? You can talk to me.”

We had hid my mom’s illness. She wore a wig outside and a bra with cotton in the cup to show the public she was still “normal.” Indoors, she could be herself, but everyone walked around on tiptoes—including her. She put a bandana or a beanie on whenever she sensed one of us felt uncomfortable. My siblings and I were told not to speak about the operation outside of the home. It was easy not to talk to anyone.

“I have some things to sort out, that’s all.”

“And then you’ll be back?”

I could hear rustling, and a voice calling from her side.

“It’s no one, Dirk, just a telemarketer.” She returned to me. “Come home.”

“I’ll be back.” I hung up the phone.

“Hi, Mom.” We had stood too long in silence and something needed to pierce the air, even if it was an unsettling two words.

She set down the books she was holding. I noticed one was a cookbook my dad had bought her about Asian cuisine.

“Caroline and I were going to make some sushi today. Peter wasn’t supposed to pick her up till this evening.”

“I know, but he said I could come and get her.”

She made a small, impatient grunt and walked past me into the kitchen. I turned and glanced at Abraham.

“Can you gather Caroline’s things?” I asked him.

He nodded and I followed my mom into the kitchen.

“Is Dirk home?”

“He’s at work.” My mom banged a large pot on the stove, which made me jump. She went around banging cabinets and objects she was setting on the counter.

“Mom, I came to say I’m sorry.”

She walked by me to the fridge. “Excuse me, I need to get the avocados.”

I stepped aside. I watched her bend over and reach into the lighted area.

“Well, tell Peter he and Caroline can come over later for dinner.” She walked back to the stove.

“I am sorry Mom.” I went to her.

“Stay right there, Toby.”

I stopped.

“I don’t need to waste my energy.”

Caroline came running into the kitchen.

“Grandma! Grandma!” She hugged my mom. “Grandpa says I have to go home.”

“Yes, but you can come back later tonight, okay?” She patted Caroline’s back.

I thought I should say something more. But there was nothing. I hadn’t even rehearsed what I thought I could say on the drive over, and I had nothing from all the time I had spent at the sea, or the time I had spent being back.

“Don’t tell Dirk I was here.”

She turned from the stove. “Why would I do that?”

I turned to Caroline.

“Ready to go?”

“No.”

“You’ll be back.”

I grabbed her hand and we walked to the door. Abraham handed me her backpack, bent down, and kissed Caroline.

We drove down the street. I looked at Caroline through the mirror like I had the other day, watched her body sit there, contemptuous.

“Did you sleep in my sister’s and my old room?”

“I don’t know.”

I suddenly remembered. “On, no, I guess it wouldn’t look like it anymore. I forgot she remodeled it years ago.”

Silence.

We pulled into the driveway, and Peter walked outside to greet us.

“How did it go?” he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Like I thought it would.”

“You want to have lunch first before you leave?” He picked up Caroline.

“No, I better go.”

He nodded.

“Here’s the house key.” I placed it in his hand, and remembered the car keys.

“And here’s your car keys,” I dropped them into his palm, and held his hand for a moment.

“Take the car. Rebecca and I are planning to get a minivan soon.”

“Right.” I let go of his hand and nodded. The distance had begun, before I got back into the car and drove away. I looked at Caroline, who stared at me like the stranger I was. It was the same stare she had given me the first night I had spent back at home, and she had found me asleep on the couch.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m Toby.” I sat up and examined every inch of my daughter.

She leaned towards me. “You’re my mom.”

I was taken aback. “How did you know that?”

“Dad told me. He said I had a mom who went away and would be back someday.”

“That’s me. Where did your dad say I was?”

“On vacation.”

I nodded.

“Are you going to live here?”

I thought about the answer to that question. I had tried and failed five years before. I had come back and didn’t know why.

“Where are you going?” Penelope asked when I arrived on her porch with a backpack.

“I need to go back for a while.”

“What is this about, Toby? Is it because of Lucy? Or Morris?”

Lucy had left a year ago, after her ex-husband drove up one morning and found her. Morris had passed away a month ago. We carried his body to the back of his truck,

and I drove to the convenience store to get help. It was a large mess that involved unnecessary people.

“Going back won’t make things better.” She had a purple glove on each hand.

“I need to see.”

“They’ll have moved on.” Penelope turned away from me and went inside her house. I heard her voice fade away. “It’s not necessary to go back.”

Caroline studied me with her eyes. She glanced down at my backpack and back at me.

“I’ll be staying for a little while. Is that all right?” I sat up.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged her shoulders, heard Peter cough upstairs, and ran up to greet him.

I remembered this scene as Caroline gripped Peter. She lay her head on his shoulder.

“Bye Caroline.”

She only looked at me.

I walked to the car and Peter followed.

“Could I know where you’re going, just in case?”

I turned around, smiled, and said: “To the sea.”

I remember driving away and watching their huddled image grow smaller the farther I got. I thought about how I had been a young woman who didn’t know who she was—which would have been ok had I not been in a life I wasn’t good at. I remember hearing stories about people who were born inside a body they couldn’t accept, so they

had surgeries to fix the problem. I didn't want to fix the problem. I wanted to be stuck in it like gum on the bottom of a shoe. The guilt of leaving didn't trump the past that showed itself everywhere I went. And I never tried to bat it away. The past had been in competition with me for all those years, and it was time to let it win. The realization made me smile because the past knew before I did that it had already won.

I've been back for five months. I like my surroundings. Being at the sea, I know things will rot into the ground and disappear one day. Nothing is hidden or unexpected because death has been in process for a long time. Even for the people who come here—we're here to die. Outside we are there to live, and we place death in the back of our minds and are angry and upset when something bad happens to our life. We forget out there. It's impossible to forget here.

Nothing matters in the day to day. I wake up and rinse myself off with water I collect from the sea. I dress and go to Penelope's for breakfast. Last week we welcomed a new member into the settlement, a man named Steven who decided to come here after his partner of thirty years left him for a younger man. He blames television and the media for wanting us all to look young, thin, and attractive. I look at him and see his frame withering away. The skin on his face has sunk into his skull, and his hands are brittle like the palm branches we collect after heavy winds. Penelope says he's got an illness and came here to die before his partner found him on their floor one day. I understand.

After breakfast at Penelope's, I take a walk down by the water. There is a white yacht sticking out of the ground into a point, its paint crumbling wherever I touch it. The

steering wheel hangs loose and looks ready to fall into the ground. The air is warm and smells ripe with salt. It dries my throat whenever I take a breath. The water is calm, gently slaps around and glints ahead with the sun at the top of the sky, and birds fly around or sit in the water ready to eat again, never learning from their fellows who lie dead on the shore, or from the hundreds of fish rotting in their scaled sleeves.

The land in the distance is brown and vast, and I wonder what is on the other side. I wonder what deserted towns could be off in that distance, and what death could be met there. But I stay here and sit on the sand, pick up a fish whose eye is dried out and fling it into the water. It makes a plunk and I wrap my arms around my legs. The sun will set soon, and then I will walk back to Toby Walter's. I will eat some food I brought for us then meet the others outside to become chameleons in the night. We tell our secrets then go to bed.

I dream that I drive by the house back home and see Peter and Caroline sitting on the porch, waiting expectantly for me to come home from work. I reach the driveway and they both jump up and run to the car. I emerge from the car, and gather them both into my arms. We then walk inside and sit down for dinner.

Some nights I drive up to Simone's, and she introduces me to her husband, the boyfriend she had back in college. We sit at her table and talk late into the night. She likes to ask me where I have been and I always change the subject. These dreams never last long. The night before I came back, I drove to where she had lived when we were in college. I knocked on the door and no one answered. I watched someone peek out from the curtain at the window beside the door, and I knocked some more.

“Simone?” I call.

I hear a voice yell, “Go away!”

I walk down the drive, believing it was Simone, until I glance at the mailbox at the curb, and see the name on the box isn't hers. I let it go.

Other nights I dream I am parked outside my mom's house, where she is outside watering the lawn. Her red hair has grown long past her thighs, and it moves with her like she is twenty years younger. She is wearing the skirts she used to wear to church a long time ago, with high-heeled boots underneath. I look at my parents' car, where my sister and brother are, as is my dad, who is beckoning to my mom to get in. I can't see their faces, but I feel them there. After watering the last of her plants, she finally walks over to turn off the hose. I get out of the car, and I wave to her as she is walking back to the lawn. She stands looking unimpressed by my grand entrance, and the hose matches her sentiments by dripping its last drops. I admit defeat. But as I am about to turn back to my car, she lifts her hand, brushes aside her bangs tucked underneath her paisley bandana, and waves.