Fall 2016

Good Grief

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Deabler, Alexandra, "Good Grief" (2016). *Master's Theses*. 4750.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.8yq9-m8qm>
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GOOD GRIEF

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Alexandra Deabler

December 2016

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

GOOD GRIEF

by

Alexandra Deabler

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

December 2016

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ABSTRACT

GOOD GRIEF

by Alexandra Deabler

Good Grief is a novel following one family as they move through the five stages of grief. The purpose of the creative work is to focus on the complicated relationships of a blended family, and further complicate that with the added pressure of mourning a loved one, while still fulfilling familial and societal obligations. It is a meditation on the different ways people handle emotional trauma. Grief is a universal concept, but often mistreated or misunderstood. Grief, as a process, takes several different forms, some of which—expressing pain through joviality or sensuality—are shrouded in shame. My thesis challenges the notion of normative coping behaviors, while also telling an engaging and emotionally evocative story about one family with a convoluted lineage and even more complex relationships to each other. *Good Grief* follows a five-stage model of grief; it leads with denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally ends with acceptance. The novel is split into five sections with each one focusing on a different family member. Each character in this work expresses his or her individualized way of grieving by embodying one of the five stages. This allows me to deeply investigate the intricate nature of grief and how it is further complicated by each member's gender, age, and relationship to the deceased.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thesis has evolved into what it is because of the incredible help I received from many immensely patient and talented people. Among them are the extraordinary professors in my Thesis Committee—Nick Taylor, Robert James, and Bob Cullen—who have all elevated my thesis to greater heights through diligent line edits, constructive feedback, and encouragement. My thesis would not be where it is without the shrewd questioning and supportive comments from each one of them.

Noelle Brada-Williams, my GA mentor, was vital to my success, and the reason I always met my deadlines. She walked me through the graduation process and was always ready with an answer when I ran to her with questions.

On a more personal note, a huge thanks goes to my family for, literally, giving me a place to write, and for not asking me to read my thesis before I was done. Thank you to Matthew Abraham Torres for being there throughout the entire development of this work and acting as a soundboard for my endlessly changing ideas. Finally, a very special thank you to Gartrude, whose input was fundamental to the completion of this project.

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Preface

My novel, *Good Grief*, follows a blended family through the five stages of grief after losing an integral member to a ravenous, terminal cancer. The novel focuses on five core characters and their relationship to the deceased: Jake, the brother; Noah, the half-brother; Emily, the step-mom; Robert, the dad; and Desi, the girlfriend, as they try to process and reassemble their lives after tragedy.

The family drama is written in varying viewpoints, focusing on a different character in each section; the structure is akin to Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. The novel is split into five sections—one for each family member—culminating in a final chapter that is the story through the eyes of the deceased. Each family member represents one of the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The sections change point of view depending on the relationship between the family member and the deceased. Close third person, first person, and second are all used to create an emotional and sometimes jarring narrative mapping out the chaotic journey through grief.

The novel is set in a small Central Valley town in present-day California. The size of the town only further complicates the family's attempt to come to terms with the tragedy that has struck because of the constant interaction with friends and neighbors. Those unplanned interactions with the outside community are used to illustrate the depth of the characters and further convey how each member personally deals with grief. My goal is to depict the intimacy of grief, and to juxtapose that with community and familial expectations of "how to properly grieve." The peripheral characters are intended to provide a nuanced view of each character and how they handle themselves in public

verses how they mourn in private. The geographic location, however, is less of an emphasis in the novel, as my intention is to focus on the stages of grieving and how the dynamic of a family changes when dealing with tragedy—and how different relationships to the deceased or different familial obligations affect the mourning process.

This novel showcases a family in the throes of inner and domestic turmoil—different family members at different ages and in different relationships of a blended family dealing with loss and coping with who they are in the aftermath. Since each family member is representing one of the different stages, each section has an overarching theme of that stage.

The story follows the classic Kübler-Ross model of grief, beginning with denial, which is represented by the father, Robert. From there it moves onto anger with the biological brother, Jake, 26; bargaining represented by the step-mom, Emily; depression depicted by the teenage half-brother, Noah, 14; and finally end with Ian, 31, representing acceptance. There is an epilogue that does not follow the five stages where the deceased's girlfriend, Desi, speaks. However, since that is after the completion of the novel, I do not include that as part of the family epic. It is more an informative ending that can either be read as part of the novel or read as a tangential story.

The novel depicts the gut-wrenching complications, resentments, selflessness, and unexpected humor and carnality of the grieving process. It shows raw human nature and innate human compassion. My depictions—which are rooted in realism—and how I write them are pulled from a lot of literary and sociological influences, such as the Kübler-Ross model.

Several literary texts inspired and guided me in terms of style, tone, diction, and in some cases, structure. Among them are: *As I Lay Dying*, *No Country for Old Men*, *Song of Solomon*, *The Bell Jar*, *Nine Stories*, *A Thousand Acres*, *The Day of the Locust*, and *To the Lighthouse*. Are all works of fiction to which my project bears resemblance, or works that I enjoy and have influenced the development of my own writing style and sensibilities.

The largest resemblance may be to Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* because of the subject matter. The text, though oft called inaccessible, is an intriguing and jarring picture of surviving family members trying to work through the loss of a mother and push forward with life. My novel follows some structural and stylistic elements of Faulkner's text, drawing larger parallels to Faulkner's multi-generational family drama. This will most obviously be seen in the section where the deceased speaks—like Faulkner's interrupting chapter with the mother's voice, disrupting the linear narrative expectation.

Similar to Faulkner's literary achievement, McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* has a sense of sterility to it. However, McCarthy's narrative style is more approachable and bit removed from the at time incomprehensible fad of modernism.

McCarthy's has an economical and efficient writing style, using few very concise and visceral descriptions to move the plot and engage the reader. I utilize this method of "less is more" when it comes to description—though sparingly to really push the focus of the reader to appreciate the silence and the let the heaviness of those situations languish. Through this minimalistic style, I try to create more empathy with the characters, allowing the reader to fill in some of the blanks. This creates a more participatory and

passionate response from the reader. In certain scenes, I try to concentrate on very specific and very deliberate details to evoke an instinctive reaction in the reader to the turmoil of the characters.

Though McCarthy and Faulkner both had struck me in terms of style, Toni Morrison has injected into me her subtle way of handling emotional trauma and familial pain. In *Song of Solomon*, the Dead family is a complicated, multi-faceted group. The depiction of pain and contempt from misunderstandings that happen within the core family members, but also the unceasing love that they share, is a technique I use for my family dynamic as well. Morrison creates characters that feel as real as they are unreliable. I use the same kind of family disorder and conflicted characters, both driven by self-interest and a desire to create a deeper bond with their family members, to enhance the flavor of authenticity in my book.

Morrison's finesse with emotionality is a striking element I imbue into my text. However, that emotionality cannot be achieved without a window into each character's desires. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* relies heavily on the interiority of the characters—focusing the narrative on inner thoughts, with little exterior dialogue. The plot is largely built around each character's perception of events, rather than the event itself. This creates resentments or hesitations based on assumed expectations, rather than actualities. I have used this style of showing inner thoughts throughout my novel to portray internal struggle and how that affects each character's grasp on and understanding of reality. It also helps to heighten the drama within sections, allowing for subplots that spin off and closely mirror real life's messiness.

I have chosen works that exhibit similar thematic elements to my creative project. That is very true of Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, a novel that treats each character as if they are in a pressure cooker, slowly building up to a climax that, once it explodes, seemed inevitable. The retelling of Shakespeare's *King Lear* depicts a family in the throes of domestic collapse. The protagonist is shown as suffering from internal conflict just as much as the exterior warring that is happening amongst the family members. I use the same method of showcasing internal conflict through close 3rd person narrative—using each section to focus on a different character as they wrestle with their grief. However, I vary the perspective, allowing each character to come through with a individuated voice. This more closely imitates Salinger's *Nine Stories*. Thematically, Salinger's collection is helpful for conveying that feeling of helplessness, confusion, or restlessness sometimes experienced in unhappy domestic partnerships, as well as expressing different viewpoints and providing separate, fully-fleshed out characters.

There are many more influences—cultural, sociological, personal, and literary—that have led to me to start, and ultimately complete this project, but the last one I mention is as fundamental to my development as an author, as her subject matter is to the discussion of grief. Sylvia Plath and her dark and moody *A Bell Jar* is emblematic of how I understand grief and how I convey it in *Goof Grief*. Plath's wry humor and witty exposition is influential on my project. She took a dark and serious subject (suicide) and made it relatable and sympathetic through realistic moments of levity. The protagonist's sarcastic and amusing commentary helped make the scenes more three-dimensional. Brief, subtle scenes of comic relief help to reflect true mourning and grief that happens in

real life. There is a humor to death that oft goes unmentioned or buried in shame. I try to pull it up, showing the earnestness of each character through it.

The concept and act of grieving is a cumbersome and inelegant process. It is a necessary part of the human experience—and as idiosyncratic as mourning can be, everyone does go through it at one point. There are multiple resources and meditations on grief and coping. This one is a focus on those that experience it within the confines of one blended family with multiple pressures—both internal and external.

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Robert

I.

Robert's son was melting. He was finally succumbing to the long, arduous process of dissolving into the table. Ian's broad shoulders—which had dislocated his mother's hip as he came out—were slowly becoming wider as they slid farther apart under the fluorescent lights.

Robert Dulance cut his tongue against the sharp edge of his molar while he watched. He was trying to relieve a piece of gristle he couldn't see, nor touch with his hand, but could feel wedged deep, festering. It had been lodged there since the evening he found out.

Ian continued to deflate. His torso spilled over the card table, dripping frosting onto the floor like fat, tenacious drops that keep rolling off leaves after a rain stops.

"Oh, no," Jenny said. "I'll get a napkin."

She sidestepped Robert to hunt for a napkin in the disorganized church kitchen. This had been her idea. Jenny, the next-door neighbor and aspiring caterer, had spearheaded the thought of bringing a cake with Ian's photo on it to his own funeral. It was supposed to be therapeutic, she claimed. She had called the day she found out to offer her condolences, and services, carefully weeping into the phone between suggestions for appetizers. In the small Central Valley town, bad news touched everyone in unison. The remorse and discomfort tacked on every door in the neighborhood. A plague had befallen their community, but Robert walked on.

"Who was that?" Emily asked after Robert hung up the phone.

“Jenny,” Robert said.

“From next door?”

"Yeah."

"What did she want?"

“To help.”

“Help with what?”

“The funeral.”

“Help how?”

“With the food.”

“What did you say?”

“I said 'ok.'”

“Oh,” Emily said.

Emily fidgeted. She gently twisted her wedding band, turning it nervously with her spindly fingers. A habit she fell into when she wanted to broach a subject, but wasn't sure how. She had become more timid as their marriage progressed. Even after all these years, Robert would find Emily flush with anxiety around him—unlike his first wife, Susan, who was self-assured and fiery, always to a fault. Susan was thick in body and spirit. She would roar with an open mouth, front teeth slightly gapped, until her rambunctious laughter filled every crevice. Her hair was like a lion's mane, kinked and frizzy, as wild as she was. Emily was fine-boned, like a bird, with nervous ticks and nurturing habits. Emily was easier to handle, Robert thought. Easier to understand.

He placed a hand over Emily's spinning, stroking the smoothness of her delicate hand. It felt familiar, usual. It felt like the hand he had held a million times, and planned to hold a million more. He tried to protect fragile bones with his grip. The peaceful feeling of her palm in his relaxed him. She felt soft, her skin conditioned from compulsively applying lotion. The moment stopped, like his breath. Time yawned open into a sea of possibility. He lingered, allowing time to stop, allowing himself to ignore the clutter of medical papers surrounding them in a thick nest of doctor jargon. He dwelled in the potential.

Emily's index finger jerked in his palm. He let her go. His hand returned to the cocoon of his front pocket.

Refined in a tailored blazer, Emily stood next to Robert, tucked into herself. Robert adjusted the collar on his old gray button-up, the armpit slightly stained with use. He had a gnome-like quality, with squat bowed legs and aggressively upturned nose. People were always surprised to see them standing together, arms or fingers intertwined like dutiful vines snaking across the façade crumbling buildings.

"Do you really want her help? She has never—" Emily said.

"She wants to help."

Robert walked back behind the kitchen counter, dividing them into two opposing forces.

"I know, but don't you think we should just hire someone. Someone who could--"

"No. She wants to help. I said ok. That's it. Who am I to turn down people who want to help?"

“Well, you’re the father.”

Robert tightened his brow. He began tidying the mess of papers lying limp in front of him. He separated bills from pamphlets from admission history receipts, trying to find some semblance of order.

"Ok, I'm sorry. It's your call," she said.

Granite started to peak out under the neat rows Robert was making. They looked like a parking lot of white cars seen from the top of a building. Little compact rows that seem so harmless right before a jump.

“It’s just that—“ Emily started again.

“What?”

Robert stopped shuffling, gripping the counter’s lip as she paused. After twenty-six years of marriage, Robert knew the implications in Emily's different pauses. Her peculiar way of stopping as if searching for the words, but her blue eyes remaining focused and alert. He waited for her to speak, counting the seconds, savoring the upward lurch of his stomach that comes in the hang time before a drop. He saddled into the roller coaster that was climbing higher. Every moment that passed and she didn’t speak was another moment he could keep climbing, ignoring what was beneath—hang in the silence between crashes. Fine blond strands fell in front of her face. Robert refrained from tucking the wayward hair behind her ears. He kept his hands locked on the counter.

“It’s just that...do you think planning this is helpful? Don’t you think we should hire someone to handle it all? I don’t know it’s healthy for you to do so much of it yourself.”

“Why?”

“Well, it just doesn’t seem like you have any time to...to yourself. He was your oldest son. Maybe you should take some time—“

“I don’t need any time.”

Robert bowed his head, staring intently at his work. The silence invaded every nook where papers weren’t strewn, working its way into the cracks. It hung like the Central Valley summer heat, oppressive and stifling.

"I'm doing this," Robert said.

“Ok.”

“Ok.”

“Do you need any help now? With anything?” Emily asked.

“No. Thank you.”

“I made some dinner while you were at funeral home earlier. It’s in—“

“I’m not hungry,” Robert said.

“Ok.”

Emily lingered in front of him in the kitchen. The laundry alarm sounded upstairs—a single, definitive punctuation mark.

“Ian loved you, a lot, you know. All your boys do. I do,” she said.

“It’s almost 9. Maybe you should get some sleep,” he said.

Emily sucked in her natural pursed lips, creating a nude line where her mouth was. Her secrets buried deep within her mouth, that Robert couldn’t access. He cleared his mind, letting her carry his memories within her, where they couldn’t haunt him. He

watched her under hooded eyes, crawling up the stairs slowly before turning from the banister into their room. He heard the small click thunder through the house, shutting him out.

His head sunk into his shoulders, like a scared turtle trying to suck back into his shell. Wrinkles had sprouted up, running through Robert's face like cursive letters marking the past year. His stress tattooed itself in the cracks of his eyes, showing off any time he frowned, or smiled. He couldn't escape the subtle reminders of his past, or his age.

He stood over his newly filed pages, carefully placing blockish hands on either side of the stacks. A dog-eared purple pamphlet edged out under the remaining uncategorized pages—the deep, vibrant eggplant color retained despite the damage it had caused. It waited patiently for Robert to gather strength and pick it up, stroke the pages that had caused so many sleepless nights. He pushed it away and kept shuffling.

Dozens of papers were organized and reorganized. Robert created subsections underneath the mountains of recently stacked pages. The clock on the microwave glowed radioactive as it neared midnight. The white of the papers began to blur his vision after the hours he had been hovering over them. The purple jacket continued to sit at the edge of his peripheral vision.

Robert tapped the professional pamphlet. He crawled his hands up and down the smooth cover before picking it up. It felt heavy. The girth of material overwhelmed his sturdy grip. He dropped the paper on the wood floor of the kitchen. He picked it up quickly and weighed it in his hands. He started to fan through the pages. He rubbed the

coffee stain on the left corner absently like an old addict's habit. It was the same nighttime ritual he had repeated for the past eleven months.

"Dad?" Noah stood in front of him, interrupting the loop Robert's mind was caught in, holding the pamphlet. Robert took in his youngest son, standing taller every day. Noah held a glass in his hand, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

"Why are you still up?" Noah asked.

Robert looked at the clock over the oven. 12:06 a.m.

"Just got caught up in some things," Robert said. "Why are you awake?"

Noah shook the cup in front of him.

"Water," Noah said.

Robert moved out of the way, watching his living son walk over to the sink. Clear, tepid water rushed out from the tap. Noah stooped to fill the plastic tumbler. He was getting taller than Robert. His eyes, the only blue ones left in the family. Noah rubbed a skinny wrist against the wayward water dribbling down his lip, wiping across the peach fuzz that had started to sprout up. The black hairs, straight and faint, a reminder that Noah was turning fourteen in two months, but had gone through more than his years.

"What's wrong?" Noah asked.

Robert brushed his cheek free from the threat of tears and choked out a smile.

"Nothing. Just tired."

"Ok," Noah said. "Go to bed."

"Yeah, I am." Robert said.

Noah set his cup down.

“You first,” Robert said.

Noah stalked up the stairs, back into his black room—an off-limits zone to Robert and Emily. The uninviting metal posters lining a once-blue nursery, where Robert had rocked each one of his kids to sleep at one point. On Robert’s way upstairs to the bedroom, he placed the booklet in the kitchen trashcan. The purple jacket papered over discarded avocado peels and tissues. The cover peered out, upright, with its neon white text “Understanding Pancreatic Cancer.”

The lighting in the church recreation room hummed loudly. Three of the twelve bulbs had burned out, and two were threatening. The room was in a building behind where the congregation met for Sunday service. It had a pitched roof and lemon curd refrigerator. When Robert had taken his sons Ian and Jake here for vacation bible school in the 1980's, the décor was an adorable call back, delightfully retro. Now, it looked out of place, a relic of an untidy past. Robert rested on the taupe bar top jutting out from the framed kitchen window into the open room. It was like a walk-up ordering window; a demanding addition to the once-bustling kitchen. His hairy arm in front of watermelon cubes and wilted lettuce that he had bought in bulk at Costco, the massive warehouse where Robert had started spending hours of his days. He weaved up and down aisles, taking in samples and blender demonstrations. An unfettered pastime. No one knew him, and no one bothered him.

The church’s kitchen counter was his domain. He used it to showcase his merchandise, an eccentric collection of whatever low maintenance food he thought would

keep people sated, and that he recognized. He came to the church armed with mozzarella sticks, bagged salad, croissants, and a six-pack of green tinted sparkling apple cider bottles.

"Oh, I thought we agreed I would be handling the food," Jenny had said when he approached the kitchen.

Robert unloaded his economy sized frozen packages with a thunk onto the Formica countertops, an era-appropriate avocado green.

"We can never have enough food," Robert said.

Jenny picked up the bags, trying to find the instructions. Robert waited by the oven, waiting for her to tell him how to cook the processed snack foods. Instead, she set down the four pounds of breaded cheese sticks and gave him the cocked-head sympathetic look he had been avoiding. She touched him, her palm hovering just above his shoulder. Her other hand rested awkwardly on the frozen food. She sucked up the air in the kitchen through her flared nostrils before she spoke, taking Robert's hesitations into her crescent-shaped eyes. Her entitlement and pity filled Robert's gaze, challenging his vision with her catawampus tilt.

"I have a son, too," she said. "I can't even imagine what you must—"

"I have another bag in the truck."

Robert pushed through the double doors, baking in the baking sun. Jenny didn't follow. Robert trudged to the truck. The bed and cab were both empty; all the bags had been brought in already. Jenny's cloyingly apologetic eyes followed him, boring into the back of his neck, already burned at the outdoor burial, hours earlier. The unadulterated

pity she would unleash on him, suffocate him with, when he showed up without another bag of something she thought Ian would have liked. Truthfully, Ian wouldn't have eaten any of it. It couldn't have been farther from Ian's palette. His son was a health nut. He was an avid runner. He wouldn't eat deep fried cheese. He would have wanted roasted tomatoes and balsamic dressing, or a quinoa stuffed zucchini blossom. He was a foodie, and a yuppie. But this wasn't for Ian. Ian wasn't coming, and Robert wouldn't stare at a would-have-been-perfect menu for Ian, followed by an if-only.

Robert loaded himself into the beat up truck that had handled a divorce, two marriages, and the birth of his three kids—all boys. “The Dulance Boys” as they had been known by those in town, and by Robert himself. He still used the term, disregarding that there would ever be a time to refer to them as “The Dulance men.” They were his sons, and always would be just as they were.

The truck gasped, sending little rumbles up Robert's spine as it shook in idle. He drove down the street to the nearest Safeway and cruised up and down the aisles, letting the minutes click by. The cart squeaked forward on a loose wheel. If eyes of neighbors lingered on him as he manipulated the paraplegic cart by cheese-covered crackers and sodium-rich snacks, he didn't notice. The soothing sounds of showering produce, and low hum of price tag scans distracted him from whatever people were around. Robert stuck to his moving meditation down each row, taking in everything and focusing on nothing all at once.

"Oh, you brought jalapeno poppers," Jenny said when he came back, dropping the smallest of the frozen bags on the counter. "I'll get these right in the oven."

"It's ok, I can do it," Robert said.

Robert kept his head low, avoiding whatever emotional witchcraft Jenny was trying to perform on him. He waited until she left him alone before he stood up to face the trays of food waiting to be crisped and boiled. The pathetic crusts of browned breadcrumbs pooled around the sticks and cubes of processed cheese. Robert stuck them in the oven while Jenny fussed with the cake. They both waited, silently, for his wife and two remaining sons to come with the flowers. Robert futzed around the kitchen, stacking the napkins and plates so all corners were uniform. His hands remained busy, quieting his mind with the simplicity of his actions.

The sheet cake loomed in the peripheral of his vision. Four layers tall and glistening with silver dusted frosting. On top of it sat an erect frame of Ian, cast in icing and hardened sugar. Ian's white teeth glowed against the blue background. His graduation tassel dangled down into his grinning face. Robert avoided Ian's vibrant blue eyes peering out, squinted and alive.

"Do you like it?" Jenny asked. Robert jumped at her breath in his ear. She came up behind him like a gas leak, silent, but demanding attention. He turned toward her and suddenly she was everywhere, filled up the kitchen with her wide smile mimicking the one of his cake son—wide, yet demure, with a natural separation between the two front teeth like two independent squares cohabiting the same space.

"What?" Robert said.

"The cake?"

"Oh."

Robert tried to change his grimace of unease from the photo of his son, and from her prying look.

“I had never done a sugar frame before. I felt that this was the time. Ian was such a special boy. He needed a special treat. A celebration of his life.”

Jenny tried to smile, but a tear caught in her eye.

“Such a special boy,” she repeated.

Robert watched her reach up and pluck the single tear off her eyelid like a ripe blueberry off a bush. She squashed it between her two fingers before addressing him again.

“I got the photo from Emily,” she said.

“His college graduation was the last time we took family photos,” Robert said, getting lost in the crinkle of Ian’s eyes. The photo was taken nine years ago. It looked like a time capsule that had recently been unearthed—an unbelievable recollection of a simpler time. He felt the bubble up of weakness in his throat.

“Excuse me,” Robert said, and went to retrieve the food from the oven, pulling the steaming food out and laying it next to the assigned platters.

Jenny hovered next to him. Robert went to work, easing the spatula under the flaccid cheese sticks and transporting them onto the freshly cleaned plates, waiting for her to make her exit.

“This is all so hard,” Jenny said.

Robert clasped his mouth together in a hard purse, stamping his teeth down together creating an unfriendly grimace. He jammed the spatula under the poppers,

flinging one up into the air accidentally. It splattered onto the countertop, oozing white pus out from under an unnatural green jalapeno.

"I got it," Robert said, heading Jenny off before she could offer any more unsolicited help.

Jenny left the kitchen and returned to decorating the rest of the recreation room in somber colors. She set an 11 x 13 picture of Ian on an easel she had pulled from one of the side rooms. It was a photo Robert had never seen. A soft focus of Ian standing in front of a waterfall, smiling large, his arms outstretched wide as if he was trying to gather the entire frame into a big bear hug. The foliage crawling down the rocks of the waterfall sprouted out behind his head like a crown.

"Did Emily give you that, too?" Robert asked, pointing to the picture.

"Oh, this? Facebook."

Robert studied the jarring photo, trying to pinpoint the location, the photographer, a timestamp.

"Doesn't he look handsome? He was so handsome," Jenny said. "Such a shame." She finished her sentence with the graceless tact of someone who has never lost a family member. Her words moved down Robert's ears like honey on rocks—a jagged slide into his brain, where he locked them into one of the doors to which he threw away the key.

Jenny kept tidying around the photo, laying the black paisley table cloths over card tables. Robert wouldn't stop staring at the photo. He was rubbing his hand lightly over the tight cloth, as if he was trying to buff out the past, reveal something present

underneath. Trying to get close to his son, understand him like a father should. Ian had once been the pinched, creased, upturned spitting image of Robert. He had grown into Robert when no one was looking, and with equal secrecy, he turned into someone else—his own man, unrecognized.

Emily walked in with Noah, both arms full of peonies and calla lilies, orchids, and roses—anything Robert said Jenny told him were must haves. Robert was crouching in front of the frame, rubbing it, trying to conjure up the same knowing that this beaming man was his son. Each time his hand came away empty.

"What are you doing?" Emily asked.

"Where do you want these?" Noah asked.

"Oh, I'll take those," Jenny said, rushing to relieve Emily of the flowers.

Robert continued to study the photograph.

"Why don't you come help me set these up, Noah," Jenny said.

Noah followed off after Jenny to set up floral wreaths and sorrowful arrangements for the tables.

"Do you see something?" Emily asked. Robert was leaning in so close, his nose almost touched the water-sprayed rocks in the picture.

"Have you seen this?" Robert asked.

Emily took in the picture, crinkling her button nose.

"Jenny said she got it off Facebook," Robert said.

"Oh."

"Do you know about this?"

"About what?"

"This photo."

Emily began rubbing his back when he moved back to take the picture in as a whole. She looked at the frame, cocking her head side to side.

"It looks sort of familiar. I may have seen it on Facebook."

"It looks recent. Look at his hairline."

Robert pointed to the balding patches on his son's pointed head, side effects of the heavy radiation and chemo he was subjecting his body to on a routine basis.

"You know, Bobby. Ian was an adult, he had a life outside of us. And sometimes people do crazy things when they get...when they find themselves in a bad situation.

Maybe he just needed an escape, to get away. I've read some—"

"He wasn't the escape type. You know that."

"I know. Sometimes people change after they find out they have cancer."

"Ian didn't."

Emily nodded her head, keeping her hand on his back like a brace, tentacling her fingers out to the side like she was strapping him into a harness. He shrugged her off, shaking his whole body in one cathartic cleanse.

"I should help them set up the flowers," Robert said. He walked toward the door, a neon sign blinking green "exit" above his head as he did just that.

Guests began to arrive. Emily relieved the pressure. With her poise, she greeted the guests on their way in and moved them expertly toward the middle of the room,

floating around the massive cake. She did this without a word from Robert, but a knowing exchange of looks. Robert refused to move from his post, and Emily refused to ask him. People bobbed in and out of the reception area. They wept and handed each other handkerchiefs. Many wandered over to Robert and dosed him with downcast looks. Some handed him cards with different saints printed on them, saying "Ian would have liked this." He tried to avoid their downturned mouths like a game of dodge ball. He shut his ears against the cliché sympathies of "I'm so sorry for your loss. He was a good kid," and "Every parent's nightmare—having to bury a child," letting them fall into the grave he didn't want to acknowledge.

Robert moved away from the quicksand of mourners—each one falling deeper into their own misery. He took up residence in his corner, protecting the finger foods from flies and interest. He stood guard as people waded past the counter, bowing their heads to him in understated apology. He brushed them off as he did the pests trying to land on the snacks, each one proving to be more persistent than the last, reflecting on the misguided, well-intentioned efforts of a community too disconnected to know they don't know each other.

The cup in Robert's hand, now bent in several places, had been drained of its contents, but he continued to keep it with him, holding it close to his chest. He kept sneaking glances at the photo, replaying the past year in his head, searching for missing weeks to fill the gap in his understanding of his grown son.

"We're so sorry for your loss. Ian was such a lovely boy," Betty, the director of the church said.

"Thanks, Betty," Robert said.

"The whole congregation keeps you and your family in our prayers," she said.

Robert shook the ice around his cup, vibrating the pieces wedged on the sides into the center.

"You were such a good dad, raising those two boys on your own. And Emily, what a dear. We heard about the...situation with Susan." Betty said. "And now with Ian. Your family doesn't deserve this."

Robert watched the gathering of people he hadn't known in a long time. Betty touched his shoulder, squeezing the thick part that joined his stocky neck. Robert stood still. He had known Betty since he was a child, when his late parents would bring him here to church. They were devout Lutherans—and devout donors—up until the very end. Betty had been like a surrogate aunt to him during his formative years. But, like most extended family relationships, it had been lost in the chaos of his immediate family obligations. And further fractured by his post-divorce announcement of atheism.

"We haven't seen you in such a long time," she said.

"Well, can't say I've been very faithful."

Betty removed her hand from his shoulder, folding it into her other palm.

"Your parents were very special to us. We're always here for the Dulance family. You know that, right?"

"Thank you, Betty."

"We would love to have you back in the congregation. We missed you since you used to come. I always knew I could count on you and Susan as being here on Sundays, with the boys."

"Yes. That was a long time ago."

"Of course. I just meant we're here for you. We're praying for you."

"Yes." Robert said.

"Hello, Betty," Emily said. Robert felt Emily's hand slip around his torso. Betty fluffed her bouffant with wrinkled fingers. Betty smiled at Emily. She had met her at their wedding more than two decades ago, and again at each of Robert's parent's funerals. Betty had always told Robert how he had chosen a good one, *this* time.

"Emily, I was just telling Robert that the congregation is deeply sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." Emily said.

"How are Jake and Noah taking it?"

"One day at a time," Robert said.

"It's always hard to lose a brother," Betty said. "I lost mine some years ago. I still struggle with it."

Betty dropped her head as if she was going to cry, but was instantly distracted by something on her shoe. Robert shook his plastic cup again, but the ice had melted away and he was just swirling around the lukewarm water. June was heating up, immolating memories of the mild spring days that seemed to have just been yesterday. It left track marks of sweat under the arms of the mourners in its wake, to match the stains of their

tears. Even in the sealed room, with whirling fans and packed iceboxes, the heat snaked its way in.

Emily rested her hand on Robert, silencing his tremor.

“Well, I’ll let you two be,” Betty said.

She pressed her hand intimately into his palm, trying to leave a lasting impression. She walked away, back into the fold of the sadness, and collective healing. Jenny began cutting the cake, wielding the knife like an expert butcher, carefully slicing equally sized pieces and heaping them onto round, black paper plates. The cake cubes revealed a chunky banana filling, browned by the hours of waiting. Robert smirked with private knowledge that Ian hated bananas. Jenny continued to cut away, laying each new slice next to the melted image of Ian, now resting on its back to preserve whatever was left of his smile.

Robert turned away from the show, into Emily's waving hand. She was waving her small wrist in the air, signaling a woman across the room. Robert watched a poorly dyed coil of red hair bounce over toward them.

“Do you remember Desi?” Emily asked.

Robert shook her hand, taking in her familiar face.

“I know you from somewhere,” Robert said.

“I was Ian’s nurse for a while,” Desi said.

“Oh, yes. That was it,” Robert said.

“She was also Ian’s girlfriend,” Emily said.

Robert's skin pricked by a chill that had moved in around him.

"I didn't realize Ian had a girlfriend," Robert said.

"I think I was his first," Desi said. "At least his first that he actually referred to as a 'girlfriend'." She eked out a nervous, sad laugh.

"We spent a lot of time with him."

"I know."

"He never said anything."

"Oh," Desi said.

"That's not true. He did say once that he had a friend he was spending a lot of time with," Emily said.

"I don't remember that," Robert said.

Desi sawed her overlapping bottom teeth against her top lip. She was like a child. Ian would never have dated someone so infantile, Robert concluded. He closed off the possibility in his mind and filed it away.

"Near the end," said. "He—"

"We were with him at the end."

"Of course you were, I didn't mean—"

"And where were you? I don't remember seeing you at the hospital visits."

"I actually changed hospitals. I couldn't be his nurse."

"So you just stopped coming?"

"I drove him to and from when I could."

"He told us he took Ubers home."

"Well, I guess you could call me that," Desi laughed, audibly this time, with a confidence Robert didn't like.

"We gave him rides home a lot. Or his brother Jake did. He said he didn't want them because he lived across town," Robert said. "But we did anyway."

Emily pulled on Robert's sleeve as he raised his hand to show the distance of where they lived from where Ian lived. His outstretched hands seeming to mirror the unidentified canvas photo across the room.

"We did!" Robert yelled, pulling his arm away from Emily's soft embrace.

The mourners quieted and began to look at Emily, Robert, and the new girl all huddled around the forgotten food.

"That sounds like Ian. He was the most considerate man I knew. He always said you both—"

"Yes," Robert said. "He was considerate."

Desi tucked her hair behind her small ear, hoop earrings dangling from the lobes. Her brown roots almost reaching the arch of her eyebrow. She hadn't told Robert he was sorry for his loss. He eyed her as she stood straighter next to Emily. She was taller than he realized, and a little round in the middle.

"The last thing he said to me, he told—"

"Yes. I need to get back to other people. Enjoy the cake."

Robert stalked off toward Jenny and the church congregation all wringing hands and crying next to framed photo of his son.

“Robert, we’re so sorry,” one of the members burst forward like the sobs she couldn’t control, her trembling hands grasping at his.

"I need some air," Robert said.

Robert lunged toward the doors, depressing the horizontal metal levers that locked each one. He practically tumbled outside, pushing the doors to shut faster than the spring allowed. He inhaled deeply, coughing a little in his desperation.

Outside in the sandpit was a giant pirate ship. It had been a lavish purchase made in the church's heyday after a generous anonymous donation that everyone knew was by Pam and Jim Dulance, Robert’s parents. They wanted their grandkids to be raised in the faith, and they felt to guarantee that would be to ply them with fantastical toys and playhouses. Robert tried to object, but lost in the battle. The installment of the ship was the last time Robert had brought Ian and Jake here. They had clamored over every part of the wooden behemoth, climbing up ladders, and fighting over the rope swing.

When Robert came back to pick them up in the afternoon, they were still at it, jumping off the split-level decks, into the wooden bowels below.

“Daddy, I’m a pirate!” Ian said, running up to Robert and thrusting a plastic sword into the air.

“I’m a piwate, too,” Jake said, toddling behind him, fingering a black felt patch that covered his right eye.

“That’s neat. Who gave you those?”

Jake’s two-year-old finger, sticky with the juice he was drinking pointed at one of the volunteers. Ian, four, and more mature, called the volunteer by name.

“It’s Jane. She’s really nice. She gave us candy, too. I told her I wanted to be a pirate and she gave me this. Look.”

“How about that.” Robert said, squatting down to admire the dull gray plastic blade, with the curled handle. Jake padded up with his juice box, handing him the plastic from his straw.

“Oh thank you,” Robert said. “Hey, let’s tell everyone bye, okay? We have to go home now.”

"Ah, we don't wanna!" Ian said.

"Come on, Ian. We gotta go."

Jake started to cry, dropping his juice box on the ground and rubbing his small eyes with balled fists. His pouty lip jutting out in between open mouthed wails.

"Come on, buddy. Stop crying. We gotta go home."

"Why?" Jake said, puffing his chest out like a big kid.

"Because we have some things to talk about. Daddy needs to talk to you about Mommy.”

"What about her?" Ian said, snidely, still thrusting his pirate sword through the air.

"We’ll talk about it at home. Let's go. Put those back and get your things. Here, take Jake with you."

Jake and Ian begrudgingly went inside the recreation room and packed up their backpacks and waved goodbye. The yellow streamers and balloons billowed behind them as they left, closing the door on the church behind them.

Robert stared at the pirate ship. The ropes were frayed, and the plank had been sawed down, producing a nub barely jutting from the deck. Robert saw smoke furl in and out of knots next to the ladder. Jake stood under the cloud, idly sucking at a cigarette.

"You're smoking?" Robert asked as he walked up to him.

"I am," Jake said.

"Seems like a bad place to be doing it."

"I don't think so."

Robert nodded as Jake kept smoking. Jake stayed slightly turned out toward the ship, keeping his free arm crossed tight against his torso.

"You remember this thing?" Robert asked.

"The ship?"

"Yeah."

"Of course. They had just gotten it the last time we were here."

"That's right. Boy. You have a good memory."

"Well, it was the day you told us Mom left. 'Abandoned us' as Grandma put it. So, hard to forget."

Jake threw the cigarette butt on the ground and stamped it on with the toe of his haggard Converse.

"That was a tough day for all of us," Robert said.

"Yep," Jake said. He looked at the ground, kicking dirt over his cigarette. Jake was shorter than Ian, and had beady brown eyes that shifted under thick, dark eyebrows.

He had chiseled cheekbones and defined jaw line, thickened with a well-groomed beard. Though he was two years younger than Ian, he always looked like the older brother next to Ian's smooth, round baby face.

"What do you think she would do if she was here?" Jake asked.

"Who? Your mother?"

"Yeah. If she was alive, what would she say, do you think?"

Robert reeled in Jake's look, examining the squinted eyes on either side of a perfectly aquiline nose. Robert tried to pick apart the question, whether he should keep it or throw it back into the depths of some strange, sad ocean from which he was sure it had originated.

"Well, I don't know, Jake. That's a pretty heavy thing to ask. I—"

"Robert." Emily called from the door into the recreation room.

Robert lifted a hand, showing her where he was. She started walking toward him, clacking her small heeled sandals on the cement walkway.

"Oh, hi Jake. I didn't know you were both out here. How are you doing?"

Jake shrugged his muscular shoulders, square and defined under the crisp, white button-up he was wearing. He toed at the hidden cigarette.

"Where's Noah?" Jake asked.

"He's inside. I think I'm going to take him home soon. He's not doing well."

"Yeah, you should," Robert said. "This is a lot for his age."

"It's a lot for everyone," Emily said.

"Well, at least someone should be emotional," Jake said.

"What does that mean?" Robert asked.

"Nothing. Just a relief to see someone crying. Take this seriously." Jake said.

"Jake, what are you saying?" Emily said.

Jake shrugged again, looking off into the abandoned yard of tall weeds and loose trash that bordered the church. Robert watched Jake dodge Emily's question. Jake shook off her inquisitive stare. He slid his hands into his jacket pockets and waited with terse lips for someone to speak.

"I think I'm going to go inside and check on Noah," Emily said. She turned and clacked off, kicking up sand clouds behind her like little smoke puffs, leaving Jake and Robert in a thick haze.

"I remember once, I took you guys to the park when you were really little. Before the thing with your mom. You must have been just born. Ian was around two, maybe three. And he started--"

"Why don't you cry?" Jake asked.

"What?" Robert said.

"You. You haven't cried once since we found out about his cancer."

Robert pulled himself up into his most paternal look, a stock-straight stance that made him appear taller and more authoritative.

"So, anyway, at the park. You started crying because, I don't know, actually. You just started crying. And Ian was on the swing. He got down from the swing and came and got you and carried you over to the swing and held you until you stopped crying. He

could always get you to stop crying. It didn't matter what was happening, when he was around, you were always happy."

"Well now he's dead."

Robert spit out an exhale, like he had been sucker punched in the gut. His eyes bugged out in a goggle of betrayal. Robert dropped his jaw and stood, silently watching Jake, glowering and unflinching.

"I'm going to go check on Emily," Robert said, absently.

Before Robert could react, Jake hit him again with his words. Robert tried to defend against them, but Jake kept flinging them at him, striking down Robert's tightly wound defenses.

"Why can't you just accept that he's dead? He's dead! He's not coming back. He's not gonna just call tomorrow and say everything is all right. He's gone. He's really gone," Jake said. "He's gone."

"You should have some respect," Robert said.

"And you should have some emotion!" Jake bellowed.

Robert thought to hug his son, attempt to draw Jake to him.

"You need to lower your voice," Robert said in his best parenting voice.

"He's fucking dead, Dad. He died. You let him die."

"How is this anyone's fault?"

"You didn't believe it was a big deal. You never did!"

"I'm going inside," Robert said.

"Fine, go. Fucking go," Jake said.

Robert heard Jake yell once he was back, tucked inside the church recreation room. It had emptied. The only people left were Betty, Emily, Jenny, and Noah, all dutifully cleaning without a sound, or a look.

Robert walked up to the picture of Ian in some tropical land. He took it in again, relaxing into the pleasant look on Ian's face. He trained his eyes on it, distancing himself from Jake's screams outside.

"He had such a nice smile," Desi said behind him.

Robert turned around. He saw her slink up closer in her form fitting black dress. It hung down into pleated curtains that pooled around her exposed feet. There was a tan line running parallel to her toes, as if she had recently been to a beach.

"I didn't realize you were still here," Robert said.

"I was in the bathroom. I thought I would stay and help clean up."

"That's ok. We've got it."

Desi didn't move. She stood, shoulder to shoulder with Robert, sizing up the photo.

"That was a good day," Desi said.

"What?"

"That," Desi said. She pointed a painted fingernail to the picture. "It was last October. In Hawaii."

"How do you know?"

Desi looked at him like she didn't quite believe what he was asking, like she was waiting for him to drop the punchline or catch her in some sort of trap.

"I took the picture," Desi said.

Robert gaped before catching his jaw and slamming it shut into a look of disinterest. Desi stood in silence as Robert accepted what this woman, his son's girlfriend, had just told him. He turned away from her and started dusting at one of the table cloths with his hand, piling up the food debris with the side of his palm into one slimy line of leftovers.

"Well, if you ever need anything, please let me know," Desi said to his back. "I know you and I weren't close. But, I really loved Ian. We had known each other for about four years before we started dating. And I think he only asked me out because he found out he was dying," Desi snorted. Robert saw her take in his reaction. His creased brow, his angry poised mouth.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—. It's kind of a defense mechanism, thing. I laugh when I'm nervous," she paused. "Anyway, I just want you to know I'm here to help."

"It's fine. Thank you for coming."

Robert left Desi standing there. He walked through the doors without saying goodbye to anyone. He walked quick and straight, stopping only once he got to the safety of his truck. The leather interior was scabbed and peeling to show the cotton stuffing underneath. He roared off toward whatever semblance of home he had left.

The house was black when he pulled up. He eased into the driveway in second gear, trying to keep his identity a secret from his neighbors. He slowly opened the creaking door and gingerly shut it, not wanting to alert even the birds in the trees that he was home. The bloated mailbox loomed at the edge of the property, where their neatly

trimmed lawn met its cement death. Robert teetered out to the mailbox, using his chest and his hand to juggle the neglected week's worth of mailers, ads, and bills.

Robert unlocked the door and dropped the mail onto the entryway table. It fanned out slightly. Robert hung his keys on the hook in the foyer and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He sat down on the adjacent chair and began to unlace his shoes, freeing himself from the confines he had been strapped in all day.

Robert kicked off the nice dress shoes he rarely wore. He stood up, pivoting toward the living room. From underneath the mail, three cream-colored envelopes clustered together. Robert plucked them from the stack. They were missing stamps, addresses, and dates. The three envelopes were penned to different Dulance family members.

Robert looked down at the rigid black letters peering back up at him, each one capitalized, and menacing—each one in Ian's handwriting.

II.

The piercing summer sun had wiggled its way into the living room, heating up the couch where Noah and Emily were sitting, reading. Robert was ripping open packages of fireworks next to them and laying them down on the brown shag rug Jake called "the bear." Jake tended to the barbecue, wafting smells of grilled meat into the house every time he took off the lid.

"I think I'm going to take a nap," Ian said.

"Lazy. It's noon," Robert said.

"Don't feel good."

“What’s wrong?” Emily asked.

“I don’t know. Just feel sick. My head hurts," Ian said.

“Do you have a fever?” she asked.

“Maybe.”

“Take your temperature," Robert said.

"What's wrong?" Jake asked, as he entered into the living room.

"I don't feel good," Ian said.

“That’s weird, you’re never sick.” Jake said.

"Go get Ian the thermometer," Emily said to Robert.

"I'm fine," Ian said.

Robert was already walking up the stairs to the hall bathroom that the boys had all shared when they were younger. Behind the mirror was where all the medical equipment lived. Robert grabbed the trusted ear thermometer he had used for his sons when they were kids. He put a new sleeve over the protrusion. The thermometer was the one utensil Robert swore by—only fevers mean you’re sick, everything else is arguable.

"Here," Robert said when he was back in the living room.

"Thanks," Ian said.

Robert was about to place the apparatus in Ian's ear for him as he used to, but handed him the device instead. His thirty-one year old son could take his own temperature.

A clean beep signaled the thermometer had reached its decision. Ian pulled it from his ear and showed Robert. 102 degrees.

"102!" Robert said.

"Jesus, go to the doctor," Jake said.

"It's nothing. Just need a nap," Ian said.

"Fine. Your brothers will have to help with the fireworks, then," Robert said.

Robert slapped Ian on the back.

"I'm just going to take a quick nap," Ian said.

Ian went into the guest bedroom. Robert and the family ate hamburgers, and lit fireworks, whooping up in the afterglow of the bursts of fire. The noise and smoking smell didn't wake Ian. He never came out that night.

"I'm going to go get him," Emily said. "He's missing out."

"Why? He said he wants to sleep. Let him sleep," Robert said.

Emily shook her head and rose from the lawn chair that was so low to the ground, she almost grazed the pavement when she sat down. Emily came back out after a few minutes, shaking her head.

"Still sleeping," she sighed.

Robert shrugged it off, and kept lighting fireworks—one after another, while Noah and Jake traded jokes and back slaps.

"There's sleeping beauty," Robert said when Ian awoke the next morning.

Noah and Robert were both sitting at the kitchen table. Robert was tucked into the Sunday morning paper, scanning the news for any fire that had happened from fourth of July. California in the summer was parched. Renegade forest fires were something that

one could almost set a watch to. Every summer the mystic hills, once lush and harmless would turn into kindling.

Noah was thumbing something intently on his smart phone.

"Feeling better?" Emily asked, bustling in from the kitchen with an apron tied tight around her small hips, spanning over her childbearing hips.

"I'm just a little groggy. I'm going to head home," Ian said.

"No breakfast? Mom made pancakes," Noah said.

"Nah, my stomach hurts. Next time," Ian said.

"Did you take your temperature again?" Emily asked.

Emily walked over to the door, where Ian was standing, holding onto the door handle like he was trying to steady himself. She placed her hand on his forehead.

"No. I'll do it at home," Ian said.

"Are you sure?" Emily asked.

"Yeah. I wanna get home."

"Ok, bye hon. Feel better," Emily said.

Emily wrapped her arms around him in a big hug. Robert watched the wince flash across Ian's face. Ian caught his dad's look.

"Bye," Ian said, giving everyone at the table a wave.

"Love you," Emily said.

"Love you, too," Ian said.

He walked out of the door, shutting it quietly behind him. Robert watched the door, waiting until he heard Ian's car start before he started back in on his investigation of the daily news.

Three tones twinkled in Robert's pocket, increasing in volume as he struggled to get the phone out. He always had his phone on him. An electrician by trade, Robert always answered the call of duty.

"Hello?" Robert said, gruffly.

"I don't think I'm going to make it. Still don't feel well," Ian said.

"What are you talking about? Now you're just being a baby."

"It's this bug. Just won't go away."

"This is family dinner. Jake's already here."

"Yeah, next week, I'll come over."

"Emily is making lasagna."

"Sorry, tell her thanks. I'll come by next week."

"All right. Get some rest," Robert said.

Robert returned the phone to his pocket. He picked up his newspaper and propped his feet up on the living room coffee table.

"Who was that?" Emily asked from the adjacent kitchen.

"Ian. He can't make it."

"Why?" Emily asked.

"Still feeling sick."

“What? It's been almost two weeks. Did you tell him to go to the doctor,” Emily said.

“It's just a bug,” Robert said. “He'll be fine.”

“Who'll be fine?” Jake asked. He rounded the hallway into the living room, firing Noah's nerf gun at him as he walked down the hall behind him.

“Your brother. Ian's not coming. He's still sick,” Robert said.

“What's wrong with him?” Asked Noah.

“Nothing. He's just sick. Everyone calm down,” Robert said.

“What's for dinner?” Jake asked.

“Lasagna,” Emily said. “And it's ready. So, everyone sit down.”

The Dulance family took their seats around the dinner table. Robert taking up the spot at the head. Noah placed his hands on either side of his plate. He lifted his head, his brow dotted with small acne marks. At twelve, he was starting to show signs of puberty.

“Are we doing grace?” Noah asked.

“We only do that for holidays,” Jake said.

“Dig in,” Robert said. Emily handed him a spatula to dish out the pasta.

“What if Ian's really sick?” Noah asked.

Robert stopped chewing his lasagna.

“He's fine,” Emily said, caressing Noah's hand that laid next to her at the table.

“He's just being a baby,” Robert said.

“Probably got a girlfriend,” Jake said.

“If your brother had a girlfriend,” Robert said. “We'd know.”

Robert returned to the soupy meal in front of him, sopping up the wayward tomato sauce onto a piece of baguette.

"You should tell him about what a great meal he missed, though," Robert said when Jake pulled out his phone. "He should have been here."

"I'll let him know," Jake said.

He slid the phone back in his pocket and the family continued in their weekly dining ritual, wiping from their conversation the missing member.

After two weeks of nagging, Emily won and Robert called Ian to see how he was. They agreed to meet for golf Saturday.

"My treat," Robert had said before scheduling the plans.

The door slammed shut. The cool air slapped Robert in the face as quickly as the door snapped open again. Ian came in, yelling. He slammed the door shut, following in his dad's footsteps.

"Why can't you just fucking accept it?" Ian yelled.

"It's not that bad," Robert said.

"It is that bad!"

"Get a second opinion."

"What are you talking about?"

"That doctor is a quack. You need a second opinion. I'll make an appointment with my guy. You'll like him."

“I have had Dr. Thatch for twelve years. He’s not a quack. Your doctor recommended him!”

“So what? He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

Emily appeared in the kitchen, agitated. Her hair was tucked into a frazzled bun. Her hands flew next to her ears, trying to pull the pins out, and tidy the sloppiness. Robert saw her try to smooth out her ripped clothes that she wore when she cleaned the house.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Nothing. It’s not a big—“ Robert said.

“I have cancer,” Ian said.

“What?” Emily asked.

“I’m dying.”

“Don’t listen to him! He’s being dramatic.”

“I’m not being dramatic. I have Pancreatic cancer. I have less than a year.”

“How do they know that? Can they see the future? They don’t know anything!”

“He sent the cultures to an oncologist. He does this for a living. I’m dying, Dad.”

“I’m not listening to this anymore. Emily, what’s for dinner?”

“What? Robert, this is—“ Emily started.

“Why won’t you talk to me about this? This is a big fucking deal.” Ian said.

“Because it’s not true! And I’m not going to waste my time talking about it. I’ll make you an appointment with my guy and we’ll get this whole mess straightened out.” Robert said. “Now, dinner. Where’s Noah?”

“Robert, this is important,” Emily said.

"I'm not hungry," Ian said.

He stomped out to the back door from which his dad had dragged him in, slamming the door on any denial Robert had lobbed at him. The house shushed behind him, afraid to breathe. Robert held on tight, keeping all the pieces in line, careful not to destroy the image of the perfect family he had wanted to build.

III.

Robert sat on the couch, letting the home movie play in the background until his eyes snaked with bloody veins. Images of Jake and Ian flashed on the screen, each of them running around the park, screaming with delight. Robert had started at the beginning—Ian's birth video, the viscous, earnest, intimate taping of his debut into the world. He had now worked his way through birthdays, Christmases, christenings, and now to toddlerhood.

Ian and Jake scampered across green fields. The park—their park—was trampled under four naked and tiny feet. It was directly across from where Robert and Susan lived together. Ian ran around, kicked bouncing balls and doubling over with laughter. Jake tipped over, just learning how to walk. Everyone smiling. Susan's giggle could be heard behind the lens.

"Say cheese," Susan said.

Robert and the boys waved back to the camera. Robert watched himself without recognition. The younger version of him, making soft eyes at the camera, cooing to the woman behind the lens. Though they had known each other since high school, Robert was still wowed by Susan then. She had been the reason he dropped out of college and

came back to learn his father's trade. Once pre-med, he never regretted. Not when Susan would look at him with those eyes. The bright blue ones that were crystalline around the edges. The ones that faded in the tumultuous years after.

"I love you," Robert said to the camera.

Robert's forehead creased into the three fingers of wrinkles he got only when he was trying to make someone believe him—a desperate earnestness as his eyebrows lifted, his eyes widened, and his forehead crunched to make room.

"I love you, too," the camera responded with the giggle.

The boys ran around. Susan and Robert watched them carefully navigate through the open plains of the protected city park.

Ian ran up to the swings and jumped up, like the big boy he said he was. He was three, and wanted to prove it. He kicked his strong legs to try and force himself higher. Robert watched, without moving to help. He saw the struggle in Ian's face as he proved to himself that he could do it without anyone's help.

Ian flew higher and higher, propelled by his childlike need to approval. Robert walked over to him.

"Lean your body back," Robert said.

"I can do it myself!" Ian yelled back.

Robert walked up behind him and tried to push his back, forcing him to go higher than he was ready for. Ian screamed.

"Are you ok?" Robert asked as Ian's breath began to return to normal.

Ian nodded his head, still keeping his words to himself. Even in agitation, Ian was quiet, pensive, a trait his mother worried about in the beginning. But after Robert's ceaseless defense of the boy's normalcy, Susan eased.

"Do you wanna keep going?"

Ian shook his head yes. As soon as he started pushing Ian higher, and Ian began to giggle, Robert heard the distinct sound of Jake's cry. He looked out over the grassy knoll to see Jake butt plant into a growth of dandelion and open his mouth. Silence built as he gained the strength to scream out. Robert looked at Susan who was already moving toward Jake.

Ian slowed himself with his feet dragging through sand. Robert walked over to Jake, Ian trotting close behind. Susan was coddling Jake to her breast, trying to feed him, or burp him, or cuddle away his tears. She passed him to Robert who did little to abate the cries that was stemming from Jake's little lungs.

Robert shook his head, whispering soothing words into Jake's small ears. His entire face a fussy red with squashed features. Robert sat down with Jake in his arms, rocking him side to side amidst the crying.

Ian walked up and rested his hand on Jake's head. Ian nuzzled his face into Jake and blew big fat raspberries on Jake's cheek. He started to laugh. Then they both started to laugh. Ian dragged them back to the swings and gently held Jake in his arms. The last shot on the tape.

Robert got up from the couch, clutching the letter in his hand. The envelope ragged from where he sawed his index finger under the lip to open it.

“Hi Dad,” Ian had begun.

His son was dead—a fact he had come to accept in the days after the funeral. Yet, here was he, as conversational as he had been days prior. Robert kept the letter with him everywhere he went. He didn’t show Emily, and she didn’t show him his. Each member in the house was secretively preserving the last communication they had with Ian. He stood up and shoved it into his pocket. He headed toward the door, grabbing his truck keys on the way.

"What are you going?" Emily called after.

The road stretched farther the further he drove. He continued up the uninterrupted gray freeway. Asphalt breathed under his car, expanding with the heat from the breaking day and his tires. His exit loomed in the distance. The green placards counted down his progress. 2 ½ miles, 2 miles, 1 mile, ¾ mile. The graffitied sign pointed his turn off. Robert kept driving.

He drove past the sign, until it blended in with the gray behind him. He got off at the third exit, slowing to a neat stop at the stoplight. The idling truck ripped through sleepy suburbia. Rows of edged bushes and trimmed trees shot up from each lawn, blending the homes into one perfect imitation of the family ideal.

Nosing along neutral toned facades, Robert parked. The sun bouncing off the metal hood—the paint pristine despite the rumblings underneath. To look at the truck,

one couldn't see the eroding of wires, far past salvation. The decaying machinery barely usable, but still going, still moving forward.

Robert sat, looking out beyond the unblemished window. He stared at the freshly cut and watered field—just as green as he had remembered it. The joints of the door creaked when he opened it and relieved the cab of his weight.

The field had the same unfilled gopher holes, bald patches, and weed beds littered the opening between the posts. Dirt kicked up on Robert's shoes as he toed a dried mud cake. Between the goal posts, he saw his son standing, preparing to shoot the ball. Pinked cheeks puffed out as Ian held his breath before striking the ball with his toe. Robert assumed the same position he always did, ready to defend the goal from his son's chaotic kick.

The letter crunched in his pocket as he squatted down into his goalie stance. He saw the poke of white against the khakis he was wearing.

Ian was dead.

The goal posts twanged against his fist. He struck until his knuckles wept with blood.

Jake

I.

Blood misted the floor. Metal chairs groaned. Dozens of feet jumped and pounded. Two more claps ricocheted off the gym walls. Jake hit the ground.

“Our undefeated champion,” the announcer called. “Antonius Silva!”

Jake came to with clenched fists. His coach, Ralph, lorded over him, blocking the spotlight with his bulbous, bald head. His jaw clenched and threatening.

“Again?” Ralph asked.

“Fuck you.” Jake said from the mat.

Ralph gathered Jake up and stood him next to the reigning champ. He was a child next to both of the men. At 5’ 9, Jake was five inches smaller than his opponent and seven inches smaller than his coach. His only saving grace were his beady brown eyes, which sat too close together on either side of his aquiline nose in a naturally menacing squint. He had an untrustworthy look about him, even when resting, that helped him fit in to the fighting crowd—despite a tremendous lack of skill. Jake knew how to throw a punch, but was useless when it came to blocking.

“I just won’t get hit,” Jake said to Ralph when he began training.

“Too bad you can’t use arrogance as a shield,” Ralph had said.

Jake wobbled on stocky legs. His calves bulged out, as wide as his thighs from months of nonstop training. His torso looked like it was welded to two redwood trunks. Jake peeked behind the curtain of blood that was falling from the cuts on his forehead, out into the audience that was booing at him. Wiping away the blood in furious fistfuls.

His left eye drooped under the fleshy mound forming on his head, crushing his skull inward.

“Just try to stay standing,” Ralph whispered.

The announcer grabbed both wrists and lifted Silva’s glistening arm into the air. The crowd drummed louder, matching pulsing feet with the throbbing in Jake’s temple. Jake charged out of the ring, taking his shattered face and broken dignity with him. He dodged gym rats that had started to storm the ropes, weaving their way into the ring to congratulate the champion. Ralph followed behind him, weaving through jabs of the crowd. Jake managed to make it through the undulated mass of adrenalin without more injuries.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Ralph whispered to Jake, running up behind him. Ralph, the owner of the gym, tried to maintain order over his fighters and he tried, even harder, to never verbally harass them in public. Jake continued to move forward toward the bathrooms. The ring was only a few dozen feet away, but Jake’s bruised legs and blurred vision kept him from advancing quickly. His right calf was a blistery red from taking several kicks over the course of the fight. It was like he was walking in pudding, sticking to the humid air as he moved forward.

“Like I said,” Jake turned to look up at Ralph’s puffing cheeks. “Fuck. You.”

“Fuck me? Fuck you. You’re the one costing me money.”

“Fuck it, then. Fuck it all. I’m done.”

“You’re done with what?”

“With this. With fighting.”

“What? You’re on a five-fight contract. You owe me two more fights.”

The slap of Jake’s fist on the heavy bathroom door was immediately soaked into the rest of the chaos behind them.

“At least you can hit something,” Ralph said.

Jake punched a locker inside for emphasis.

“I’m not giving you another fight,” Jake said.

Jake began to undress his hands. The orange wraps unspooled into an animated heap.

“It’s already on the books, Jake. Two weeks, Saturday. You and D’anza.”

“Well, burn the books, then,” Jake said.

The wraps wiggled against the cement floor every time he moved to unwrap another row, like worms writhing up toward the muddy surface after a storm.

“We’ve been friends for four years. You said you wanted to fight, I gave you a shot. And now, you’re going to back down?”

“Seems like it.”

“I should have known. I should have known you were too fucked up after your brother.”

Jake pushed Ralph back into the row of lockers. He crunched Ralph harder. Jake focused his weight into his hips, pushing into Ralph’s stomach with the knife-edge of his bone.

“Don’t fucking say shit about my brother,” Jake said into Ralph’s tight face.

“You don’t want to do this, Jake. Back off.”

“First, apologize.”

Ralph raised his hands in a harmless surrender, but maintained the same wolfish grin Jake had come to know during his time at the gym. The deceptively sweet upturned edges and Chiclet-size front teeth spread wide over thin lips. Jake backed off, letting Ralph ease his weight back onto the ground.

“Fucking asshole,” Ralph said.

Jake turned around and sat on the bench to unwrap the other hand. He ignored the agitated breathing of Ralph behind him. He leaned his sweating back onto the lockers.

“I’m waiting,” Jake began.

“For what?” Ralph asked.

“An apology.”

Ralph laughed out a single rollicking shout.

“You’ll be waiting for a long time” he said.

Jake swiveled on the smooth lacquered bench. The force of Ralph’s foot to Jake’s swollen head sent him back, knocking him clear off of the bench and onto the ground.

“Fucking asshole,” Ralph said and adjusted his t-shirt collar. He pushed open the bathroom door, leaving Jake unconscious on the ground.

The handful of other athletes that came in to change stepped over him. Jake continued to swell on the floor, like a neglected melon that keeps growing on the vine long after it’s ripe.

An unrelenting buzz jolted against Jake's thigh. It continued for several minutes, stirring Jake out of his concussive sleep.

"Hello. Jake?" Emily said on the other end of the cell phone.

"Yeum," Jake mumbled out.

"Jake? Hello? Are you there?"

"Wha? Yeah. What? Who's this?"

"Who's this? It's Emily. Are you ok?"

"Emily. I'm fine."

Jake's eye was completely shut under the lump that had grown in his sleep. He tried to gently touch the tumor, measure how far it stuck out, but even the thought of caressing the massive bump caused him to break out into painful sweats.

"Your father is in the hospital. Apparently he broke his hand. And he needs to get stitches."

"What? How?"

"I don't know. I'm on my way to the hospital right now."

"Ok."

"I was wondering if you could do us a favor. The movers are coming to pick up Ian's stuff this weekend. Your father and I were going to go and pack the rest of his stuff today, but now this happened. Could you possibly go over? It's ok if you say no. I know it's tough."

Emily was like that. Jake could picture her back shifting nervously in the car as she asked the favor. In the same breath she could ask for help and dismiss it away. When

they were younger, she only ever asked them to help if they wanted to. Nothing was ever mandatory in their family, except for being a part of it.

“No. I’m fine. Yeah, I’ll go.”

“Ok. Thank you so much. Robert and I really appreciate all that you do. This is a really hard time on all of us. We love you. You know that?”

“Yeah. Ok. Where’s the key?”

“It’s under the mat. Just leave it there when you leave.”

“Ok.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep you updated about your dad. I’m not sure what happened. It feels like the world is falling apart sometime, you know?”

“All right, Emily. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Ok. I just hope this is all ok. I hate the hospital. I swear, I feel like I lived there now.”

Jake hung up. The gym was closed. The overhead lights were off. Jake fumbled in the darkness, using his dying phone as a flashlight. The mess of hand wraps had been neatly wound together and rested at the end of the bench. Jake slapped them onto the ground.

Ian’s apartment was on the East side, just east enough to have a higher rent, but not so deep that he had a pool, or even an in-unit washer and dryer. He was on the fringe of wealth. The outermost layer of importance, where he was defined more by what he didn’t have than what he did, and he didn’t have a lot.

Jake parked in the visitor spot, even though his brother's was vacant. Ian's Prius was parked at his parent's house, tucked away in the garage where no one went. Jake picked up the six back of PBR he had bartered for outside the corner liquor store in the rough part of town, panhandling under graffiti to get enough to buy a case. He was between jobs and only had enough for rent and gas.

He crab walked up the stairs, leaning his broken body on the rails as he pushed up each individual step. He picked up the black welcome mat, scratchy like steel wool. The key lay helplessly in the corner, an orphaned cut gold rod without a ring or mate. Jake slid his fingers over the cold cement when he picked it up. The late August weather had breathed cool into the night. He tried to let it touch all of his body, freeze his insides, let himself become ice.

The lock unlatched with a sharp click. He wiped the excess sweat onto his blood-stained jeans, his head just now stopping from leaking fluids. He wiped his shoes on the mat, like he did every time he came over. Three swipes with the left foot, three swipes with the right, and a giant step across the threshold.

The moon beamed in blood orange and full through the vertical blinds that hung long in the kitchen, clacking together from the breeze through the open window. It smelled crisp, like fall was coming soon. Jake walked to the fridge. He put away the beer. It was in glass bottles. Despite the price difference, Ian always preferred glass bottles, even when drinking cheap beer.

Dirty boot prints from the EMT were still faintly tracked on the carpet. In the corner, a yellowed splotch bloomed next to the couch. A used sample on a painter's palette muddied and watered down.

The landlord, a good friend of the Dulance family, had cleaned the place up after the EMTs and police left, but the amorphous yellow outline next to the couch couldn't be scrubbed out, like it had a grip on the house and refused to let go.

Jake started separating all that he could touch into the usable and the trash, rashly flinging things into boxes or bags as soon as they touched his hand, like they were fire burning the bundles of nerves in his fingertips. He bent over for the items on the floor, feeling the blood rush into his head, filling his eyes and sinuses with more pressure. The mountain over his eyebrow pulsed and expanded in the inversion. The mosquitos hummed around his ears. He steadied himself with the wall and stood up. The underwater feeling remained as he looked out into the living room full of items that were once used by Ian.

The trash was overflowing before Jake had even filled one box. He shoved it down deeper into the bag, feeling the papers and trinkets give under the weight of his fist. He cocked his arm back and slammed it into the bag, letting whatever was in there break further, splinter into shards of its former self. He struck and struck, letting the bag rip a little in the corner. He kicked the bag, toppling it over. The little rip turned into a gash that ripped through the stomach of the bag, spewing its contents all over the floor.

"God damn it!" Jake yelled.

"Oh, sorry," a small voice behind piped into the room.

Jake whipped around, fists up. He saw the figure standing tentatively in the doorway, gripping a bag. The intensity of her grip radiated in through her knuckles like white lightening bolts striking down her fingers.

“Why are you here?” Jake asked.

Desi shifted her baggage to the other hand, rotating her wrist around. She looked different than Jake remembered her at the funeral two weeks earlier. Her hair was pulled back into a soft bun and she wore jeans and a loose fitting sweater. Her cheeks were slightly pinked from either her discomfort or the heat, Jake couldn’t tell. But there was a feeling about her that Jake hadn’t been around. A genuine somberness that exuded from her, one that wasn’t there at the funeral reception. He stood inside the aura of her, embracing her sadness like a warm coat, clinging to the fibers of her grief. He wanted to take his box of pain and open it inside her protected bubble, to feel the honesty of what she felt.

Desi shook in the warfare of Ian’s cast off trinkets, some broken in bags or misplaced into bent boxes. She tightened the grip on her bag, a quizzical face full of self-doubt and second-guessing. Jake felt very aware of the welt on his face. It throbbed harder under the dubiousness of her gaze.

“I fell down,” Jake said. “Hit a flight of doors or whatever.”

“I just wanted to drop some stuff off.” Desi said. “I didn’t know anyone was going to be here.”

“Then how were you planning on dropping it off?” Jake asked.

“What do you mean?”

“If I wasn’t here, how were you going to drop it off? Were you going to break in?”

Desi fished something small out of the back pocket of her tight jeans. She held it up secured between two very firm fingers.

“I have a key.”

She tiptoed over to the coffee table and placed it down, gingerly, before backing away. She made sure to avoid the bombs of artifacts that littered the floor. She moved like a fawn unsure of its surroundings.

“I didn’t know you had one.”

“I don’t think your family knew much about me.”

“Yeah. We didn’t.”

“Ian was very private.”

Jake gave a slight shrug with his shoulders, wincing under the involuntary movement. He only moved a quarter of the way up to his ears, before the soreness from the fight screamed deep in his muscles. Pain shot down the coils on either side of his bulky neck.

“Yeah. He kept a lot of secrets.”

“Yeah.”

“More than we ever knew. Or could have thought to have asked about.”

“You can’t blame—“ Desi started.

“I don’t.”

Jake tossed a water-damaged travel guide to the islands of Hawaii into one of the larger boxes. The wrinkled pages fanned out, folding against other books haphazardly packed.

“I just had some stuff that I wanted to drop off. Some stuff of Ian’s. Mostly clothes. I thought maybe your parents would want it, or something,” Desi said.

“Old clothes?” Jake said.

“Yeah, and a couple of books. Some records. Just odd things he kept around.”

“And you don’t want it?”

“I kept some things, but it’s just painful to look at. Really, really hard to see every day. Think about him everyday. Want to talk to him everyday.”

Desi coughed a hoarse, mucus-filled roar into the apartment, clearing her throat away from the tickle of pain. She batted her eyelashes to push her tears back into their reservoirs, saved for another day.

“Anyway, I thought I would bring it here. I couldn’t just throw it away. It’s part of him. It is him.”

Desi slackened her hold on the strings and let the opaque garbage bag puddle at her feet.

“It *was* him,” Jake said. “It’s what’s *left* of him.”

Desi tightened her hand around the red rabbit ear strings that laced up tight around the mouth of the opening. The contents inside sucked up into a vertical sphere with her lift.

“Yeah, well, I can see you have a lot of other stuff here, I’ll just keep it with me for a while. Maybe take it to your parents’ place.”

“How do you know where they live? They give you a key, too?”

“No,” Desi said. “They didn’t.”

Jake shrugged.

“Hey, I didn’t do anything, you know?” Desi said. “I loved Ian. This affects me, too.”

“Who said you didn’t?” Jake said.

Jake slapped a notebook against the far wall before he threw it into the trash. He liked the jolt that fired out of Desi, convulsing her body forward for a moment. The fear of uncertainty at what he was capable of—the short brother, the uneducated brother, the other brother. Night fell thicker into the apartment, narrowing the pinhole of light from the single overhead bulb. The other one blackened in the thick balloon of its head, no longer able to shine.

“No one. But I don’t want to be treated like a pariah. I know you and your family are hurting. And I’m sorry Ian didn’t tell you about us.”

Jake slapped another pad on the wall, the papers clacking together like feathers of a crow about to take flight. Desi didn’t respond. She stood stick straight in her baggy sweatshirt. She looked lost in the billowing cotton. It was clearly a man’s sweatshirt. She let the sleeves dangle past her wrists, coming up to the knuckle jam of her fingers. The front kangaroo pocket slung around, hitting her nearly hip to hip. Desi pawed at the fabric, trying to pull it up her dainty forearms, but it kept rushing back down, covering

her in warmth, protecting her from the lazy August breeze that ebbed and flowed through the trees.

“Well, thank you for being so civilized,” Desi said. She turned to go, snapping her bag up.

“Do you want to come inside?” Jake asked.

“What?” Desi asked.

Jake stood up from his haunches, suddenly. Desi clutched the door handle. He placed his hands up like a caught convict, approaching her with one foot hesitantly in front of the other. She released her hold, brushing nonexistent hairs from her clammy forehead.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

Jake could feel Desi’s pride surge up inside her. He could taste the musty air of confidence he remembered from the funeral.

“I asked if you wanted to come inside,” Jake said.

“Why?” Desi asked.

Jake threw his hands up. His face screwed into a comfortable expression of apathy. Despite the swelling clouding his eye, he looked handsomely unconcerned about her reaction. Desi drew into his indifference.

“Whatever, man. You said I wasn’t being civilized. Just wanted to invite you in.”

“Okay,” Desi said. She edged her way inside, sticking next to the wall. She plopped the bag down in front of her.

“So, you from here?” Jake asked.

“From here? Like, Modesto, here?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“Oh. Where are you from?”

“Portland.”

“Portland? Why are you here then?”

“Got a job. I worked as a traveling nurse.”

“Worked? You’re not a nurse anymore?”

“Not a traveling one.”

Jake nodded while fishing through more of Ian’s stuff.

“Are you taking this back?” Jake asked. He motioned to the taught bag that was hanging down in front of her, swinging like the pendulum back and forth.

“Not if you want it,” she said.

She handed him the rabbit ear strings. He took the bag, the plastic cutting into his fingers. It was heavier than it looked, all soft spots and no poking out edges. Jake dropped it in front of the couch and pulled a pocketknife out of the back of his jeans. The plastic gave easily against the blade, collapsing into a pile of folded t-shirts and more books. Jake felt like he was going to be buried under his brother’s ceaseless collection of books.

“Have a seat,” Jake said.

Desi walked through the apartment and took her place at the bistro table in the kitchen. She wiggled into the steel chair that was part of the set meant for outside use.

“Thanks,” she said.

Jake lifted one of the books out of the bag and shuffled through the pages. It was a book written by Faulkner about a family in their quest to bury a family member. Jake took a deep inhale of the stale, used smell. It smelled like tree bark and cigarettes. Dust danced up from the crease of the pages and latched onto the hair in Jake’s nose. He started sneezing and hacking up spit.

“Geeze. Do you want some water?” Desi asked.

She got up from the table and went straight to the cabinet with the glasses and plastic cups. She pulled out the chilled Brita pitcher from the fridge and filled the glass. She spilled some water while pouring and retrieved a towel from the drawer next to the sink. Jake watched her maneuver through the kitchen like she owned it, deftly opening and closing drawers and doors. She swirled the ice around the cup, shaking it up in a tiny tornado that tried to touch the bottom, but dissipated before it ever got there.

“Here,” she said.

Jake looked at the water starting to sweat down the glass. He walked over to the fridge and pulled out one of the beers. He popped the top with the butt end of his lighter and took three huge swallows. He threw the cap on the bistro table and then sat down on the seat opposite her, keeping his knees pinned close against his body, careful not to knock into her, not to shatter the façade she may have been putting up for his benefit.

“So,” Jake said. “How long were you together?”

Desi took the neglected glass of water and started sipping it. Playing with the condensation on her fingertips between swallows.

“A little less than a year. Off and on. But we’ve been friends since I moved here. About four years ago.”

“How?”

“Work.”

“Ian wasn’t a nurse,” Jake said.

He cocked his head like a hopeful hunter after firing a shot into the distance.

“No, but he volunteered there.”

“What? Ian? Volunteered where?”

“At the hospital. He would come and dress up like a clown, read books to the kids in the pediatric oncology center.”

“The what?”

“Children’s cancer unit,” Desi said.

“I didn’t even know he liked kids,” Jake said.

“Oh, yeah. He loved it. That’s how we met.”

Ian dancing in clown make-up invaded Jake’s vision and he clenched his face to relieve himself of it, of this masquerading brother.

“I guess there was a lot I didn’t know about him. I mean, we were close as kids. And again toward the end. But, we didn’t talk a lot. Just about shallow shit, I guess. Nothing real.”

“Ian wasn’t a big talker,” Desi said.

“I guess we don’t have that in common.”

“What do you do?” Desi asked.

“Eh, I’m all over.”

“Ooh, a real bad boy nomad. You remind me of all my ex-boyfriends. Except for Ian, of course.”

Jake laughed. It felt foreign to him after all of these months. The muscles of his face spasmed, as if every tendon that wasn’t linked to frowning had atrophied. He opened his mouth larger than he had since finding out about his brother’s cancer diagnosis. He took the air deep into his lean stomach and held it, letting it balloon out. He kept it there, incubating it inside of him, afraid to release it.

“No. Not Ian. Ian was on the straight and narrow.”

An image of his brother floated before his cloudy eye. He let it hang there until his phone rang and pushed him back into reality.

“Hold on a sec. Sorry, I swear, this thing has been ringing all fucking day.”

“Hello?” Jake said into the iPhone.

Coach Ralph spoke on the other end. His voice was loud and sunny, as if he was holding a big, tight grin with every word.

“Jay-man,” Ralph said. A nickname he only used when he was asking a favor.

“What do you want?” Jake asked.

“Our fight’s coming up.”

“I told you I wasn’t interested.”

“I know. And I told you, you were obligated. Look. Here’s the thing—it’s already sold out. We need you there. But, since I know you’re going through a *tough* time.”

Ralph’s voice took on a teasing tone, making Jake’s jaw square jaw clench down like a pit bull in a fight.

“Yes.” Jake snapped. Ralph chuckled, a small snake like hiss that ended with his sharply sucking in his teeth.

“I am willing to split my cut 50/50 with you, instead of 30/70. *And* I’ll also let this be your last fight.”

“So, you’ll pay me more and you won’t bother me after this?”

“Yep.”

“What’s in it for you?”

“What? Money. Obviously. If you don’t come, I make none.”

Desi stood, gathering her over loose sweatshirt up into folds before dropping them back down, cloistering herself behind layers of black fabric. She headed toward the door, first lingering at the bookshelf.

“Ok, whatever Ralph. Yeah. I’ll be there.”

“What? Really? Just like that?”

“What? Yeah. Look. I gotta go.”

“Sorry, that was my coach,” Jake said. “You don’t have to leave.”

“Coach for what?” Desi asked.

“I fight.”

“Really? I thought you said you fell down on a door or something.”

“Yeah, well, his fist was kind of like a door.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you fight?”

“That’s not the usual response from women.”

“Is it usually ‘that’s really stupid’?”

“No. Not that either,” Jake said. “I guess because I liked it. Maybe. It’s an escape. I don’t know,” Jake said. “I’m quitting, either way. This is my last fight.”

“Why?”

“Not really cut out for it. I keep losing.”

“Are you supposed to admit that?”

“Ha, I don’t think so,” Jake said. “So, one more time and then done. Hopefully I go out with a bang.”

Jake shadowboxed in the fraction of negative space between them, pushing the air with his hands to softly kiss Desi’s cheek.

“When is your fight?”

“Saturday?”

“Like in two days?”

“Yeah.”

Desi sized up the dark purple and black splotch tattooed on his head. A bruise so dark it looked unreal, like skin couldn’t possibly change that much. Jake jerked his head away, giving her his pretty boy side—clean shaven and chiseled.

“Are you going to be ready?” Desi asked.

“Yeah. I’ll be fine.”

Jake thumbed the neck of the beer he was drinking, swishing the last few gulps around in the brown glass. The suds reminding him of waves, crashing up the sides of the bottle.

“Well, I should get going. Good luck on your fight.”

“Thanks.”

“Actually, here’s my number. In case you need anything.” She produced a sharpie from her back pocket—one she had used to mark Ian’s stuff. She scribbled a messy set of ten digits starting with an area code Jake didn’t recognize. Desi turned and clutched the banister as she descended one step at a time, noncommittally dangling each foot over the step before placing her weight down.

“Hey, if you want to come,” Jake called down over the railing. “It’s at the Cooke kickboxing gym. 9 pm. It’s on Broadway.”

Desi turned, her eyebrows like two individual brushstrokes, arching up slightly. She nodded before turning back and pounding down on the gravel and leaving him behind to languish in the chemical scent of permanent marker.

The relentless buzz vibrated again, saving him from the noxious cocktail of nostalgia and warm beer.

“Hi Emily,” Jake said.

“Hi Jake. I’m glad you’re still up. Sorry to call so late.”

“It’s fine.”

“Your dad just got out of the hospital. He has to wear a cast for a few weeks, and then go to physical therapy. But the doctor doesn’t think surgery is necessary. He did have to have twelve stitches, though.”

“Jesus, what happened?”

“I don’t know. He just...he said he was having a bad time.”

“Oh.”

Jake heard Emily’s voice raise an octave, the tears probably welling up behind the small square glasses that she always wore when she drove at night.

“I just don’t know what to do sometimes. You know? I just don’t know how to reach him. It’s just been so hard. Your brother, he just. He was so young. I think we should go to therapy, grief counseling. But your dad is against it.”

“Yeah. Sounds like him. Well, I’m at Ian’s. So, I’m going to go. Get back to this.”

“Oh. Ok. Thank you, Jake. I...We, really appreciate it.”

“Sure.”

“Bye, hon. Love you.”

Jake spun around straight into a box he had left in the middle of the living room floor. It knocked into the bookshelf and shook loose a picture frame on top, tumbling down with a crack. Jake bent over to pick it up. A hairline fracture ran down the length of the mirror where two toothy boys stood, both with furry faces and wearing backpacking gear. Ian slightly taller, leaning over Jake in front of a background of lean rock faces. Their eyes crinkled in joy, like nothing could ever stop them from conquering the world.

Jake placed it back on top of the bookshelf, feeling the slight brush of a clean sheet of paper under his hand. An unopened envelope, rested on its back with the simple clean all capital letters: *JAKE*. He tucked it in the front pocket of his jeans, and headed out back to his car in the breaking dawn.

II.

“Hey man, I’m coming over,” Jake texted Ian, the iPhone’s glass screen reflecting the late summer sun violently.

Jake put his Jeep into drive and started over. They were brothers, he didn’t need an affirmative response. He was coming, regardless. The text was really more of a courtesy for Ian than a request.

“Ian,” Jake called as he climbed the stairs, two at a time, up to Ian’s apartment. Jake banged on the front door, waiting to be received. Ian had lived here for two years, but Jake still didn’t have a key. He barely had keys to his own apartment, repeatedly forgetting them at restaurants or buried between couch cushions at friends’ houses.

A thump shook the door, like a jug of water had been dropped onto the floor. Jake began pounding his fists louder, yelling for Ian to “open up, open up!”

The latch lifted. The door slowly creaked open into a shade-drawn darkness. Jake crossed the threshold into the house, checking his shoulder for ghosts and serial killers. Ian was crawling back to his bedroom on hands and knees.

“Dude, what are you doing?”

Jake moved past him and opened the curtains to dust off the darkness that had been covering him.

“Have a hard night last night? One too many?”

Ian didn't respond, he just kept going one knee and hand in front of the other, into the bathroom at the end of the hall—about four steps from the living room. Jake followed him, lagging behind. His heartbeat was undulating up his spine into his throat while he waiting for Ian to talk. Ian made it to the toilet just in time.

“Wow, dude, maybe warn me,” Jake said.

He went back into the living room and waited for Ian to return. Ian was sweating profusely and holding his gut when he crawled back in. Stopping between lunges forward to pant and try to catch his breath.

“Man, are you ok?”

Ian looked up at him. He looked so small under his huge eyes, skin bagging around underneath. His cheek bones jutting through his sallow complexion.

“You need to go to the hospital. You look like shit,” Jake said.

Ian didn't respond, he pulled himself up onto the couch and lay, propped up by the wilted pillows. He gave a weak thumbs up before wiping the sweat away from his brow. His hand pausing at the top, lacking the energy to move.

“All right, this isn't normal. Your eyes are literally yellow.”

“Ok,” Ian said, softly. “Can you take me?”

“Yeah, let's go.”

Jake gathered his brother around him, all bones and loose skin. He fluttered in the wind. He put him into the car and fastened him up, like a father would to his newborn son.

“Who do you keep texting?” Jake asked once they were in the sterile hospital waiting room, sitting in desire of a triage nurse to tell them everything was ok.

“No one, man,” Ian said.

“Is it a girl?”

“Drop it, dude.”

“Dad said if you ever had a girlfriend, we would know about it.”

Ian laughed a little before doubling over in pain from the exertion on his stomach.

“Mom is really worried,” Ian said.

“*Emily* is really worried?” Jake asked.

This conversation was one that never got old between them, no matter how many years they had it. Jake would never back down in his allegiance.

“Yeah, mom,” Ian said.

“She’s not our mom.”

“She’s the most mom of the moms we’ve had.”

“You’re not remembering right, then,” Jake said.

Ian opened his mouth, gaping like a fish out of water. The retort was bubbling up on his tongue, Jake could see the resentment starting to thicken into a paste of hate he would fling at Jake, put him in his place.

“Ian Dulance,” the nurse stepped out, beckoning them.

“What seemed to be the problem?” the nurse asked while taking him back into the room. Ian propped up on the white paper-coated bed.

“I keep throwing up. I can’t eat. My stomach is in constant pain,” Ian said.

“Mhm,” the nurse said, clicking away at the computer in the corner of the room.

“And how long has this been going on?” she asked.

“About a week, week and a half,” Ian said.

“Oh, okay. And any other symptoms?” she asked.

“He looks like shit,” Jake piped up from the other side of the closet-sized room.

The nurse smiled slightly at the crudeness before washing it away into a professional composure unknown to Jake.

“And his eyes are yellow,” Jake added.

“Oh,” the nurse said.

She looked up at Ian, curled spine, slumped down on the thin bed. She stood and walked over to him, examining his eyes with her big brown ones. Her crunchy black hair slicked back in a severe ponytail.

“We’re going to need a stool sample and a urine sample. And a blood sample,” she said.

She handed Ian a prescription paper and told him to go down to the lab to have the blood taken.

“You can turn those in to the nurse at the front desk,” she said and then left the room without a word. Two plastic containers waited for him at the end of the counter.

“Gross,” Jake said, and got up to follow the nurse out of the door.

“Dude, you are the grossest cancer patient,” Jake said, toweling off his brother’s perspiring back as he heaved black bile into the toilet.

Ian laughed between convulsions, dry heaving chuckles. His cheeks were sunken and the skin pulled tight over his pale, hairless skull.

“You’re never going to get a girlfriend, now,” Jake said, brushing at the bald base of Ian’s skull, spidered with green and faintly purple webs. His skin was like tissue paper, showing every vein underneath.

Ian gave a weak thumbs up, before throwing up nothing but liquid. Tears started streaming down his cheek. Jake’s big brother, always three inches taller, and fifteen pounds more muscular was now curled around a toilet bowl, a tiny, wrinkled skeleton. His eyes look up at Jake. Ian flashed him a look, begging him to do something. Jake stood up and went to the kitchen. He listened to the sounds of puking clang in the echoing bathroom.

Ian crawled out and Jake put him to bed. He pulled the sheet up from Ian’s navel to the top of his chin, better adjusting the blanket to just under the protruding Adam’s apple, carved out of the sinewy neck. Jake left him to nap, going in to clean up the splatter that had landed around the bowl. He tidied up the vomit, like he had after all the other chemo appointments. Like he would the next day, for the last time, after it puddled around the leg of the couch.

Sirens ripped through the mid afternoon, collecting at the apartment. Their synchronized blasts danced up the stairs as the EMT’s lifted Ian out of his apartment. Jake followed them, screaming, yelling, pushing at the shadows.

He stood alone, staring at Ian in the hospital. The bed stretching on forever with Ian smashed up at the head, his small body wrapped up in the thin bed covers. The heap of bile under Ian, still attached by a small string of spittle haunted Jake as he stood, an hour later, at the foot of the bed. The present now a distant memory as Ian was motionless.

“Jake,” Emily said. Jake looked at the darkness stretching out. He saw her willowy fingers cupping the air in front of him, palm facing the ceiling. Jake took his hand out of his pocket. Once he moved toward them, everything would be different. The heart monitors no longer acting as a metronome ticking out a faint heart beat, the blanket no longer swelled up with breath, unceremoniously. A rage filled up from his belly, climbing slowly up his throat, strangling him. He battled it, trying to let himself go to her and be collected into their arms. He wanted her to ring him out, squeeze out the pain that was burning, flushing his neck and cheeks.

“Mr. and Mrs. Dulance?” the doctor asked his dad and stepmom.

The doctor stood with his hands folded in front of him. His shoulders stooped to the necessary grade of somberness, of condolence.

Jake avoided him as he walked out of the room. He struck the outside wall of the room before heading out, back into the sunshine, back into life.

III.

Fluorescent lights flashed cold on Jake’s shaved head. He was jumping up and down in his corner of the worn-out ring. The other fighter was five minutes late. Ralph went to talk to the bookie. Jake started shadow boxing to warm up.

The announcer walked into the ring. Ralph followed him in.

“What’s going on? Where’s the other guy?” Jake asked Ralph.

Ralph gave his famously sly grin. He pulled off his shirt, slipping a pair of hand wraps out of his pocket.

“Just you and me, baby boy,” Ralph said.

“What are you talking about?”

Ralph didn’t respond. Someone else Jake knew from the gym hopped up through the ropes and finished wrapping Ralph’s hands, before sliding on a pair of black gloves.

Ralph nodded to the announcer.

“Round 1!” He bellowed to the audience.

Jake came out from his corner, ducking low and keep his hands tucked in front. Ralph sidestepped and threw a quick jab. Jake ducked under it, spinning Ralph around. Jake stood and gave a right that Ralph blocked. Jake dropped low, to avoid Ralph’s anticipated elbow, and was met with a right foot instead.

Hours later, Jake woke up to the smell of Febreeze and vanilla. A fluffy white comforter surrounded him. He pushed up to his elbows, and felt a wave of nausea flow over him.

“Wow, wow, there. Just, lay down. You’re not in a great shape,” Desi said.

“Wha? Why am I here? What happened at the fight?” Jake said.

“You got your ass handed to you by your supposed ‘Coach.’”

“What?”

“Yeah. He beat you pretty good. But he told me to tell you when you woke up, that you’re even now. No hard feelings.”

“No hard feelings? What the fuck?” Jake said, still laying in the bed.

“Yeah. Real nice guy, that one.”

“I feel like I got hit by a bus.”

“Yeah, the emergency room seemed to think you had.”

“Emergency room? Why did I go there?”

“Because you were bleeding from your ears. Couldn’t be too careful.”

“I thought you were a nurse. Why didn’t you just handle it?”

“I am a nurse,” she said, incredulous. “That’s why they released you to my custody without an overnight observation.”

Jake shifted under her stare, trying to snuggle down more into the pillow top mattress that was holding him.

“Anyway, you’re fine now. For the most part,” she said.

Jake lay, feeling immobilized by the softness of the bed against his aching body. He tried to shut his eyes, but the spinning of the room kept him alert. He opened them back up, trying to keep his stomach from regurgitating everything he had in it, which was a couple of beers and three hard boiled eggs, from what he remembered.

“It’s funny, when your brother talked about you, he always said you were a really sweet guy.”

“I can be.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. When I give a shit. I can be a really nice guy.”

“Yeah. I guess I can see that. He would tell me about how you came over after all of his chemo treatments to help him around the house.”

“Those really wiped him out. Pumping all that poison into anyone would, though, I guess.”

Jake gently rubbed his face, feeling one side ballooning out more than the other.

“Do you have a mirror?” Jake asked.

“Trust me, you don’t want to see.” Desi said.

She got up from the chair and went the three steps to the freezer to get him some ice. She handed it to him. He barely touched it to his cheekbone before squinting in pain from the force of the ice on his broken face.

“Did he talk about me a lot?” Jake asked.

“Yeah, he did. He really loved you guys. He was very about family. Always wanted one of his own.”

“Ian? A family? Like, wife and kids family?”

“Yeah. Wife, two point five kids, dog. The whole thing.”

“Shut up,” Jake said.

Jake rolled over to better see Desi, to size up whether she was lying or not.

“Then why didn’t he ever bring you home to meet us?” Jake asked. “Outside of just telling us you were his nurse?”

Desi shrugged her shoulders, her downturned mouth drawing slightly further down her face.

“We didn’t start dating until after his cancer diagnosis. I think he wanted to see if he beat it before bringing me around.”

Desi started shifting in her seat.

“That’s a long time to date someone and never talk about them.”

“Your brother was quirky like that. He was very calculated. He liked taking measured, planned steps.”

“Yeah, like in the end.”

Desi zipped up, sitting straight against the back of her chair. Jake wanted to push and talk about the cancer, his pain, his death, but the throbbing in the back of his eye kept him from prying. His physical pain stifled him.

“Yeah, well, I asked him to introduce us. He planned on it once, but I guess Robert and he were fighting. He didn’t want to be the first to break and go over there. As much as he loved family, Ian could hold a grudge. And when he set his mind to something, he did it.”

“My dad would probably have been relieved to know Ian had a...*girl*/friend. If you know what I mean.”

Desi snorted.

“Ian was not gay,” she said.

“Well, we know that now,” Jake said, looking Desi up and down with his one good eye.

“Do you want anything to drink?” Desi asked.

“Got any beer?”

“I don’t think beer is something you should be drinking in your condition.”

“I’m fine.”

“Still. As a nurse, I’m not giving you beer.”

“Fine. Just anything but water.”

Desi got up and went to the fridge, shuffling around what sounded like condiment jars and cellophane bags.

“I have this,” Desi said, carrying in a beaten juice carton. “Does this work?”

“Yeah, sure,” Jake said from the bed.

Desi started fishing around for glasses to empty the rest of the box into. Jake saw his pants lying on the floor next to his worn-in hoodie his grandpa had given him before he passed. He kicked on his jeans over his fighting shorts, which were more like spandex underwear than shorts. In the pockets was a bundle of money shoved in, his coach at least staying true to his word of an even 50/50 split. Jake shoved the money back in his pocket, crunching down a piece of paper. He pulled it out, staring at the rumbled sheet. The unopened envelope. He took a deep breath and flopped back on her protective bed, feeling the strength of adrenalin rush through him. He opened it and read.

“Here,” Desi said. She placed the glass on the bedside table adjacent to him. He didn’t move.

“They knew,” he whispered.

“What?” Desi asked.

“They knew.” Jake repeated. “They fucking knew this entire time! And they never told me!”

He jumped off her bed. Desi cowered next to the chair, reacting the same way when he had slapped the wall with the notepad. Jake's chest swelled.

"What's going on?" she asked, trying to calm him.

Jake ripped up the letter in half, then fourths, shredding it into eights. He let the confetti of abandoned words and lies rain down in her bedroom.

"I need to go."

"Just sit down for a second. Calm down," Desi said. She moved to block off his charge toward the door.

"Get the fuck out of my way."

"Just hold on a second. What's wrong?"

"If you don't move right fucking now, I'll make you."

Desi stood. The room staled with anger. Jake was taller than her and rippling with animosity, but his face was pulsing with a different emotion. His unaffected eye was downcast in a somber defeat. She walked over to him and placed her hands on his shoulder, holding him in a platonic hug. He pushed her to the side and charged to the door, ripping it open. Desi screamed.

The night enveloped him in a fog of justified resentment. He drove off, floating in his cloud.

A pounding sounded through the Dulance house at 3 am. Robert opened it a crack. Jake pushed the door open.

“Jesus, Jake. What’s wrong?” Robert cradled his cast. “You look terrible. What happened to your face?”

Emily padded down the stairs holding a baseball bat that Robert always kept by the side of the bed.

“Jake?” she said.

“Em, it’s fine. Go back to bed,” Robert said.

“No, she can stay,” Jake said.

“Are you drunk?” Emily asked. “What happened to your face?”

“Who gives a shit?” Jake yelled back.

“Hey, don’t talk to your mom like that,” Robert said.

“She’s not my mom,” Jake said, sounding like a child throwing a temper tantrum.

“Watch your mouth. She’s the one who raised you. She’s been in this family since you were four years old.”

“That doesn’t make her my mom.”

“What’s this about Jake? Why are you here?”

“Dad?” Noah called out from the stairs. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s fine, Noah. You and your mom go back to bed.”

Emily took Noah’s shoulder into her hand and guided him back down the hall.

“No, tell her to come back!” Jake yelled at Robert.

Emily reappeared at the top of the stairs.

“What do you think mom would think?” Jake asked. “My real mom.”

“You already asked me this Jake. I don’t think about her much.”

"Yeah, I know."

"Hey, she walked out on us. I know you were too young to remember, but--"

"I remember enough," Jake said.

"Ok, well, then you'll remember that she left us to move to Florida with some drug guy she met in NA. You'll remember that she left this family. And it was for the better."

"That's what you say," Jake said.

"That's the truth!" Robert yelled. "What do you want? Why are you here? To talk about your mother? It's been over twenty years, Jake. What do you want from me?"

"I want to know what you think she'd say about you keeping her from her sons."

"Keeping her? She is the one who left. What is wrong with you?"

"Your son is dead, and you don't care. Just like you didn't care when our mom left."

"That is not true! I went to counseling with her. I did everything she wanted. She chose meth over us, Jake. She chose drugs. She had a different life."

"And you were fine with it! How long until you moved Emily in?"

Robert paused, balling his hands into fists.

"Emily was an old friend. We got together *after* your mom left. I don't know what's gotten into your head, but don't get to come into my house at 2 in the morning, drunk, and start badmouthing the woman who raised you. I want you to leave."

"Yeah, well. I don't need it anymore. I don't need this fucking family anymore—with their lies and their secrets."

“What is going on, Jake?” Emily asked.

“You fucking knew!” Jake said. “You all fucking knew!”

“Knew what?” Robert asked.

“And you kept it from me!” Jake said.

“Jake, please, come and lie down. You’re upset. Just come lie down,” Emily said.

“Fuck you, Emily,” Jake shot out.

“Get out of my house, now!” Robert yelled.

He stormed toward Jake, ready to push him out of the door and lock it forever.

Jake turned around before he could have the satisfaction and walked out, slamming the door behind him. He climbed into his Jeep and drove out to the last place he wanted to be.

He climbed the stairs, shaking when he came to the top. He fished the key out from under the mat and walked in. The apartment was completely empty. The movers had been there earlier that day. Transported all of Ian’s stuff to his parents’ house. Jake dropped to the ground and laid down, flat, next to the stain that looked out of place now that the couch had been removed. Jake let the room spin. He kept his head turned only on the left, avoiding the pulsing right side.

The vertical blinds clapped with the wind. The cool air breathed into the room. The wind increased, slamming the blinds against the wall. Something fluttered down from the sill of the window. A white folded paper with a fat yellow Post-it note fell to the ground, lifting slightly with the kick of the blinds. Jake rolled onto his stomach and crawled over to the paper.

-Jake,

You're an asshole. But, don't worry, I didn't read it.

-Desi

P.S. You should try locking the door next time.

Jake held the letter in his hand, reinforced with big, bold lines of clear scotch tape. The lines of tape ran throughout the letter like a map guiding him somewhere he wasn't ready to go. He clutched it to him, scratching his finger lightly on the serrated edge of the tape. He opened it, slowly, gently. He read it through again. He savored it. The words opening up the possibilities he kept stored in his head, springing them loose in a realm of what-if's. Jake drank it in. He basked in the probabilities. The script, his brother's signature capitals. The engineer in him showing through in every square letter he crafted.

1134 Genevieve Court

Miami, FL 33128

I hope you find your peace.

Ian

He cuddled the letter to his chest. Glossy tears slid down the side of his face. He didn't stop them. They fell, one after the other down his face, absorbing immediately into the carpet beneath him. He let the pain disappear down his face and fall to the ground, burying it deep down into the fibers of the earth. He clutched the letter firmer in his hand,

protecting it from the overhead light trying to see inside of it. He kept it with him as he fell fitfully to sleep on the floor, salted with his past.

He woke up to the alarm of his throbbing head. He couldn't tell if he was hung over or it was just the pain from his swollen face. His cell phone, almost dying, flashed 3:45 p.m. Jake rolled back over, trying to will his stomach to settle and his head to calm down. He rested for an hour, and when it never subsided, he decided to quell it the best way he knew how—a little hair of the dog.

The local bar was a run-down dive with broken wooden stools and a bartender that looked weathered beyond his years. Deep, sunken eyes were framed in rivers of wrinkles, all spiraling off from each other, connecting again at the corner.

“What do you want?”

“Bottle of whiskey.”

“I’m not a liquor store. I serve drinks.”

“Then I’ll take a glass of whiskey. And leave the bottle.”

The bartender grumbled and poured a fat drink of well whiskey. The acidic aroma wafting up into Jake’s nose. It churned his stomach, but he took it anyway, swigging it down deep into him. After Jake drank four glasses, the bartender removed the bottle.

“Hey, man,” Jake barked. “I’m paying customer.”

“Yeah. And you’re too drunk for your money to be any good here. Go on.”

“What you mean? My money is good.”

“It’s 7 o’clock. Go home.”

“I have no home!” Jake yelled.

“Well, that’s not my problem. Get out of my bar.”

Jake took the glass off the table and pitched it at the wall.

“Hey!” The bartender yelled.

Jake surrendered his hands in the air and stood up, moving toward the door.

“That’s it. I’m calling the cops.”

The bartender moved toward the phone on the wall. Jake stumbled out to his car and got in the Jeep. He dragged the door closed with all of his energy. He turned on his car. He tried to start his car right when the police lit him up.

The police were not gentle with him as they pushed him into the drunk tank. He screamed from inside the cell. The cops walked away, ignoring the obscenities. The one that stayed behind told him he had to sober up before he got his one phone call. Jake sat on the bench and leaned his head against the cool wall. He fell asleep instantly, using the cool porous cinderblock to cradle his busted face, reducing the swelling as he dreamed.

The beach sprawled out in front of him. He saw his brother, running in swim trunks. Ian looked about three. He had a big grin tucked under a floppy fisherman’s hat. He had blue plastic glasses too big for his small face. He ran around in the sun, carrying a pail full of sand. Jake watched. His mom came running up behind. She was wearing a sarong around her thin hips, rib bones jutting out from under her swimsuit. She was

cuddling an infant Jake, rocking him back and forth on the sand. Ian ran around, shoveling more sand into his pail.

“Go give mommy a kiss,” Robert said from somewhere Jake couldn’t see.

His mom, Susan, bent down and Ian ran over. He gave her a big wet kiss. Jake started crying in her arms. Susan laughed gaily, bright with love. She threw her head back before nuzzling fussy Jake. Ian grabbed onto the sarong, leading her to his castle. She followed, smiling broadly.

Robert was motioning for them to come to the water. Ian walked toward him. Jake snuggled softly into his mother, inhaling her scent. A sweaty sweetness with the corrosive ocean air. He felt the humidity on his cheeks, burying them into her. She squeezed him tighter, keeping him safe. His mother, always there to protect him. He felt the love in her, a fundamental, indefinable love. Jake watched his baby self give a big, gummy smile when they approach the water. His mother dangled him safely in the waves, but never let him go from her arms. He would have to be ripped from them.

Jake woke up with wet cheeks. He wiped them off and cleaned his hand on his quad. He massaged the length of his leg with a wet palm. A cop came up, knocking his baton on the cell bars.

“Ready for your call?”

Jake nodded and rose, obediently. He walked down the hall to the pastel pink phone sitting high on a cabinet. He called his dad. Robert answered.

“Hi,” Jake said.

His dad remained silent.

“I’m in jail,” Jake continued.

“Good,” Robert said before hanging up the phone.

Jake looked desperately at the cop. The cop nodded. Jake looked at his palm. He dialed another number.

“Hello?” the voice answered.

“I’m sorry.”

The voice on the other end didn’t respond. Jake cleared his throat, ripping out the constricting roots of distress that were crawling up, collecting himself.

“I’m in jail,” he said.

The silence remained.

“Look, I know I fucked up. But, I really need someone right now. And I hoped it would be you.”

“Oh,” the voice said.

“Could you pick me up? I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

The pause hung again. It bled out into the silence of the night. The wall clock stopped ticking, holding its breath with Jake.

“Ok,” the voice said.

Jake walked back to his cell to wait. Thirty minutes clicked by. The nerves in his stomach jolted as he heard the clack of flip flops coming down the hall. Desi appeared in front of him.

“Ready?” she asked.

Jake nodded. They walked to the front of the station. Jake signed the paperwork and they both walked out into the warm night. Desi started to head back to her car. Jake pulled out the money from the bag of his effects. He counted it. The wad of twenties stacking up nicely in his meaty palm. Six-hundred and fifteen dollars all together. Coach must have given him a bonus. Sometimes even the people Jake had written off surprised him.

“Hey, wait,” Jake said.

She stopped, waiting for something profound. Her hip cocked out to the side.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Desi shrugged, mimicking Jake’s trademark apathy.

“It’s ok. You’re going through a tough time.”

“Hey, you are too.”

Desi looked down. He thought he could see the initial glisten of tears forming before she shook her head. When she looked back at him, her big wet eyes had returned to two determined points.

“What did you see in my brother?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Like, what drew you to him.”

Desi bit her lip against a faint smile forming underneath. She gnawed at the pleasure building from talking about Ian.

“He was good.”

“Good?”

“Yeah. Good. He was sweet and patient. He was unlike anyone I had ever been with. He said the right things at the right time. He held my hand when we drove. Just sweet little things. And he was funny. Smart. Handsome. All the cliché things.”

Jake listened, quietly surveying her face light up.

“But there was something deeper in him. A kind of intrinsic nurturing that you couldn’t quite pinpoint, but could feel. It’s hard to explain...” she trailed off.

Jake stared at her. The light of the street pooled around them, protecting them from the darkness of the night.

“It’s actually the same thing that reminds me of him when I’m around you,” she said.

“What?” Jake asked.

“The nurturing. You are a very sweet guy. I can just feel it. You and your brother are more alike than you may realize.”

“I’m not good like him,” Jake said.

“Maybe not right now. But, you are. Ian always said you were. And I see it.”

Jake snaked his hand down the back of his shirt, rubbing the top his back with calloused palms. He massaged the tight knots balling in his shoulders. He felt steel-plated. He felt temporarily invulnerable.

“I’m going on a trip,” Jake forced out. The words tumbled out like a plea.

“What kind of trip?” she said.

Jake stroked the letter buried deep inside his front pocket. “I’m going to Florida.”

“What’s in Florida?”

“Me. Maybe you.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

“I’ll make you a deal,” he said.

Emily

I.

There isn't any milk for the coffee. Maybe he will finally go to the store and buy milk, and honey for tea. Tea is supposed to be very detoxifying for the kidneys. And maybe get some bread for toast. Oh, no, we're off bread. No gluten. Or processed foods. Or any dairy that isn't organic. Everything else is filled with pesticides. And what about GMO's? Dr. Phil just covered it last month. He showed a chart with the correlation between genetically modified foods and cancer. We'll need all new produce—the kind with the special stickers that say local.

I should probably just go to the store; Robert will never remember to get the cage-free eggs. I'll go on my way back from the gym. He should sleep. He needs it. I can do this. Noah's lunch has to be made, anyway.

The stretch of spandex tightens around my thighs and hips, squeezing off a ring of fat at the waistband like a strangled toothpaste tube ballooning all the jelly to the top. Two gelatinous mounds sat on either side of my outer thighs. The yoga pants flattening out my backside into a slightly cushioned pancake. My collarbone at least had a nice definition to it; maybe no one would notice the ripple in my shirt when I walked.

"I'm going to yoga class, and then the store," I said.

The house responded with chilly disregard, a disinterested moaning came from the baseboards in the kitchen.

"Robert? Noah?"

Down the hall, the glow of a television screen spilled under Noah's door. Fast clicking and grunting swept under the small aperture. I knocked, trying to syncopate my beat with his clicks.

"What?" Noah said behind the barrier, ducking away from my words.

"I'm going to the store. Do you need anything?" I asked.

"No."

"Ok."

There was no shuffling on the other end. I huddled near the door, anticipating a crack through which I could pour into, let Noah know that it would be all right. This pain was only temporary.

The door's exterior was smooth under my fingertips. The white wood chipped under the white paint, exposing the past variations of brown and black. Markers of a time before it was Noah's room, before it was even the Dulance home. A call back to a history unknown to us, but kept by someone, held deep down and covered. I covered the spot with my finger.

There was no sign of Robert downstairs. He had started taking long walks at odd times. Anytime I needed him, he seemed to be out, somewhere. I never asked where he went. His running shoes permanently stashed outside the front door, caked in mud and grass clippings. Sometimes people need space. Space helps with healing is what my friend said once. She's a therapist.

The yoga studio is new-ish. It opened three months ago, on Noah's last day of junior high school. One week after Ian's death. Two months before Jake vanished. Or disappeared. Or ran away. Whatever the proper term is for leaving your family without telling them where you're going.

Sometimes people need space.

The sign, neon orange with white letters glowing "Om Yoga" amidst psychedelic purple swirls. Underneath it whispered in lazy looping cursive "Om Is Where the Heart Is." I pinched my little pouch of fat before unloading from the car. Gaining weight had been a byproduct of the stress after Ian's diagnosis. Things began to fall apart more and more the roomier my hips got.

Walking in the bright, airy room felt fresh. The pine floors were covered in a glossy, light stain that reflected the sun's rays in its porous knots. Shelves lined with meditations on how to live better. Flip flops and canvas flats were tucked neatly into cubbies next to sports bags and leather purses. It smelled warmly of cinnamon and patchouli. A spicy purge of stress.

"Hi, are you new?" the girl at the front counter asked. She pranced delicately toward me in her butt-hugging spandex pants and cropped sports bra with a cut away back, showing off the definition of her back and sides.

"Yes," I said.

"Are you interested in our introductory promo pricing?"

"Yes," I said. "What's that?"

"It's 30 days for \$30. You get access to 30 days consecutive unlimited classes."

“Oh, is that good?”

The girl arched her eyebrows in alarm.

“What? It’s kind of like our best offer.”

“Oh. Ok. Yes. I’ll do that.”

She snatched the iPad off the back table.

“Put in your personal information and then click through to the last page and use your finger to sign the waiver,” she said.

I took the iPad and slowly clicked through on the screen keyboard. After I finished writing my name, email, birthday, and affirmed I wouldn’t sue them if I died while stretching, the petite girl showed me to the “big room,” which was slightly larger than a closet.

I walked in and felt my lungs tighten in the humidity. I dodged puddles of sweat from students past and avoided dripping my own. We clustered six to a row, four rows deep. The instructor danced around the front, practicing handstands in front of the Ganesh altar, adorned with prayer bead necklaces and flower petals resting in his folded hands. More advanced students watched her eagerly, waiting for their turn to show off. The heat clenched down harder on my lungs, each independently trying to pump enough oxygen to keep me standing upright. Each step was a mouth breathing struggle.

“Is it always so hot?” I asked her before she left.

“It’s heated yoga,” her needled brows dressed me up and down. “I suggest you set up near a window.”

I unfurled the light blue mat I had been carrying like a weapon under my arm—locked and ready to swing. It was a wedding present from twenty-six years ago. Someone's plus one had insisted that this was the key to a healthy life, and marriage.

Two decades worth of being tightly rolled in a forgotten closet corner was proving tough to flatten. My yoga mat looked like it had scoliosis. The curling edges kept flipping up and rolling back. I kicked them down while doing some seated stretch the front row was doing.

"Are you new here?"

A man asked from the black yoga mat inches from mine. Deep grooves showed gray in the black mat, where his hands and feet would go, bald spots in the tread showing the years of wear. He slid off his shirt. His chest was lined with little graying curly hairs that dotted his abdomen all the way down to the tip of his red gym shorts.

"Yes. First time," I said.

I smiled wide. Too wide? I fixed my hair into a ponytail like the rest of the women, showcasing my left hand prominently.

"To yoga or to the studio?" He asked while holding a push up position.

His voice was strained, but deep and genuine. A light gloss covered his forehead and chin.

"Both," I said. My blushing cheeks making my face look swollen.

"Well," he said, kicking through from a push up to his seat. "Welcome."

"Thank you."

"I'm Tom."

“I’m Emily.”

He enveloped my hand in his. It was warm, inviting. I let it linger, savoring the heat even in the sauna that we were standing in. Sweat falling off my brow.

“Om, Shanti,” a shirtless man bleated out, walking in with an entourage behind him.

Tom turned back to his mat. The instructor beat a small drum he had wedged between his carved hip and bicep, hunching forward to bang it in time with his chanting.

“Om, Shanti,” the class responded back.

“Come to a seat, and let us begin with three ‘om’s,” the instructor said.

Deep inhales sounded around me like a vacuum sealing out all of the impurities that had followed us in here. Calibrated hums rumbled through the floors as thirty-five students omed in unison to the breath cues of the instructor. The sequenced meditation carrying me away on their cloud of vibrations.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said. “Now for our flow.”

I panted through the seventy-five minutes of stretching, strength-building, and pose holding. The beat of the drum coordinating all of the women’s shifting limbs into perfectly executed poses and balances. I fell in and out of tree pose enough times to finally settle down on my mat with my head between my knees and rested until the final pose, appropriately named corpse. The instructor rubbed his hands together and placed them on my forehead. He pushed into my skull, cradling my thoughts in his. Then he let

go, freeing them into the room like crows rushing from a tree. They filled the space to worries and concerns, until they no longer mattered.

“How was that?” Tom asked once we were allowed to start talking again.

“It was... Yeah,” I said.

He smiled a broad, toothy grin. His teeth were impossibly white and straight, as if he never missed a day flossing. His smile was what everyone who put their children in braces at twelve hoped they would turn out with.

“It’s ok. It gets easier.”

I nodded, still lost in the brightness of his mouth. Their complementary shapes, the canine sculpted perfectly against his incisor.

“You have the nicest teeth I have ever seen,” I blurted out.

“Oh, thank you. I’m a dentist.”

“That makes sense.”

He smiled again, pride surging behind his teeth. He rolled up his mat into a symmetrical bundle of rubber. I pushed mine into a used sleeping bag, one side rolling into a sharp point. I carried the pencil structure with me and followed him into the room of windows and expensive sandals packed in wooden cubbies.

“I hope to see you again,” he said before packing up his messenger bag and scooting out the front door, head held high with the rest of the yogis.

I gathered into my Ford Escape, marinating in sweat. My forefinger punched the ignition start. Then it found the off button for the radio. The silence unpacked into the car, unfurling in a welcome serenity. I drove to the store across town, battling butterflies and guilt.

My shopping list wilted under my sweaty hand. I checked off each item mentally as I placed it into the squeaky cart: kale, spinach, string beans, bell peppers, quinoa, bulk black beans, apples for Noah's lunch, organic turkey breast, free range eggs, almond milk, GMO-free baked snap pea chips, and a vegan chocolate, gluten-free cake for dessert. My shopping cart pushed toward the acne-riddled teenage checker.

"Paper or plastic?"

"Neither. I brought bags."

I brought out my folded insulated canvas bags that I had purchased on Earth Day last year. I handed them over to the bagger, equally as broken out and teenaged.

"That'll be \$65."

I produced my credit card, handing it to the checker. He pointed to the do it yourself service machine in front.

"If that has a chip, you have to insert it."

I inserted the card and waited for the relief of the beep.

"Oh my god, Emily?"

The whiny voice was joined by a rush of blond hair moving toward me in a matching white, velour track suit.

"Oh, hi Jenny."

“Emily! How are you?”

“I’m ok. Hanging in there.”

“We heard the news about Jake. First Ian, now this. Robert must be a wreck. *You* must be a wreck.”

Jenny gave me the one size fit all concerned look that had come to be associated with our “poor” family. The card reader beeped.

“Ma’am,” the teenager said.

I hurriedly grabbed my card and shoved it back into my wallet. I threw it in the cart with the rest of my groceries and coasted off to the shoulder—a supermarket breakdown lane. She kept pouring on the questions, thick with implications that crawled up under my skin, wheedling their way to answers that were buried deep within me.

“Well, how *are* you?” Jenny insisted on continuing the conversation.

“Yes, it’s been hard. But I don’t know what you heard about Jake. He’s fine. Nothing to worry about.”

Jenny turned to give me a sidelong glance. She leaned in closer to me, checking over her shoulder, like we were in a private huddle—two people fighting against nosiness.

“Well it didn’t seem like nothing that night,” Jenny said.

“What night?”

“The night when he was banging like a lunatic on your door!”

“Oh,” I said. Heat bloomed in my cheeks under the dried sweat from yoga. “That was just a misunderstanding. Family thing.”

“I heard after that he just disappeared,” Jenny backed off, her eyes large and mouth sealed as if she was gossiping about another family and not my own.

“Yes, well, Jake’s ok. He didn’t disappear. He just went on a trip.”

“A trip?” Jenny said, her eyebrows arching into a coy curve.

“Look, Jenny, I don’t know what you heard or where, but everything is ok. Jake’s on vacation. Enjoying his time, I’m sure.”

“But you haven’t spoken to him?”

“You know Jenny, I have to get home. Need to start dinner.”

Jenny checked her watch. It was 11:15 am. She gave me a pathetic, half-lit smile. She grabbed my shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

“It’ll be ok,” she said. “And you look great by the way. Have you been losing weight?”

“Talk to you later.”

I headed toward the exit, counting to ten before exhaling. If I held it together this long, nothing else could fall apart. You’re only as strong as your weakest link. I read that somewhere, once. If I could be strong, then everyone else would be, too. I could take this burned on my shoulders. We would be fine, the whole family. It could be ok.

“Noah, Robert, I’m home. I bought kale chips!” I called out into the void.

Robert’s shoes had been discarded haphazardly at the front door. He was somewhere, just nowhere within talking distance, or listening distance. It was like his

emotions had a restraining order against my presence, ever retreating back into some dark corner that I couldn't quit get in to.

A gurgling came from the garage and ejected a dusty, coughing figure into the house. Robert had been working on his woodworking project—an antique, mahogany rocking horse. Ian and he had started on it when Ian was a child, but by the time they had made any real progress, Ian was in his teens and no longer needed a child's rocking horse.

“Get a lot of work done?” I asked.

Robert went into the kitchen, narrowly missing brushing me with his shoulder. He moved briskly to wash his hands. We have a sink in the garage, but I didn't point this out, that he didn't need to track dust and debris onto the mopped linoleum. He knows we have a sink out there. He installed it. But, the soap inside smells better. It's organic.

“You'll never guess who I ran into at the store,” I said.

“Who?” Robert asked.

“Jenny.”

Robert walked past me into the living room and flopped on the couch. The open concept floor plan did little to keep us from being closed off.

“From next door? Why is that so weird?”

“I don't know. I guess I just don't usually see her out shopping. Dan does that sort of thing.”

Robert raised his left arm in a single-handed shrug while flipping through channels with the remote in the other.

“She asked about Jake. She was like a vulture.”

No response. Robert surfed through channel after channel. Nothing came into focus on the screen long before he decided it wasn't what he wanted. He could be very finicky. But this was his time. He could switch channels if he wanted. Maybe he liked the blur in between channels leaping to other channels.

“I told her Jake was fine. I don't know who she heard it from though. Gossip around here. It's worse than wildfire.”

“I told her,” Robert said.

The television paused, a station picked. It showed a bucktooth woman dabbing her eyes with the knuckle jam of her left hand, delicately removing tears before they streamed down her face. She discussed the pain of discovering her husband cheating. The camera panned over a squat man in a suit, face like a grapefruit—pock marked and pinkish. His tie cutting into the double chin that dangled down, jiggling slightly with his sincerity as he asked her if she wanted to stay together with the cheating man. She cried harder. An audience member led an applause break that set up for the commercial break.

“What?”

“She came over after that night where Jake was pounding on the door. Wanted to see how we were.”

“Oh,” the anger welled up, like the woman's tears on tv. I kept it at bay, dabbing delicately at the bell pepper I was washing in the sink. Just a little longer and things will be ok.

“So I told her Jake took off the next day and we hadn't heard from him.”

“Why did you tell her that?” I asked, placing the rest of the produce in the strainer next to the sink. A piece of bread I was toasting popped up.

“She asked. Didn’t see the point in lying. She cared enough to come over.”

“Yeah, *cared*,” I stabbed the spoon into the crunchy almond butter and shoved a heaping helping onto the crisped gluten-free brick. I brought the plate out to Robert, completely engrossed in the daytime television show that was now following a man out onto the stage.

He took the plate absently and placed it on the table next to the couch, with his untouched water.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Did you tell her you called the cops to find him?”

“No. She came over the next day, Em. I didn’t send out a follow-up letter.”

The anger filled my stomach, silencing the grumbling temporarily. I let it warm me before extinguishing the flame.

“Have you talked to Jake? Since, since the police officer told you he found him?”

“Nope.”

Robert brought the plate back, balancing it precariously on the pillow. He ripped into the toast. His teeth, jagged and crooked, tore the toast in half like a starved beast. The almond butter created a paste affixing itself to the front row, brown against his yellowing teeth underneath. I turned to sit on the other end of the living room, away from his chomping fangs.

“You haven’t even tried?”

“He wants to leave. So let him. His brother died and he leaves? He needs to learn that not everything is about him.”

I nodded, avoiding ruffling any feathers. I could call him, too. I should call him. I tried, but I should try again. Maybe he’ll answer this time.

“I did everything I could think of for them,” Robert said.

I walked over to him. I reached out to touch the thick arm that was still resting on the couch back, cavalierly propped on the cushions. His hair matted with dust from the garage. Dirt embedded within the hairs. He didn’t turn to watch me hovering behind him.

“I think I’m going to start dinner,” I said.

The cuckoo clock in the living room chimed noon. I went into the kitchen to start chopping produce. I watched my hand move up and down with the knife blade. I felt warmth creep up my arm from the exertion. The heat emanating off my skin, wrapping around my hand, like a handshake. A firm, hot handshake.

“Actually, I’m going to take a shower, first,” I said and left the vegetables lying in the kitchen sink, helplessly waiting for their turn to be used.

The steam shower was part of the new bathroom addition we did a few years ago. It was still my favorite feature in the house. I let the heat fill my pores. I sat on the bench inside the shower while the steam filled. I sat until I was sitting in a cloud.

I got out of the shower, my skin a dewy glow. I dressed in jeans and a floral blouse Robert had bought me on a vacation to Carpentaria. I shimmied into the clothes and tiptoed back to the kitchen. The vegetables had browned in places from the air. The

avocado oxidizing more with every minute. Robert hadn't moved. His arm now dangled down the couch's back. The air was interrupted by his intermittent snores. I began counting them as I cut, listening for his exhale before stabbing into another ripe bell pepper.

"Dinner is ready," I called through the house.

Robert twitched his arm off the sofa and swished his head around. Once he gained his bearings, he stood, wobbly like a newborn giraffe, and ambled into the kitchen.

"Noah! Dinner," I tried again, and again.

Noah slumped down the stairs, wires dangling down his hunched shoulders from his ears. He shuffled into the dining room and took a heavy seat.

"It's 3 p.m.," Noah said.

"Never too early for a home-cooked meal," Robert said.

"Eating early is good for digestion," I said.

"What is this?" Noah asked, the teenage chagrin hanging heavy over the steaming plates of vegetable side dishes and non-GMO ghee.

"Quinoa stuffed bell peppers. With tomato sauce."

Noah poked it with a fork. Fat quinoa pellets shot up in the air. He stabbed at it some more, but the food gymnastics seemed to have ended. He ate the insides, leaving the red bell pepper standing firm. Robert ate his quickly. The entire table quiet, our spines glued straight to the unforgiving wooden chairs.

"Why aren't you eating?" Noah asked me.

“I already ate. It’s hard to keep a cook from sampling as she goes,” I lied. I flashed him a carefree smile and sipped ice water.

“Thanks,” Robert said as he pushed back from the table. He grabbed his dish and placed it in the sink, scrubbing off the bell pepper remnants. Noah took this as an excuse to leave as well.

“Hey, you wanna come help me in the garage?” Robert asked as Noah stood up, wiping crumbs from his shirt.

“No, thanks,” he said and turned to climb back up the stairs.

He grabbed a granola bar from the bowl on the counter on his way back up to the little citadel he had made for himself, keeping Robert and me out.

“Thank you for helping to clean,” I said.

Robert nodded at me. I came up behind him, trying to wrap my arms around his torso. It had shriveled recently from all of his walking and sawing. His woodworking, sculpting, and whittling him into a solid, defined mass that was my husband. I felt the undulation of his back under my cheek as he scrubbed the dish clean in the hot water.

I leaned my forehead into the middle of his back, where his shoulder blades both stopped. It felt like a pillow for my mind, where I could just leave all of my thoughts behind and walk away free. Robert whipped around, ceasing my transfer.

“Gotta go back to work.”

Robert went back to the garage and locked the door behind him, like a post-dinner dessert only he was allowed. The same secretive dish that kept his side of the bed cold for

most of the night, until the almost breaking dawn when he would come, like a prowler, pawing at the covers and gliding in between them.

II.

I read somewhere that starting diets on the first of the week or the first of the month helps them stick better. Today is both. Sunday, October 1st. That must be a good sign. No excuses not to start today. Robert has already slimmed down a lot, a shadow of his former self. The yoga helps, but there's no hurting in really hammering down on the health. Never hurts to be healthy—that's my new motto. Our new house motto.

One of my coworkers at Johnson Smith Realty told me about this juice place at the downtown plaza. Apparently there's a starter kit for a week, all juices included. I felt my hips starting to poke out under my work slacks when he told me about it. A slight sharpness buried under plaid pleats, waiting to be unearthed, polished up and set free. I made a date in my calendar, ready to start my excavation.

There was a long line when I got to the juice shop. A waifish girl was wandering around the store, offering samples.

"It's our ginger-kale-lemon juice," she said. "With cayenne for a bit of a kick. It's really popular."

"Oh, ok," I said.

I plucked the thimble of liquid off her stainless steel tray. The cayenne hit the back of the throat and spread through my sinuses. I gasped, trying to keep my nose from dropping down onto my tailored work blazer. I had to show houses later that afternoon. My eyes collecting in salty tears at the corners.

“Good, huh?” the girl said to my back. I gave a thumb up until I got a handle on my excretions and could turn to face her innocently curious eyes.

“I’m actually here for the week long juice cleanse.”

“Oh, yes,” she said.

“How do I start?” I asked, ready to kick start the reboot that had been promised to me by my coworker.

“So, it’s a seven day cleanse. We give you the juices to take three times a day, and then two cleansing shots. “

“Ok.”

“I’ve done that cleanse before. It’ll make you feel like a million bucks,” a warm voice surrounded me.

Tom stood, statuesque and smiling, like always, in the doorframe of the store. His dark workout clothes contrasting with the white subway tile the store walls were covered in.

“Oh, really?” I said. “That’s good to hear. My coworker actually told me about it. But it’s always nice to have a second opinion. A second, positive, opinion.”

“Where do you work?”

“I’m a realtor,” I said.

“No way. I’m actually in the market to buy a home.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Do you have a card or anything?”

“I do.”

I handed him my old business card. It had a dated photo of me sixteen years ago, pre-Noah. It felt like a senior photo. My current ones were tucked into the glove box of my car—the family-sized SUV.

“Excellent. Well, I’ll give you a call then.”

“Please do.”

“And maybe I’ll see you at the gym.”

“That sounds great.”

“I guess everything really does happen for a reason,” he said.

I giggled, a girlish laugh I hadn’t let escape into the real world since I was a lanky teenager in high school. It bubbled up before I could lock it back, force it into its box where I kept all my childish sensibilities.

“Take it easy,” he said.

“Bye.”

“*60 Minutes* is new tonight,” Robert said from the couch.

He had been planted there since this morning, his feet firmly rooting down to the plush carpet. Three beer bottles sat empty on the side board, watering him throughout his shows.

“Oh, that’s good,” I said from the kitchen.

The chipped countertops had become my oasis in the household. It was where I set up shop twice a day, every day—and three times on the weekends. There I was free to experiment and read, dabble and create. I had full control in the kitchen. Wielding the

spatula like a scepter, I commanded the eggs into two over-easy disks. Milky compacts surrounding a slightly darkened core.

“Do you want tomatoes with your eggs?” I asked Robert.

“Whatever,” he said from the couch, his face pointed toward the TV.

The back of his head funneled down from a wavy mass of brown into neatly tucked in curly cues that rested delicately on the back of his neck. His femininity hidden from view, just slightly hovering above the nape. I would push the tips of my fingers snugly against it when he pulled me to him for a kiss. A long time ago.

“Where’s Noah?” I asked.

“Upstairs. He ate earlier.”

“What did he eat?”

“I don’t know. Said he ate at school.”

I walked the eggs over to him. With every step, the yolks jiggled with trepidation; a death march, slow and steady toward the couch. The cushions had started to permanently sag where Robert took his seat. The micro tears in the seat running horizontal like stretch marks. The springs lurched audibly every time there was movement. It was an ancient couch that had come from his first marriage. The boys had worked it over enough in their youth, body slamming into the tall back.

“Shabby-chic,” Robert had once referred to it when Emily wanted to get a new one.

That was twelve years ago. Now it was too shabby to be chic, and too nostalgic to be replaced. A permanent representation of the boys’ younger years.

“Want to watch?” Robert asked.

“No, I’m ok. Long day at the office,” I said.

“Dinner?”

I shook the bottle of juice that I had been nursing since lunch. An algae-green with bits of pulp lazily floating around the bottom, like a lava lamp that had been out of commission for decades.

“Detox,” I said and climbed the steps as I had done every night that week, slow, and alone.

“Hey Emily. Here for class?” the front desk girl asked.

“Hi, June. Yes!” I said with the signature cheer that I doled out in fat dollops to the yoga center receptionists.

I took my post in the corner, next to the windows. I languished in the small breeze that would sometimes push through the oppressively hot studio. A tiny whistle of air that would land right above my brow, and cool my thoughts, forcing them into a tunnel of gratitude. On the other side was a happier family—I just had to get there first, work my way there.

My waist had shrunk significantly. Now my yoga pants puckered between my thighs. The loose material would gather underneath my seat and I would pull it up, bringing the band higher and higher on my bony hips. I tried to wrap myself in the fabric. It felt good, the rippling of spandex around my flat stomach, billowing out right underneath my rip cage. Every day, the same routine: I would retreat from my private,

heated oasis back to my citadel where my family was hooked to their own forms of pain management.

“Ok, today we’re going to start in seated meditation,” the instructor began.

I obeyed, sitting crisscross on my seat, preparing for my 75-minute break from the day outside. Because if I got through this, then maybe we could get through everything else.

I met Robert for dinner, for our evening ritual. A constant repetition that kept us both sane, or at least kept us both physically in the same space for an hour every day. I pitched together something healthy, something he wouldn’t make on his own. Anything I could do to keep him out of pizza and burgers. I didn’t complain, at least we saw each other. Maybe this was how healing worked. Noah never came out, though. He had started taking all of his meals in his room. Robert didn’t mind. I was too worried to ask. Everyone needs to cope somehow, this was better than other ways. At least he’s still here.

“How are things?” I asked.

“Fine,” Robert said.

“How’s the horse?”

“Better.”

“I am going to show houses all day this Saturday. I have a couple of finicky clients.”

“Ok.”

I eyed a piece of broccoli speared on his fork. It was yellowing near the floret, a putrid tie-dye showing its age. Robert plopped it into his mouth and chewed, methodically, without tasting. I watched him chew. The lashing of my own stomach in its hunger throes interrupted his bite.

“Was that your stomach?” he asked.

“So, have you called Jake?” I asked.

“No.”

“It’s almost November. You don’t think you should try and check in?”

“He’ll come back when he’s ready.”

Robert rose and started cleaning the dishes. His methodical chewing gave way to methodical cleaning, a mindless scrubbing the same spot over and over again. I left him alone with his plates and trudged back up to my solitude, my special time of the day when I was alone in the corner of our room. The blissful state of isolation where I tried to heal, and send it to the rest of the house. All it takes is one leader to change a household. I can be that leader.

“I’m leaving,” I said to the house on Saturday.

The couple I was working with are perpetual lookie-loos. They don’t want to commit to anything, but like the idea of buying a house. They have a bad case of HGTV syndrome—where what they think they deserve and what they can afford are upsettingly different. But, they have it in their heads that the right realtor can work their five-

bedroom dream house into their two-bedroom budget. The morning was no different, after four houses in 100 degree heat.

“Nothing really speaks to us,” Steven, the husband, said.

“Yeah, this isn’t our ‘forever’ home,” Michelle, the wife, backed him up.

“Well, there is another one that will be on the market soon,” I said. “But it doesn’t have a pool.”

The Bambi-eyed look flashed across Michelle’s face. Steven pulled her to him in his tanned, muscular arms. He had served in the army, and still had his desert tan.

“I don’t know if we’re ready to keep looking,” Michelle said.

“Maybe take a break for a little while,” Steven added.

The resentment crawled up my spine like a rabid lizard. After four months of working with them, I let it get as close to my mouth as I could, relishing the anger gripping at my body, tearing at my filters. Before it worked its way to my tongue, propping it up with its hate, I clenched it down, swallowing it into my belly, digesting it away.

“I understand completely,” I said, the smile plastering itself on my sweating face. “Take your time.”

We shook hands and I loaded back into my SUV, open house signs clacking together in the trunk, and drove toward the air conditioned office.

I erased from my white board my financial goals for the quarter--\$100,000 in sales; 25 new customers. I held the eraser loosely in my hand and patted the board, letting

the promises come off in stages. Errant black chunks of numbers stayed back, refusing to be wiped away. The receptionist tapped on my door with her sharpened fingernails.

“Come in,” I said.

“Someone is here for you,” she said, a wicked sparkle in her eyes.

“Who?”

“Some man,” she said, smiling.

“I don’t have any appointments,” I said. “Send him back then, I guess.”

Tom strutted in wearing loafers and khakis, an odd combination only the wealthy—and the handsome—can get away with.

“I saw your building on the way home from the office, thought I would stop by instead of just calling.”

“No problem. Lucky you caught me. I am rarely here. Usually showing houses.”

“That’s good because I was driving by a property that I wanted to go see.”

“Where?”

“East side of town. Out on Lakeshore. 2 bedroom—“

“Two and a half bath. Yes, I know the place. It’s been showing a lot,” I said.

“Could we check it out?”

“Now?”

“If you’re not busy.”

“Sure. I’ll call the listing agent on our way out. He’s usually pretty quick.”

“Sorry I couldn’t get us in for a showing tonight. How about next Tuesday?” I said when we got back to my office.

“That’s fine. I guess it was a lot to ask for such a quick turnaround anyway,” he said, a coy look on his lips.

“It’s no problem. Sometimes things work, sometimes...”

“True.”

“Well, I will pencil you in for Tuesday afternoon then,” I said.

“Thanks.”

Tom lingered, staring up at the marbled columns that led to the office building. The monolithic structures dwarfed the glass entrance doors.

“See you later,” I said, slipping my key into the lock on the door. The receptionist left at three p.m. on Saturdays.

“Bye,” he said.

The latch clicked back.

“Hey, are you hungry?” Tom asked.

“Oh,” I said, feeling the gurgling of my stomach. “A little, I guess. I just finished the juice cleanse. My stomach is a little off now.”

“It will be. Has to adjust back to solids,” Tom laughed.

He straightened his tie on his plaid button up.

“Can I take you for dinner? To thank you for trying?” he said.

“Um,” I said. “What time is it?”

“6:30.”

Time for Robert and Noah's dinner.

"We can do it some other time, if you want?" Tom said.

"No. No. That's fine. Tonight is great. Let's go It's good to get out of the house, sometimes."

"Excellent," he said, and opened the door to his sedan. "After you."

The door handle into my house chilled my blood. Robert was standing in the kitchen, rinsing off the ubiquitous dust that was kicked up from his insistent sawing, and sanding. A perfectionist in woodcraft—he could always see the tiniest imperfections and would buff and blow and quibble over them until he had fixed whatever microscopic issue he had. In woodworking, he paid attention to every moving part. In woodworking, he was very attentive.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," I said.

"You look nice," he said.

"Oh," I said. The stun slapping my cheeks into a pinked glow. "Thank you."

"Where were you?" he asked.

The kitchen felt claustrophobic, invaded by the glow of the oven clock, marking in its bold way 8:26 p.m. He looked at me and smiled. An intimate, small grin that took up very little real estate on his wide face. His eyes crinkled into folds of affection. An endangered look I didn't want to startle away. I held it softly in my gaze, matching it with my calm.

“Showing houses,” I said. “Remember? Ran late.”

Sometimes people need space.

“Oh yeah. I thought that was only this morning.”

“Yeah. Picky customers.”

Robert walked over to me and collected me to his chest.

“Well they have the best working for them,” he said.

I let him kiss me hard on the mouth. My hand flew to my hair, smoothing out the flyaways and unkinking the knots from earlier.

“Thank you,” I said. “What’s gotten into you?”

“I finished the horse.”

Pride swelled up him like a beacon of light surging through his chest. He beamed forward toward me, blinding me.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“Can I see it?” I asked.

“After dinner,” he said, without dropping his smile. “Have you eaten?”

“No,” I said, feeling the fullness of my gut. “No, I haven’t.”

“I made some pasta I found in the cupboard. We haven’t had that in a long time.”

Robert smiled again, and took down the ceramic bowls. The goofy ones we had painted at one of those do-it-yourself pottery painting stores. He filled them to the brim with empty carbs. He handed me the bowl.

“For my wife.”

I stared down at the yellow snaking noodles, wrapped tightly around the base of the fork, obscuring the prongs. Robert slurped his up, leaving fat red juice on his chin. He wiped it up with the back of his hand. I grabbed the fork and pretended to eat, cutting the noodles into tiny pieces and tucking them into my napkin.

“It’s so good,” I said, the napkin soaking through to my skirt.

“Something smells good,” a voice said from the back door. “Why wasn’t I invited?”

Robert and I turned toward the shadowed voice.

“We need to talk,” it said, and stepped out into the light.

III.

Ian was broad, even as a child. Jake took a little bit longer to grow into himself. He was gangly, with big ears and hands. Even though Ian was taller than Jake, Jake went through more of an awkward phase. His face had more of an edge to him than Ian. He was drawn in a permanent scowl, hard lines down either side of his thin mouth. Ian’s eyes were bright, and quick. Jake took his time, sizing things up, measuring their intentions. They were Robert’s sons, the Dulance Boy’s—he was their dad. Though Ian had Susan’s eyes, a gray-blue tint and long, dark lashes, he was more of his dad than anyone else. Jake took all of Robert’s attitude and balled it up into his stance, an untrusting bow-legged, balled fist pose that he struck when no one was watching. They were as different as they were the same—they were thick as thieves, and followed each other anywhere. They loved their dad. And they were both becoming my sons.

Jake and Ian were the only groomsmen. They wore matching gray suits with turquoise ties and pocket squares. Robert had a paisley pattern on his, to differentiate. It was a suggestion from his mother to spice up the pictures.

My father gave me his atrophied arm; his muscle had started to expire after retirement. It lay like a limp fish, supported by sheer will, as I bunched my fingers around it. My dress flowed behind me, a white mist covering the ground as I walked, clearing away any footprints for me to follow back. I turned the corner.

“Will the guests please rise for the bride?” the officiant asked.

The crowd rose, but all I saw were three men standing in front of me, asking for me to join them. My father lagged behind as I picked up my pace, running toward the future. Ian ran up to me and wrapped himself around the skirt of my dress, pressing his fat cheek into my thigh. Under the layers of tulle, I felt his softness. A baby’s innocence clinging to the fabric, his trust soaked through to my skin.

Jake remained next to his father, grabbing onto his pant leg, and hid his inquisitive face behind the gray cloth. He was almost four. Ian took my hand and dragged me up to the alter. The crowd laughed, I think. Robert’s eyes crinkled, the way I knew them too, in comfortable pleats.

“Do you each have your vows?” the officiate asked.

“Yes,” I said.

I looked down at Ian’s beaming face and Jake, still partially hidden behind Robert. I held their stare and made my silent vow to them. I vowed to take care of them, forever, like their mom never did. Jake looked at me. I hadn’t noticed that he had his

mother's accusatory eyes. The dubious look that didn't trust whatever you were about to do. I nodded to him, telling him I knew his doubts. And I did. And I knew that they would never need to be realized.

"Emily, you look pretty," Ian said. "Like a mommy."

I blushed. Hearing the words ricochet out of his mouth like a welcome into the folds of the family circle. I stroked the side of his face, fighting back the tears that were threatening to spill down in messy lines.

"I miss my mommy," Jake said. His eyes leaking down the cracks of his eyes like a broken sprinkler down a sidewalk—it littered down into the gutter of his mouth, catching into a salty gasp.

"I know you do, bud. But, Emily is here now," Robert said.

I brushed back Jake's hair and revealed a tiny widow's peak hiding under his bowl cut. The softness of his hair like silk falling through my fingers.

"I want my mommy!" Jake said again, pushing his tears harder down his face.

"I think I'm going to put him down to bed," Robert whispered to me, cradling Jake closer to him.

"Can I?" I asked.

Robert hesitated, holding Jake a little closer, trying to squeeze out the sadness, ingest it as his own. I knew the look. My mother had that look when she was babysitting my sister's child.

“Yes, of course,” Robert said, realizing who I was. I was now Mrs. Dulance, his wife, and his children’s stepmom, forever and ever until death do us part.

He placed Jake slowly into my arms, giving ample time for Jake to lash out and demand to be left alone.

“Let’s go to bed, sweetie,” I cooed into Jake’s small ear, a soft bead jutting out from the side of his head.

“I miss my mommy, too,” Ian said, demanding.

“Ok, you come, too,” I said.

I took Ian by the hand, and led them both to the hotel suite where we were staying. Jake rested on his side, facing away from me. His small back exposed. I rubbed it softly, gently, waiting. He didn’t move away. Ian sat on the chair opposite the bed, swinging his legs to and fro.

Jake’s little inhales and exhales turned into gentle snores. I rose to get some water out from the bathroom tap. Ian followed.

“Can I have some water?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said.

“I miss my mommy,” Ian said, again.

“I know,” I said. “And that’s ok. I don’t have to be your mommy. But I do love you. Do you know that?”

Ian shrugged his tiny shoulders. He created an arch in the small starched shirts that he was tucked into.

“Yeah. I know,” Ian said.

“And you know what else? If you ever want to talk to your mommy, you can come to me and I’ll tell her.”

Ian looked up at me. The bottom of his mouth magnified under the fractured glass of the cup from which he was drinking.

“What?” he asked.

“Anytime you want to talk to your mommy, you can tell me. And I’ll let her know.”

“Really?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “But, you can’t tell anyone. Ok?”

“Ok,” Ian said. “I won’t tell.”

“Ok,” I said. “Secret.”

“Secret,” he said, and finished his water. “Can I have two mommies?”

“Of course,” I said.

Ian gripped the back of my dress again in his hands, wrapping himself around my legs in a big hug. I slumped against the hotel sink, breathing deep in the web I had started to weave.

I never thought I could love anyone more than those two boys. They were my boys. And then Robert and I had Noah.

IV.

“Happy to see me?” Jake asked.

Robert and I stared at him, casually scooping pasta into a dish. He fished around for a fork, like one of the family.

“I can ask you the same thing,” Robert said. “About us.”

“I was in Florida. You know that. You sent someone.”

“We were worried. You just disappear a month after you brother dies? That’s not right! What about your other brother? Emily and I were worried sick.

“I was fine. You guys are fine,” Jake said. “Also, it was two months.”

“That’s not the fucking point,” Robert said.

“Robert,” I said.

“Where is Noah, anyway?”

“He’s at a friend’s house. Sleepover.”

“You weren’t here. How would you know how we were?” Robert pressed.

“Well, we can get more into that,” Jake said.

Jake moved over to the table, where neither Robert nor I had moved. We sat, tense in the unrelentingly straight back seats. Jake shimmied into the head seat opposite Robert. He shoveled pasta into his mouth. His teeth, straight and filed, chomping down on noodle after noodle. Clean lines of butter and oil smeared across his lips like an animalistic gloss.

“Where were you, Emily?” Jake asked.

“Where was I, when?” I asked.

“Earlier.”

“I was showing houses,” I said, blushing.

“Oh,” he said.

“Why?” I asked

“Just curious.”

“What are you doing here, Jake?” Robert asked.

“I just got back. Well, Desi and I just got back,” Jake said. “Desi was with me in Florida, in case you didn’t know.”

“We didn’t know,” I said. “Why would we know?”

Jake shrugged, showing no sign of slowing down in his carbo-loading pasta shoveling.

“Well, I know dad knows,” Jake said.

“What? How did you know?” I asked Robert.

“I told him,” Jake said.

“You told me you didn’t talk to him,” I said.

Robert refused to meet my gaze, keeping his eyes trained on Jake across the room. Each shooting daggers into one another. The holes in their bodies matching the ones in their stories.

“We talked once a week,” Jake said.

“Enough,” Robert said.

“What do you mean enough?” I screeched. “You lied to me?”

“Just, we’ll discuss it later,” Robert said.

“You can discuss it now. Lots of lies going on in this family,” Jake said.

“What does that mean?” Robert asked.

“Ian gave me an address in his letter,” Jake said.

“What letter?” I asked.

“She didn’t get one,” Robert said.

“What letter?” I asked.

“Ian sent us all letters. Before...before he *passed*,” Jake said.

“Did you get a letter?” I asked.

Robert licked his top lip, chapped from being in the garage, and the long walks he took after his day job.

“Yes,” Robert said.

“And you didn’t tell me? What did it say?” I asked.

“It didn’t say much. It just said he was sorry. And he hoped we’d be able to move on,” Robert said.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me,” I said.

“Calm down, there,” Jake said. “He’s not the only one lying, here.”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“I went to Florida.”

“Right.”

“Do you know what’s in Florida?”

“What?” Robert asked.

“Emily knows what’s in Florida.”

“Alligators?” I asked.

Perspiration was collecting in the small of my back. My shirt pasted itself to my body. I lifted it up to air it out, trying to free myself.

“Nope,” Jake said.

He produced a letter from his jeans pocket and slammed it onto the table. It was taped and the head of the sheet was crooked.

“My mom.”

“Your mom is dead,” Robert said.

“That’s what you always said,” Jake said.

I started gasping. The air thickening in the room. Accusations nestled into the crook of my neck, clamping down on my throat. I stayed quiet, unsure of what he meant.

“Desi and I went down to the address Ian gave me. Wanted to meet the mystery woman. The one who birthed us, and then took off. Get her side of it, you know.”

Robert sighed, shaking his head at what Jake was saying. He always believed her to be dead. She ran off with another man, her drug dealer, and fled to the international waters of southern Florida.

“When we got there, to the address, a man answered the door. His face was fucked up. Do you remember mine that night? Yeah, well, worse than that.”

Jake turned to show us his healed face. It was sealed back up into the attractive man he had always been. Upon closer inspection under the chandelier, when Jake leaned in for the great reveal, a tiny line ran perpendicular with his brow, a small jagged scar. He reached back in his other pants pocket and dropped a bundle of letters on to the table, next to the other one.

“There are seven there. All sent during Christmas. Seven years of letters,” Jake said.

“What?” Robert asked.

“How did you get those?” I asked.

“Apparently Emily has been writing our mother every year on Christmas. Letting her know we are still alive. What we were doing. Always kept Noah out of the letters, which I thought was odd. But, I guess why would Susan care about your son anyway?” Jake said.

“You’ve been writing her this whole time?” Robert asked, quietly.

His eyes flowed over the bundle of letters, trying to seal the tides that kept turning, running away from us every time we got a handle on one.

“I would send her cards, school photos, some money sometimes. It came out of my paycheck. It was only a couple hundred dollars. He never asked.”

“And you kept it from us?” Jake asked.

“She asked me to. I was respecting her wishes. And protecting you both. She’s still a druggie, Jake.”

“So you never told Ian?”

I paused, holding my tongue, gathering my thoughts.

“In his final days, he asked if I knew anything. Like, when exactly she died and where. He wanted to possibly visit and pay his respects. I told him she was still alive. I gave him her address. It was probably dumb of me to do, but he was suffering so much. And I knew he didn’t have the strength to travel, and I didn’t have a phone number for her. The least he could do was send a letter. He never told me if he did.”

“Well, he sent me,” Jake said. “Why did you lie to us?”

“To protect you. She was bad news, Jake. Plus, she actually was dying at one point. Someone at the hospital contacted us to say she had overdosed. But when Robert called the hospital back a week later, they said she was released.”

“Well, she’s dead now. Seven years.”

“What?” I asked.

“Surprised?” Jake asked.

I looked down at the letters, all addressed to Susan Dulance in my handwriting. They were opened.

“Is that why you have these?” I asked.

“Turns out, mom did die of an overdose. Just twenty years after you said she did. She got clean for a while. The man at the door said he was a boyfriend. Not the original, but one of many is what I gathered. But then she relapsed. And that was the end of that. The guy took the money from the cards, but kept the letters. I’m not sure why. Maybe he thought they were good luck,” Jake said. “You should probably stop sending money.”

“Jake, you should go,” Robert said, staring at the letters on the table, addressed to the wife he had long tried to forget.

“But I just got here,” Jake said.

“Please,” Robert said, his voice high with confusion.

“Just tell me how, Emily,” Jake said.

“How what?”

“How did this start?”

“She called the house once. Your father was at work. I was home with Noah. She seemed like she had cleaned up. She wanted to come visit, but I told her she couldn’t. She had chosen her path.”

“Then why?” Jake persisted.

“Because she’s your mom. Because I heard the pain in her voice. I—maybe there was a time in my life that I would have said no, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t deny her. I couldn’t deny her... But I didn’t know she had died. She didn’t usually write back. That wasn’t unusual. I just assumed it was too painful for her. I mean, what does a mother who abandoned her kids say?”

Jake stayed staring deep into my eyes. His beady brown holes digging into me. He didn’t say anything, just watched.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” I said.

“Jake,” Robert said. He pointed toward the door.

“Ok. But, you should ask Emily where she was today, really.” Jake said, looking at me between the eyes.

“What?” Robert asked to Jake’s back after he spun around toward the sink. Robert’s breath quickened. He gripped the table in his hands, anchoring himself to the ground. Jake slipped a noodle between his fingers, gliding it up and down in a perverse cat-like toying.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Jake said.

“Haven’t you done enough?” Robert asked.

“We’re so sorry, for everything, Jake. Really,” I said, waving my surrender flag in his face, trying to back him down.

“Don’t be,” Jake said. “I have my own family now.”

“What?” Robert asked.

“Desi’s seven months.”

“What? How?” I asked.

“It’s not mine,” Jake said, slurping up another noodle.

I looked quizzically at him. His mouth curled around the noodle as he pulled it quivering into his mouth. He looked like his mother in that instant. A conniving tinge breaking through in the corner of his eyes.

“It’s Ian’s,” he said, and walked out the door.

V.

After twenty-six hours of labor and thirty minutes of pelvis-crushing pushing, Noah was born—six pounds, nine ounces. Ten fifteen at night, our little Noah Robert Dulance popped out, screaming and flailing little balled fists in the air. It seemed like hours for the nurses to finally give him back to me. But when they did, clean and swaddled in a white cotton blanket, I began to cry. I cried so hard Noah started crying too. Robert gently wiped the tears away from Noah’s fat cheeks with his thumb. Robert kissed my forehead. The love I felt at that moment swelled in my chest so full that I had to let out deep exhales. I was afraid it was going to crush me—the unbridled adoration I had inside of me for this baby I had only held in my hands for moments.

“Can I hold him?” Ian asked.

“Of course, buddy,” Robert said.

Robert went to fish Noah out from my arms. I felt his arms invading the gap between my forearm and belly. I tightened around Noah, panicking.

“No, no,” I said.

Robert eyed me queerly, a look of warning ran across his mouth. He turned back to the boys.

“Not right now, guys. Your little brother is really tired. Let’s go get some hot chocolate in the cafeteria. Let them rest.”

Noah nestled closer to my breast. His smooth head was lined with little downy hairs around the crown. He was my bald little beauty. Both Ian and Robert, from the photos I had seen of their birth, came out with full heads of fine, straight hairs. Little mop tops, the both of them were.

His skin was like velvet under my hand. I was afraid to touch him too hard, worried that he may break. I held my breath to feel his breathing on my chest. His little ribs expanded with each drawn breath, bloating his belly out into mine. I counted our breaths in unison: 1...2...3...

“Em. Em,” Robert said.

A gentle hand pressed my shoulder.

“Hmm?” I said.

“The nurse says we can go home, if you want.”

“Go home already? But what if I need something? What if something goes wrong?”

“Nothing is going to go wrong,” Robert said, softly.

“But what if it does? I’m a first time mom!”

“First time mom?”

“What?”

“What do you mean by that?” Robert whispered. “Jake and Ian are right there.”

“No. Yes, you’re right. You know what I meant,” I said.

“Do you want to rest a little bit more? You seem out of it.”

“No, no. Let’s go home,” I said. “I want to show him his nursery.”

“Can I hold him now?” Ian asked.

“Ok, Champ. You can hold him,” Robert said.

“But,” I began.

“Emily,” Robert started.

“Let’s just wait until we get home,” I said, stifling the tears forming in my eyes.

“I want to go home.”

“You can each hold him at home,” Robert said.

Ian and Jake gave collective sighs and slumped back to their seats on the side of the room. I avoided Robert’s stern eyes. The sterility of the room felt suddenly suffocating. Disinfectant and sanitizer filled my nose with its offputtingly sweet scent. A janitor walked by with his mop, leaving a snail trail of bleach behind.

“I want to go home,” I said.

Robert opened the door and helped me up the stairs into the nursery. Noah slept the whole ride home. The nurse had told me he was going to be an “easy child.”

Ian and Jake trotted up the stairs, shoving each other along the way. Robert eased Noah into my lap on the rocking chair. It was the only other piece of furniture in the pastel yellow nursery other than the behemoth crib. The crib was a present from Robert’s parents, and it was as large as their love, and their pocketbooks.

“Can I hold him *now*?” Ian whined up at Robert.

“Yes, Buddy. You can hold him now,” Robert said.

Robert lifted Noah out of my arms and placed him gently in Ian’s.

“Hold his head. Be careful!” I cried.

“Emily, he’s ok. He’s doing a good job,” Robert said.

“My turn, my turn!” Jake yelled.

“Not so loud! His ears are sensitive,” I scolded.

Robert did the same exchange from Ian to Jake as he had done from me to Ian. It was like they were playing a hot potato game with my baby. Each person getting a turn to caress his pore-less skin, and admire the small beans of his toes as he kicked. His small mouth opened in little gapes to show perfectly pink toothless gums.

“He’s so small,” Jake said.

“He’s a baby,” Robert said.

Jake tried to reposition Noah into the crook of his arm. Noah’s head bobbed out, falling heavy down toward the ground.

“Careful,” Robert said.

“Give him to me. Give him to me now!” I said.

Fear flashed across Jake’s small brown eyes. They stood out against the tears that were building. I had never yelled at Jake. Raised my voice, yes, but yelling was something we didn’t do in the house. It was something Robert and Susan did, but never us. We had made that a rule when we married.

“It’s ok, Jake. You’re ok.” Robert said. He scooped Noah out from Jake’s arms.

“Hey, why don’t you guys go on downstairs? Go decide what you want for dinner.”

They scampered off. Jake refused to meet my eyes as he turned to run out after his brother.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly.

Robert placed Noah, asleep, into his crib. He seemed so small in the expansive bed. It was a Tempurpedic mattress, his parents told us. They wanted nothing but the top of the line for their newest grandson.

“They feel like strangers touching my baby,” I said.

“He’s their brother. And this is your family. We are all your family,” Robert said.

“The only one acting strange here is you.”

Robert’s cheeks puffed out by his jaw. He was clenching his teeth trying to be patient with me, since I had just given birth, but his paternal instincts were flaring under the surface. His boys. They were *all* his boys. Our boys. I felt my stomach lurching and unsettled. My nerves were frayed. My forehead was glossy with sweat and anxiety. I was a bundle of edges, each one awoken by the presence of Noah. I was in love and afraid at the same time.

“Of course. Of course. It must just be post-partum hormones. Of course I love the boys. All my boys.”

Robert rose from his haunches, where he was hovering in front of me. He danced his fingers over the crib. The solar system mobile was playing slowly above Noah, sleeping soundly underneath.

“I’m going to go start dinner. They haven’t eaten since before baseball practice.”

“Ok, do you want some help?”

“No, you get some rest,” Robert said. He walked over to the cradle. Noah wriggled in his fire truck onesie.

“Besides, this little guy seems to be getting fussy,” Robert said.

He waggled a finger down Noah’s stomach and Noah began to cry. The room shrank around the girth of his wail. Instinctually, I rose. My legs lifted me up from my seat, and before my mind had caught up, I was repositioned in the rocking chair with Noah latched onto my breast making faint suckles.

“That’s my boy. That’s my perfect, perfect boy.”

VI.

The house exhaled with the Jake’s departure. Robert and I looked at each other. The tension seeping into each of our pores, deepening into our skin where hands couldn’t reach, couldn’t squeeze it out.

“Ian’s child,” I started.

“Where were you today?” he asked.

I looked down to the beds of my nails, a light pink from the adrenalin coursing through my veins. The frigid chill from the open windows hadn't frozen them back into their blue state.

"I was with someone," I whispered.

"A client?"

I didn't respond.

"Did something happen?" he asked.

"We kissed," I said.

Robert stood from the table, releasing his grip. The heaviness of his arms hung down at his sides in defeated ropes.

"I'm going to go take a shower," he said.

"Ok."

I walked up to the bedroom with the ensuite bathroom. I lay in the bed, wondering what was next, basking in the steam that had escaped the bathroom and was filling the bedroom. He walked out of the shower. Cold, aloof, dismissive. He looked at me, looked through me. His droopy eyes fell farther down his face, obfuscated by heavy lids. I saw his pained look.

I started to cry, little fat drops at first that rolled down my face unevenly, and then I began to sob. I convulsed. I fell to the ground apologizing.

Robert scooped me up and held me as I seized against his burly chest. He held me sturdy. I could feel my bones pushing against his muscle. He whispered that it was ok in my ear and I nodded. I looked at him between my showers of tears. He kissed me. Hot on

the mouth. It was the first time he had kissed me in months. He held my mouth in his. He slid off my clothes and ripped off his towel. He laid me on the bed and we made love like we used to. I let the wave of giddiness move through me. And then it ended. He got up to clean off. I finally had my husband back.

I picked my phone off the end table and ended it with Tom. Or ended what could have been with Tom.

I laid with my arms wide, waiting for Robert to come back into them. To tell me this was all ok now. We were all ok now. I had sacrificed our marriage vows to save us. Me for him, it was done, it was ok. We were going to be grandparents. We had our two living sons back in the house with us. Things were back on track. We were healing, as a family, just like we were supposed to be doing.

Robert came back in from the bathroom, dressed in his pajamas. He picked up a pillow and one of the throw blankets from off of the recliner chair that sat in the corner of the bedroom, positioned right in front of the television that we rarely watched.

“I’m going to sleep downstairs,” he announced. And then trounced out of the room and down the hall.

I felt the ache start to dull in my chest. I laid in the warm bed, letting the last of the smells of him dissipate into the ether.

Three gentle chimes jingled. The sound grew louder with each text message, twanging in triplets. I flipped the phone to vibrate. The down comforter, hot over my face, suffocated me with my own warm breath. I shut my eyes against the heaviness of my body, drifting back to nothingness.

Noah

I.

Noah had swaddled himself in sheets during the night. The frigid morning air was creeping under his door.

It's too cold to get up.

Another gust pushed through, forcing him tighter into the covers. He pulled them over his head, a helmet matting down his curling mop of brown. It flipped into his ears, tickling the cochlea. The heat started to build under the sheets from his breath. He tried hold it, counting seconds until he had to release, wading in between them. He tried to insert stillness into the moments.

5...6...7...

Finally he inhaled. The thick comforter latched itself to the aperture of his mouth. He found a reserve of motivation somewhere within himself. He drew from it, what little was left, and kicked the cover off. He climbed up out of the twin size bed, a hand-me-down from when Ian lived there. Ian was in college when Noah was old enough for his own bed.

Noah stood and rubbed his hazel eyes, letting himself wake up in stages. He searched for his pants in the mountainous heaps of scattered clothes on his floor. His parents had stopped coming by to get him up months ago. He found some black skinny jeans on top of one especially clean pile. His signature black hoodie with thumbholes cut out of the sleeves sat next to it. He pulled them both on, after sniffing the knees and sleeves to make sure they didn't smell too bad to wear for the fourth time in a row.

Cold and dry gluten-free toast was orphaned on a plate in the kitchen next to a green juice of pureed chard and apples that his mom had. His dad came out of the guest room, stretching and scratching the sleep out of his eyes.

“Are you ready?” his mom asked him, sipping her juice.

She tried to give Noah a hug with one arm thrown over his shoulder. All he felt were the bones of her elbows and collarbone tearing into him, ripping away his covering. He wiggled away, convulsing his entire body against the counter.

“You didn’t eat your toast, yet. You need to eat something,” Emily said.

You need to eat something.

Noah shoved the toast into his mouth, crumbs exploding with each bite out onto the spotless counter. Every night it was cleaned, a type of obsessive therapy his mom had taken to when his dad started sleeping downstairs. The house was always clean, despite whatever mess was living inside of them.

“Yeah,” he said.

They both piled into Emily’s SUV and plowed forward to school in the cold overcast sky. The Christmas lights peered out bright against the darkness, decorating the houses in candy-colored cheer.

“Christmas is coming up,” Emily said, breaking their routine silence.

“Yeah,” Noah said.

“Anything you want?”

Noah shrugged his shoulders in apathy. The quintessential teenager response, punctuated with irritation. Emily recoiled at the hostility.

“You know, we can’t get you presents if you don’t tell us what you want,” Emily said, recovering her reprised mothering role.

“How’s school going?” Emily asked.

“Fine,” Noah said.

This was their routine every morning through the traffic. Neither of them brought up Jake or Robert. This was their special drive through denial.

“Have a great day, sweetie!” Emily said as she pulled up to the front of the school. Noah got out and slammed the door, canceling out her well wishes.

Homeroom was filled with tired eyes and open books, blank sheets of binder paper desperately being filled with copies of last night’s homework. Noah walked past his peers; even though it was Freshman Year, the cliques had already been fully formed. The preps sat in the front with bright colored sweaters and light jeans, the goths in the back decorated with black lipstick and eyeliner, and the nerdy kids lined the wall nearest the door, huddled in a mass of undefined characteristics and sloppy anime t-shirts. Noah sat away from everyone. He was a loner, an island to himself, cast off in the solo desk shoved up against the back corner.

The teacher, Mrs. Manx, tall and willowy, walked in with her messenger bag of corrected papers and future assignments. She had a hooked nose, which she peered down when she wrote on the white board, left-handed and crooked. Her glasses wrapped around the back of her skeletal neck, hanging down her neck on beaded ropes, like her

sagging skin. She looked like she had always been, and could never be anything other than a high school English teacher.

“All right, everyone. Books down. Time for the test,” the teacher said to a collection of groans.

The rows passed back clean white sheets numbered with ten multiple choice questions. The class had been reading *Lord of the Flies*. Noah spied his book in his disheveled Jansport backpack, the spine free of any cracks from having been opened, read, lived in.

“Pass them up,” the Mrs. Manx said.

Noah handed the sheet back. Haphazardly circled letters.

A, A, A, B, A, C...

There was no rhyme or reason to his method. Whatever letter looked nicest, cleanest, was the one he circled. Mrs. Manx collected the tests and shuffled them. She doled them out to different rows, deputizing each student in the role of corrector.

“Ok, First question—B, second, C, D, B, B, A. Number seven, E, all of the above. Eight, A. Nine, B. Ten, C. Write the number on the top and pass them up,” Mrs. Manx said.

Noah passed up his paper, looking over the sea of other students handing in red lined sheets. A girl in the front row turned and looked at him. She smirked and gave a quick thumbs up before passing hers up to the impatient hand in front. Noah shrugged and looked back at his desk, tracing his index finger in the deep grooves of gang signs that had been etched in by previous classes.

The bell rang, releasing them back into the wild of slamming lockers and shuffling feet. A world of hormones and angst. Noah guided himself through it, keeping his head down and counting the steps it took him to get to his locker.

129...130. Locker pass: 28, 39, 15.

Noah slid his finger into the locker loop, inserting it like a key, lifting up on the latch. Inside were perfectly ignored textbooks, all lined in order of the period he would need them. He stared at the book for his next period, before closing his locker.

“Hey,” the girl from homeroom approached him.

Asther O’Brien. Her red hair fluttered in layers over her plaid coat. Freckles lined the bridge of her nose like wispy animal tracks, faintly peeking under the powdered makeup she caked on before class. Her eyelashes thick and black, like legs of a spider crawling out toward him, catching him in their web and drawing him deeper into her brown eyes. Noah looked down, back at the black and white checkered linoleum he had become deeply familiar with in the past three months of school. It was punctured next to his locker, a frayed white peeling back to show a sliver of hard cement underneath.

“Hey,” Noah said.

“I corrected your quiz,” she said.

“Oh. I didn’t really read the book.”

And now you think I’m stupid. Great.

“It’s ok. I changed your answers. You got a 100%.”

“What? Why did you do that?”

Asther looked at him, her eyes coy and darting. Little tufts of red hair frizzed up by her ears, rebelling into curls. She straightened it every day, but Noah could see the secret waves scrunching up by her face. All the popular girls in Asther's clique had naturally straight blond hair, but hers was just masquerading.

"Trying to be nice," she said.

"Oh. Thanks."

"It's not a big deal. I would hope you'd do the same."

"I w-would," Noah said. His eager words getting ahead of him in a stammered stampede. Asther didn't acknowledge his phonetic faux-pas, the straight line of her mouth unwavering in either joy or sympathy.

"Where do you go after this?" Asther asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Where do you go? Like, what's your next class?"

"Oh."

Noah had ditched this period so many times he had forgotten what came next. Like a child learning the alphabet, he couldn't conjure up the next letter in the lineup. He looked at the carefully balanced books in his locker.

"I have Spanish," she said.

"Oh yeah, I have French. I think," he said. "Yeah. French."

"That's in the same wing. We can walk over together."

She kept her books out in front of her, not bothering with a slovenly backpack to cover her up. She let her hair sway down to the small of her back, flicking it subtly as she

walked. Noah slumped over, disguising his growth spurt that had come without warning during the summer. His legs jutting through the bottom of his pants, ankles exposed under short socks and shorter hems. At fourteen, he was already six foot two, and angular. His baby face fading into a sallow canvas of harsh lines. His lips, though, stayed plump and puckered in the center of his face. He didn't much resemble his parents, but looked like a perfect blend of Ian and Jake, with a kiddish button nose. That one trait handed down to him from his mother.

"See you later," Asther said, and bounced down the line of portables to her Spanish class at the very end.

Noah made it all the way until lunch. He counted down the seconds on the wall clock bolted into the punctured walls. He counted every pore in the bulletin board, stamped by removed staples. He moved through four periods, drifting from class to class on the wave of Asther's attention.

At the lunch bell, Noah took the curving sidewalk away from the school. He walked along the tree-lined streets, bare from the annual Autumn leaf dump. Noah counted his steps until he got home and crawled into his the cocoon of covers.

His room was his comfort zone. Usually his thoughts were preoccupied with video games and escape, but today it was a different fantasy. He thought about heroism. He thought about valiance. He thought about her.

Asther would drop her books, scattering them like marbles in the middle of the hallway. Big tears would start to well up. She probably has never dropped her books before, never been embarrassed in her life. But then I would come, like that white knight.

I would pick them up and carry them for her to her next class. She would grab my hand before we got to class to say thank you.

You don't need to thank me, I would say. But she would anyway. She would thank me, and ask me to be her boyfriend.

Noah dropped off into a fitful waking sleep. He tossed and turned coming in and out of dreams until his parents came home. Emily pulling him back to reality with her squawking call that dinner was ready.

The next day, Emily dropped Noah off with a desperate hug. She squeezed him, every bone in her rib cage pushing into him as he struggled for the car door. He walked into his first period. The teacher was waiting next to his desk, a white slip of paper suspended in her hand.

“Your counselor would like to see you.”

Noah took the long walk through the empty hall. His feet clopped on the ground. The counselor was waiting at her desk for him.

“How are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m fine.”

“Come, have a seat.”

He groped his hands as he sat in the cushioned chair, clearing his throat. The school counselor sat delicately on the chair across from him. Her lank hair hung down like unkempt plumes of a pigeon. She had an apologetic face—wide eyes, gently creased brow, downturned mouth with slightly parted lips as if an “I’m sorry” was always in

threat of escaping. She wore a baggy pants suit that made her look larger than she was. She looked like a child playing dress up, every article askew and comical. She pulled her blazer closer in to her stomach, swallowing up her entire midsection with a retro tweed.

“I know we talked earlier in the year, about everything that had happened this summer. It must be hard to come to school sometimes,” the counselor said.

“It’s ok,” Noah said.

“I don’t know if you remember, but when we spoke back in August, I told you that if you need anything, you could always come to me.”

“I remember.”

“Ok, well, that’s still true.”

“Ok.”

She fidgeted in her chair, readjusting her large thighs in the plastic seat. She seemed as nervous as Noah in her interrogation.

“We do need to discuss your truancy issues, though. You have missed more school this semester than you can possibly make up. You’re looking at summer school. And your grades...they have seriously declined.”

“Oh,” Noah said.

“You need to come to school every day until the end of the semester in two weeks,” she said. “Do you understand?”

Noah nodded.

“Ok. Typically I would have to give you Saturday school for all of your unexcused absences, but because of your circumstances, I’ll let it slide as long as you make sure you’re here every day for the next two weeks.”

“Ok,” Noah said. “Thank you.”

He stared down at the ground as she talked to him.

“Do I go back to class now?” he asked.

“Yes. That’s fine. It’s still first period.”

Noah rose and left the room. He went to his locker to retrieve the next book in the series that he didn’t read—*Rebecca*, a love story, or so he gathered. As he pulled it out, the passing period bell rang. Noah collected the French book instead, weighing it in his hands.

“Hey, you weren’t in first period,” Asther said.

Noah turned around and saw her standing, mouth slightly parted in a worried expression. She was wearing a purple turtleneck pulled high up to her long chin. The color reflecting greener flecks in her eyes.

“Counselor’s appointment,” Noah said.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you in trouble?”

“Kind of, I guess.”

“What happened?”

“Missing too many days of school. Can’t do anymore if I don’t want Saturday school. Or summer school.”

“Why do you miss so many days?”

“Family thing.”

“Oh.”

Noah pulled on his hoodie, knotting his fingers around the pull strings of the hood. Asther’s friends called to her from down the hall. She gave them a wave.

“Wanna walk to class?” she asked Noah.

“Don’t you want to go with your friends?”

“They are in a different wing,” she said. “And I like walking with you.”

“Oh,” Noah said. “Ok.”

Dinner was reheated vegetables and salad. A heavy mixing of kale, spinach, chard, chickpeas, and other health foods Emily described as “textures.”

Tastes like garbage. Rotting garbage.

Noah chased garbanzo beans around with his fork, leaving the rest of the leafy greenery to color his plate, like a garnish.

“How was school?” Robert asked.

“Fine,” he said.

“We got a call from the principal,” Emily said.

Noah squished the steamed zucchini under his fork, mashing it into a paste on his plate. The seeds popping out like pus from the destroyed vegetable.

“You’ve been cutting class, again?” Robert asked.

Noah spoke in monosyllabic words and grunts.

“Do you want to talk?” Emily asked.

“No,” Noah said.

“You can’t cut any more class,” Robert said. “Or else you’ll be grounded.”

“And you’ll have to take summer school,” Emily said. “You won’t be able to graduate on time. With your friends. You wouldn’t want that.”

“K,” Noah said.

“You understand?”

“I just said ‘ok.’ God,” Noah said.

“Don’t take an attitude with me,” Robert said.

“I’m done,” Noah said.

He pushed up from the table and did his best stomp up every step all the way back to his hideout. Emily and Robert let him go, giving him his distance. Like they had with the other two boys.

“Remember,” Emily said the next morning when she dropped him off. “You have to stay for the entire day.”

“Yeah, whatever,” he said.

Asther was sitting obediently in her desk when Noah walked in. He saw her shoulders release when she saw him, her face breaking into a smile. She sniffled a little under her wave.

“Sick?” Noah asked.

“Yeah, it’s just a cold, though,” she said.

“Oh,” he said.

“We’re picking partners for our project on Shakespeare, today. It’s our final presentation.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Noah said.

“Do you already have a partner?”

Noah blushed and immediately looked down at the ground.

“No,” he said.

“Do you want to be mine?” Asther asked.

“Ok,” Noah said. As soon as he did, he felt nerves begin uncoiling in his body. Asther smiled. The teacher walked in.

“Ok, class, like I promised, we’re picking partners today. Everyone buddy up.”

Noah remained standing next to Asther as the teacher took role and then wrote down everyone’s partners.

“Noah and Asther?” she arched her eyebrows surprised before moving on to the next, more obvious couple.

“Do you want to exchange numbers?” Asther asked.

“Ok,” Noah said.

Noah tried to stop his trembling hands as he punched it, number by number into his cell phone. The first girl’s phone number he had ever gotten.

“Can we do it at your house? My house is really small,” she said.

“Sure,” Noah said.

“Ok, now, we’re going to go over last night’s homework,” the Mrs. Manx said.

Noah returned to his desk. During class, Asther texted him emojis indicating how boring the lesson was. Noah got in trouble three times for laughing. The teacher, softer on him because of his “circumstance,” let it slide.

The last bell rang. Noah made his way to his locker. Asther was there waiting for him. They walked home together, stomping on the last of the crunchy leaves. She gossiped about kids at school, most of whom Noah had been classmates with since elementary school, but hadn’t spoken to since then. High school, he found, was a completely different beast.

“Neat room.” Asther said to the posters plastered all over his wall of metal bands and old horror movies.

“Thanks.”

The assignment didn’t take long.

“So, what do you do for fun?”

Noah shrugged. “I don’t know, I don’t do much. I play video games, watch movies.”

“That’s cool,” she said.

“So what’s wrong with your family?” Asther asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You said you were missing school because of family stuff.”

“Oh. Nothing, really.”

She shot him a frown, and waited, resting back on her forearms in his bed. She surveyed his bedroom, again, buying time for him to break down and tell her. Give in to her questioning.

Just say it.

“My brother died.”

An overwhelming sensation of sadness gripped him. She came up and held his head in her arms.

“Are you ok?”

Noah started to cry, for the first time since it all happened. Asther gave him a hug as he sobbed. He gripped her tighter and let himself be held. He looked up at her, tears coming to a stop. She leaned down to him, and held his head, waiting until all of the tears had stopped flowing from his eyes. And then she continued to hold him, until they heard the latch unlock downstairs. His father’s heavy gait stomped into the foyer.

Asther waited for Noah by his locker most mornings, and periods between classes. They didn’t eat lunch together, but they commuted together—to and from every room and portable, regardless of each other’s schedule. Whoever’s classroom was further, that was the one they would walk to. Whispers and stares came from Asther’s blonde friends. No one said anything about Noah. He had no friends, and she didn’t share hers. He kept on his island, but sometimes Asther would ask for a life preserver and he would throw it out, dragging her in to him.

“Do you want to finish up the project at my house?” Noah asked after lunch when they were both heading to math—she was taking the advanced class, but they were next door to each other in the 50’s wing.

“Sure. But I have ballet at 7,” she said.

“Ok.”

“We don’t have much left, anyway.”

“Meet at my locker?” Noah asked.

“Ok. See ya,” she said. She disappeared into the shade-pulled classroom. The heat trickled out into the hallway as Noah scurried on to his, making it barely before the tardy bell sounded.

Asther skipped alongside Noah, commenting on the beauty of the Christmas decorations that had now covered the streets in flashing red and green lights, cotton candy fluffs of fake snow, and giant inflatable Santas waving at cars.

“I love Christmas,” she said, dancing up and down the sidewalk on her tip toes.

“It’s ok,” Noah said.

“Do you guys do anything for it?”

“Family dinner. Nothing big.”

“Oh man, we do everything. All my family comes. We open presents. We make cookies for Santa. *And* the reindeer. It’s magic. My favorite part is hanging the stockings. It doesn’t feel like Christmas until the stockings are up.”

“My mom does all the decorations. I just come out for presents.”

“That’s sad,” Asther said.

Asther teetered on the curb lip, stretching her arms out wide for balance. She tapped the edge with her pointed foot, and then slipped off. Noah stretched his arm to grab around her waist. He pulled her toward him. She stumbled into his chest, elbowing his stomach on the way in. He held her close, feeling her belly balloon with breath.

1...2...3...

Noah closed his eyes and kissed her on her top lip and nose. Her bottom lip squirmed away. Asther’s shoulders folded into her back. Noah let her go.

“I have to go,” she said.

“What? What do you mean?”

“I want to go home and practice before ballet. *The Nutcracker* is coming up soon. Want to make sure I have the part down.”

“I’m sorry for kissing you.”

“It’s fine,” she said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Asther jaywalked across the street. She bobbed her head both ways before making it into oncoming traffic. Once she was on the other side, Noah watched her pull out her phone and furiously tap into it. Sending a plethora of texts out to whoever would listen. Noah’s nose was wet with anger and self hate. He kicked the light pole on his way back home.

The next day, Noah looked for Asther in homeroom. She wasn't there. The tardy bell rang and the teacher started taking role. Asther sauntered in, refusing to look at Noah.

"The next presentation we have is Asther and Noah," the teacher said.

"We made a Powerpoint," Asther said.

"Yeah," Noah added.

Asther made it.

"In this slide, we have..." Asther droned on to the class, keeping them engaged with her bubbly personality. Noah sat on the sidelines, hiding behind the computer, pushing the arrow when she gave her signal. That was enough for participation credit. Noah obediently clicked.

Asther wasn't at the locker when class was over, or after French. At lunch, she sat with her friends on the green benches with her posh clique. Each one admired themselves in their individual compacts, brushing up their eyelashes with the crook of a finger. Asther's smile curled up into her chubby cheeks as she dabbed powder on her nose.

"Can we talk?" Noah whispered to Asther.

"I'm busy," she said.

"Hey smooches," one of them called out. Another punched her in the shoulder before they all erupted in laughter.

"Maybe later," Asther said. She turned back to the group.

"You guys!" Noah heard Asther said to them, before dissolving into their cheers and chuckles.

It was the last day of school before break.

Lunch is close enough.

Noah ducked along the sloping sidewalk that he always took when he ditched class. He walked quickly away from campus security, trying to look like he was just a civilian out for an afternoon stroll.

The house had an evergreen smell when he walked in. A tree sat in the middle of the living room, a red velvet curtain lining underneath.

“You’re home early,” Robert said, struggling to line the tree perfectly.

“A little to the left,” Emily said from the kitchen.

“Minimum day,” Noah said.

Emily looked him. She surveyed his face. His eyes were distant.

“What?” Noah said, agitation edged into his speech.

“Nothing,” Emily said. She tried to preserve the holiday cheer she had spreading through the house like a pungent blech.

“You can help me put ornaments on the tree!” she said.

“I’m tired,” Noah said. He rushed upstairs to his room, latching the door immediately, keeping out whatever was following him. He tried to outsmart the emotions, keep them from barging in.

Video games sated his brain. He didn’t think about anything. The numbness of clockwork clicking helped. His phone sat on his lap, vibrating with an illuminated screen. Asther’s name blinked black. Noah scrambled to unlock it.

“Hi” was all it said.

“Hi” he wrote back immediately.

“I’m sorry I was mean today. I was just dealing with some stuff.”

“It’s ok. Do you want to talk about anything?”

“No, it’s ok.”

“Sorry, my friends can be lame sometimes,” Asther texted.

“It’s ok,” Noah texted back.

“I like you, Noah. But I don’t like you, like you. But I like you as a friend. You’re like a brother.”

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to say it like that,” she quickly sent a follow-up text.

“It’s fine,” Noah responded.

“Do you hate me?”

“No. Don’t worry.”

“You’re the best.”

“Thanks.”

Noah put his phone down, resting on the keyboard. It stopped vibrating. The screen dimmed until it went completely black.

“Hey, are you coming back?” his headphones asked.

“Noah, hey man, are you doing this mission or what?” another voice said in the headphones.

“Noah, fuck. We’re getting killed! Come cover us.”

“Left, left, I need someone on my left.”

The noises from the party chat sounded in Noah's headphones. He shut off the Playstation, the television, the cell phone. His entire room covered by black out curtains. Noah burrowed further into his covers, a dark navy that looked black in the shadows of his room. He let sleep consume him, nibbling at his toes and then growing up his spine, until his lids got heavy. He gave way to the incessant drag of fatigue, hoping it would take him into the night and never give him up.

II.

"It's Christmas Eve!" Emily bellowed from downstairs.

So what?

"Noah?" Emily rapped at his door. "It's Christmas Eve. Aren't you going to come downstairs and see all of the presents?"

No.

"Are you still sleeping?" Emily asked, cracking the door slightly. Noah didn't move. He stayed, immobile in the bed.

"Ok, honey. I'm going to work," Emily whispered, closing the door behind her.

Noah laid in bed all day, ignoring the sunshine and the gurgle of his starving stomach. Noah's feigned illness lasted into the early afternoon, listless. His legs bent at odd angles like a broken doll that had been discarded instead of placed. His pajamas wrinkled around his scrawny torso.

The sun heated up his room, even through the shades. The blackness attracted the heat, and held it captive. The sweat peaked on his forehead, forming little balls that would tumble down his temple. Roaring from his stomach finally got the best of him.

Emily and Robert were both at work. Noah didn't know how long they would be. He roamed the house looking for something to eat that wasn't healthy.

Kale chips. Zucchini chips. Organic soup. Oatmeal.

He decided on a banana and sweetened green tea Emily had bought accidentally, forgetting to check the label of ingredients. The tinge of sweetness played on Noah's tongue, enlivening them with its artificiality. A forgotten tang Noah missed. Gulps after sips invaded his mouth until the bottle deflated in his hand, empty. The recycling bin was across the kitchen, next to the entrance of the guest room. His dad's room.

Rows of boxes lined the far wall. Neat Sharpie labels are penned on all four sides, next to arrows denoting which way to set the box down. Noah walked into the room, immersed in its woody scent. Walking his fingers over the taped-shut mouths, feeling the smoothness of the adhesive slide underneath his pads. The serrated edge of one section bent back into an unnatural position. Noah tapped underneath it, trying to pry it up without pulling up the skin of the cardboard. The tip of his finger scooted under the tape, gently relieving the pressure. Bubbles where it hadn't been secured popped up easily. Eventually, the box gave way, opening one flap, followed by two others. The hidden tabs sprang up.

Here lies what's left.

Noah's brother's artifacts were exposed to the elements. The packaged, padded, and sorted items of what was left of Ian were now in front of him, motionless—dead, inanimate objects. He moved on to the rest, tapping open a second and a third, mastering his technique. A slow, methodical excavation of books, notepads, and old pictures Noah

had never seen. He hadn't been close to his brother. The sixteen-year age gap was too much to overcome in their limited time together. His brother was so rarely around, and when he was, he was spending time with their dad, building things. Or time out on the porch sipping coffee and talking to Emily. Noah wasn't much of a builder. Or a talker.

Noah picked up one of the boxes on top to get a better look inside. The contents shifted awkwardly, rolling from one side to another. He made it a few inches away from the other boxes before it threatened to get away from him. Noah set it down on the ground, thundering through the rest of the room. An earthquake shook the curated knickknacks Emily had chosen to decorate the guest room. The box held nothing of interest to a fourteen-year-old gamer.

Noah closed back the boxes, replacing all of the books he removed. He bent over to pick up the heavy one, lifting with his back instead of his spindly legs. He arched up, floundering around for the bottom. His fingers spread away from each other. The box lurched forward. Noah lowered it back to the ground, collecting his breath and the box back into his grip.

1...2...3...

A flash of white caught his eye before he attempted the second lift. Two letters hovered above opening of the box on the ground. It had been sandwiched between the two, forced underneath the box that he held in his hands. He replaced the top box on the ground and picked up the letters.

Noah. Emily.

Architectural lettering bled over the face of the envelope.

The door unlocked. Noah scrambled to replace the box he had disrupted. The clack of his mom's boots beat on the kitchen floor. She was working fewer hours.

"Winter is always a slow season for real estate," she told him and Robert over dinner one night.

She had stopped doing yoga. She took up cycling instead, but she rarely went to that. She had taken to long walks around the neighborhood like Robert, but never with him. They were two aimless walkers, but never on the same path. Noah was never sure when they were coming or going.

Noah tried to creep back into his room silently, avoiding Emily's bustling.

"Noah? Is that you?" Emily called. Noah balanced on the squeaky stair.

"Yeah," he said.

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

Noah fled back upstairs. The letters scraping against his stomach as he dashed back into safety.

III.

I was twelve when Ian first was diagnosed. I didn't know what it meant. My brother had cancer. People get cancer all of the time. Not everyone died from cancer. A lot of my friend's moms had had breast cancer. It was just something that happened, and then you heal. Ian would come over sometimes, but spend the whole time in the bathroom. He started getting more and more pale. Every time he came over, he wanted to do less than before. He stopped going out to the garage with Dad. He drank tea with

Emily instead of coffee, but even that stopped. He had to stop every couple of steps to hitch up his pants. Even his belt was loose around his hips. The house had one giant cement step out in front, and Ian had to be helped up it. Sometimes he would leave in the middle of Sunday dinner, just to crawl to the bathroom and lay on the floor, the towel covering his face.

The day he died, I didn't cry. I didn't do anything. My mom wept openly, and in public. My dad got much quieter. He was softer, in a way. He started looking at me, more. He didn't yell. He was still stern, but he wasn't harsh. Even when people would call and say "at least he's in a better place." My dad hated it. He called himself a "reformed Lutheran," which just meant atheist. But he would collect himself every time someone said it. Dad learned to smile and nod when people said it. Mom would rub his back and steer him away from whoever was apologizing.

At home he would gripe.

"What's a better place? Alone in some box?" Dad said.

But why is sitting at home around a toilet a better place?

"That's just how they mourn, honey," Mom would say.

I could help but think they were right. Or at least not wrong.

"How are you?" people would ask me.

"I'm ok," I would say.

I wasn't lying. I was ok. I didn't really know my brother. He was my brother, I knew that. But, he wasn't my friend. We weren't close. He was my dad's son from a

previous marriage. We never shared a room, or even a house. He was starting his freshman year of college when I was born. I saw him on holidays.

He moved back to town when I was six. He started coming to Sunday dinners, with Jake. Jake was always there. But Ian starting coming. That made my Dad happy. He was always nicer when Jake and Ian were around.

“Love having my boys around,” he would say every Sunday.

“It’s nice to have the family here,” Mom would chime in.

They constantly reminded us that we were a family, as if their words would solidify the fact. Like we were always a threat of fracturing off into some other union.

In the end, I guess he was right.

“I know this is hard,” Mom said to me one night. “But instead of focusing on your sadness, sometimes it’s good to think about all the good times you had together.”

She rubbed my back. She was crying, but still managed to choke out her words. She spoke as if she was used to crying.

“What is your favorite memory of Ian?” she asked.

I froze. I scrunched my face. I tried to look pensive. I tried to make myself cry. I tried to get something to come out—anything to come out. To be normal. This probably wasn’t normal.

“It’s ok,” she said.

But it wasn’t ok. My brother and I had spent time together.

“One time, he took me for ice cream,” I said. The words tumbled out of my mouth, somersaulting into a declarative landing. They stuck.

“One time, he took me for ice cream, just the two of us. He drove me out to Baskin Robbins and bought me a cone. He talked to me about girls. It was fun,” I said.

My memory cut off.

“That’s a nice memory,” she said, crying. “He really loved you.”

The tears fell thicker down her face. She wrapped her arms around my back and pulled me in close to her.

“Excuse me,” she said. She got up to leave.

I stayed on the couch, letting the wetness from her tears seep into my shirt. I let it soak my shoulder, marinating in sadness.

I got up and went to bed. Remembering everything I couldn’t say about my brother. I repeated it over in my head, hoping it would conjure up something inside of me. Maybe it would make sense if I thought about it.

My brother is dead. My brother is dead.

The words lost all meaning, bouncing around my head like a racquetball. It beat back and forth, flipping and flopping into senselessness. The guilt surged in me. I stopped chanting. I stopped thinking. I stopped.

IV.

Christmas morning started at 11 a.m. Noah heard Jake and Desi arrive to the ooh’s and aah’s of Emily and Robert at her enlarged condition.

“Come, sit,” Emily’s voice trailed up to Noah’s room.

He didn’t get up. Didn’t run down to open presents, or check his stocking. He stayed in the room, trying to muscle up the motivation to move.

“Noah! Your brother is here. Come down,” Robert called up.

“Noah! Come on, we’re opening presents,” Emily said.

The pain of movement coursed through his body. The mental anguish of getting up pounding his head. Every flick of his finger took more energy than he had. He depleted it all.

“Hey, Noah,” Jake said, tapping at his door. “Come on, Santa was here.”

Jake laughed and cracked open the door.

“And we brought coffee cake. So you don’t have to have Emily’s shakes. Or whatever she makes you guys eat around here,” Jake said.

“Ok,” was all Noah could eke out.

Jake stood on the other end until Noah made it out of bed, slowly. He moved like every inch of his body had been burned—the flesh reconstructed, but still aching. He lifted himself out of his nest, limb by limb.

“Come on, man. It’s going to be gone,” Jake said.

Noah inched on pants and a sweatshirt. Both smelled like the laundry pile they had been discarded into. A stagnant, musty teenage aroma drowned the room.

“I’ll be there in a second,” Noah said.

Jake left him to finish dressing. He went down to rejoin the picturesque family gathering that was happening around the kitchen table. The heat from their laughter rose to Noah’s room. It worked its way into his mouth. It tasted like the artificial sweetener in the green tea. He nabbed the letters he had stashed under the pillow and tucked them back

into his boxers, lowering his shirt down over them. Using them like a hidden protective shield. They were his Kevlar vest in the turmoil of family Christmas dinner.

“There he is. Sleeping Beauty,” Robert said when Noah appeared at the top of the stairs.

“There are a lot of presents under the tree for you,” Emily said.

The pine skirt was filled with packages in different sizes and shapes. Each one adorned with a more lavish bow and extravagant paper. Some with gold laid paisley, running like rivers around the boxes. Silver dusted polka dots speckled green sheets of paper. The brightness blinded him.

The first Christmas without Ian.

His parents had tried to pay their way to normalcy. Jake and Desi nestled into the couch nearest the tree. Jake passed around the packages to their owners. Desi sat, her arms scooped under the lump of her belly. She smoothed her hands over it every few minutes, ensuring it was still there, still hers. Her cheeks had puffed out, along with her double chin. Her smile and eyes peering out. They were like pinpoints being sucked into the vortex of her face.

“This one is for you,” Jake said to Noah.

The package was heavy in his hands. It was the only one without the fancy wrapping paper. Noah put his hand into the brown, wrinkled paper. A soft bulge stopped his reach. It was soft. He pulled it out.

“What is it?” Emily asked, excited.

“It’s a sweatshirt,” Noah said. “It’s gray.”

“We thought your other one was getting so grubby. This one is really nice. It has these like little holes under the armpit. For ventilation. So you don’t get too hot,” Desi said.

“Since you wear it year round. Don’t want you to get heat exhaustion in the summer,” Jake joked.

“That looks nice, Noah,” Robert said.

“What do you say to Desi and Jake?” Emily asked Noah

“Thank you,” he said.

He placed the sweatshirt back in the bag. The fleece stroking his arm with its softness, not yet adulterated by use. The charcoal color fading, shrouded under the white tissue paper.

“Who’s next?” Emily asked, keeping the cheer going.

“Wait,” Robert said.

He got up, excusing himself from the festivities. He went out to the garage. The minutes ticked by in the living room. Awkwardness descended like a net, catching all of them in its forbidden Ian talk.

“I wonder what he’s doing out there,” Jake said.

“I’m going to go help him,” Emily said.

She stood up, catching herself after wobbling slightly. The mimosas appearing stronger than she had anticipated. Her knobby knees showing slightly under her capris pajama bottoms. She took a step toward the garage door. Robert opened it wide.

“What is that?” Emily asked.

Robert walked in with a huge, wrapped gift. A massive, floppy white bow would around the top. He dragged it into the dining room, unable to make it all the way into the living area where they were huddled. The tag said “Desi,” in sloppy script. Robert’s writing.

“It’s for you,” Jake said to Desi.

She stood, pushing up on the back of the couch to help her up. Jake assisted by grabbing under her arm and pulling her to stand. She waddled over. Her dress tight around her legs, limiting her gait. She took slow, measured steps. Her stomach guided her over to Robert. He stood, lording over the gift, which hit him mid hip. Desi made it to the gift, protecting her stomach from knocking it over.

“Oh my god, Robert. What is it?” she said.

“You have to unwrap it,” he said.

There was a camaraderie growing between them, wrapping them together like the drooping white bow. She unwrapped it. Pulling the paper off in rows. Each one dropping into a furled pile of paper at her feet; each one showing off more of the gift. The last sheet popping off the top with the great reveal.

A huge, wooden rocking horse bobbed back and forth in front of her.

“Ian really wanted one when he was a kid,” Robert said.

Desi began to cry. She waddled over to Robert, wrapping her arms around his neck. He smiled, and gave her a one-arm hug back. Jake pushed the horse back and forth, examining the intricacies of the carved wood. The face looked back at him, exposed

gums painted behind snarled lips. A bone jutted from the teeth, linked by a rope on either side that looped back behind its head.

Jake went to his dad and gave him a hug, too. Their first since before the funeral. Desi's nine month swollen belly, invading their space. Emily got up, adding her tears and hugs to the couple.

"Another baby Dulance in the family," Emily said, wiping her eyes.

"It's beautiful," Desi said. "Robert, it's so beautiful."

"Well, you know. Wanted to make it for him. Thought it would be best for his daughter to have it."

"First Dulance girl," Jake said, rubbing Desi's stomach.

"Noah, come here. Come look at it," Emily beckoned him over.

Noah rose, readjusting his shirt. The letters caught on the hem, folding over his pant waist.

Noah. Emily.

He pulled his shirt down long, covering the letters up.

"It's nice," Noah said.

"Hey, we have another present for you," Jake said.

He strutted back to the tree and unearthed from the tree a squat, square package. It was wrapped poorly with ancient Peanut's Christmas paper that was browning along Snoopy's white snout. It felt brittle in Noah's hands.

"Just something I found while I was cleaning out Ian's place. Felt like maybe it would help you, you know, like in high school and stuff."

Noah turned the package over and saw that the curling paper had already started to unwrap itself. He tugged on the ribbon of paper and exposed the cracked notebook underneath. The cover was so worn, Noah thought for a second it was a second layer of wrapping paper.

“What is it?” Noah asked, looking at the used goods.

“Ian’s old journal,” Jake said. “He kept one for the first couple of years of high school. It started as a project he had to do for English class, but he just really liked it and kept it up. I remember I made so much fun of him for keeping it—”

“Jake,” Desi said.

“Well, anyway. Thought you might like it. Since you didn’t get to spend a lot of time with him, and Dad says you’re having a tough time in school. This might help. I saw it, and I thought of you,” Jake said.

“That’s really sweet,” Emily said.

“He looks just like him,” Desi said, her face still moist with tears from Robert’s gift.

“Who?” Emily asked.

“Ian. Noah looks just like him,” Desi said.

Emily cocked her head and surveyed her son. His straight nose started between his bushy eyebrows and traveled all the way down to his full lips. The tops of his ears stuck out slightly beneath his mane.

“Yeah, I guess I never noticed. But he does kind of,” Emily said.

Jake reached out and tousled Noah's already messy bedhead. It was a sign of brotherly affection Noah hadn't experienced in a while. Noah started to stand up to give Jake a hug. Jake leaned in and give him a pat on the back, hitting Noah's torso with his hip. The letters crunched under Jake's touch.

"What was that?" Jake said.

"Nothing," Noah said.

"What are you hiding? More presents?" Jake asked.

Jake went to lift Noah's shirt.

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it," Noah said.

"What's going on?" Robert asked from over by the rocking horse.

"Dunno. Noah's hiding something," Jake said.

"What do you have?" Emily asked.

"What is it?" Robert asked.

Jake quickly tugged on Noah's shirt. The letters were flush against his skinny torso.

"What are those?" Jake asked.

Noah pulled the letters out, quickly, like ribbing off a band-aid, and placed them on the couch, face up. The names separated.

"What's that?" Jake asked.

"I found them," Noah said.

Desi wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

“Sorry. It’s the hormones,” she said. Emily laughed with her. The empathy spilling out of her as she rubbed Desi’s hard stomach.

“Where did you get this?” Jake asked.

Noah shrugged. Jake circled around the letters, wading like a shark around chum. He watched them carefully, as if they were going to disappear before he could find out what they said. He picked them up.

“What is it?” Emily asked.

“Letters. From Ian,” Jake said.

“What?” Emily asked.

“What are you talking about?” Robert asked.

Jake held the letter out, the names facing toward his father.

“I thought you said they didn’t get one,” Jake said.

“Where did you get that?” Robert asked.

“Noah had them,” Jake said.

“Where did you get that?” Robert yelled at Noah.

“I found it in the guest room,” Noah said, quietly.

“Why were you going through the guest room?” Robert asked. His cheeks flaming red.

“Why did you keep these from us?” Emily asked.

“What?” Robert asked.

“She asked why you kept the letters from them,” Jake said.

“I wasn’t. I was protecting you. Both of you,” Robert said.

“From what?” Emily screamed.

“Noah’s too young,” Robert said.

“Too young for what?”

Robert didn’t respond.

“Am I too young?” she persisted.

“I didn’t think it would be a good idea,” Robert said.

“Why not?” Emily asked.

“When did you get these?” Jake asked.

“The day after the funeral.” Robert said.

“That was six months ago,” Emily screamed.

“I didn’t want you to suffer anymore. I didn’t want my family to have to suffer more. To have to have him die all over again,” Robert said. “Do you know what it’s like receiving letters from your son after you buried him? It’s like I had to watch him be lowered into that grave again. Every time I see his handwriting, it’s another pile of dirt being scooped on top. I didn’t want that for you!”

“That’s not your call!” Emily said.

“How did you even get them?” Jake asked.

“I don’t know. They were just in the mailbox when I got home,” Robert said.

“I put them there,” Desi whispered.

“What?” Jake whipped around.

“He asked me to,” she said.

“Why is Ian asking you to deliver all of the letters to us? When did you get them?” Robert yelled.

“Did you know something?” Emily asked.

“The day he died,” Desi said. “No. I didn’t.”

“I thought you were out of town,” Robert was yelling, louder still.

“I was out of town. I got it when I got back. I swear, I didn’t know anything at the time. I knew as much as you, that he was sick. That the radiation wasn’t working. That he was in constant pain. I didn’t know anything else. I thought he was going to fight it.”

“Did he know?” Emily asked, referencing her stomach.

Desi rubbed her daughter with her palms.

“No. And I regret that every day,” Desi said. “I wish I had told him. Maybe it could have changed something.”

“You got the letters first? And you never told me?” Jake asked, his muscle tensing in his neck.

“I was going to. I just didn’t know when. Trust me, I didn’t know anything,” Desi said.

“I thought you didn’t know you were pregnant until after he died,” Jake said.

“I didn’t. Not for sure. I just thought, maybe,” Desi said.

“So you lied,” Jake said.

“No, I didn’t know. I’m not lying. Just, listen,” Desi said.

“I’m out of here,” Jake said. He got up and headed for the door. Desi wobbled over, behind him. Her pace stifled in her dress and her womb.

“Please, I didn’t know anything!” she yelled.

She broke down into sobs on the kitchen floor. Jake’s car sounded outside. The roar of the restored GTO engine. It shifted into third and stormed down the street. Noah retreated to his room, taking his letter with him. He covered his ears against the turmoil licking up at the bottom of his heels. He moved faster.

The habitual check of his cell phone illuminated two text messages, sent from Asther, minutes from each other.

“Merry Christmas,” she texted at 1:03 p.m. followed by “Omg, sorry. Wrong text!” at 1:06 p.m. Noah tossed the phone onto his pillow and turned on his Playstation. His four friends waiting in a party chat. He joined, trying to distance himself from the screaming downstairs.

“Hey,” Noah said into the microphone of his headphones.

“Oh, look who is it,” a voice in the party said.

“Oh, it’s Cry Baby Noah,” another one of his friends said.

“Gonna cry some more? Ooh, wah, a girl doesn’t like me,” another voice.

The four boys in the party mock crying.

“I’m waiting for an apology,” Noah’s best friend, Justin, said.

“For what?” Noah asked.

“For abandoning us during that mission. We fucking lost,” Justin said.

Noah was silent.

“Here, I’ll make it easy. Repeat after me: I, Noah Dulance...” Justin said.

“I, Noah Dulance,” Noah repeated.

“Am sorry that I’m such a little bitch,” Justin said.

The other boys snickered in the background. The cacophony of their laughter attacking Noah in stereo.

Noah clicked off the headphones. He threw the remote against his wall—the rumble pack breaking off from the rest of the controller. His headphones crashed down in a twisted mound. The letter was out of the envelope, resting on his bedside table where he had discarded it when he got upstairs. Not yet worn out like his brother’s. Not yet understood like his father’s.

Noah read his letter, again. Hoping it would tell him what to do—what to take from it. He started his day with his half-brother’s words, and was now planning to end with it.

“You’re not that frail little Mama’s boy that you used to be when you were younger,” Ian started. “You grew out of that. You grew out of that when Jake punched you in the arm in the backseat of Lucy, that eggplant-looking mom-mobile you had to suffer through during your childhood. Sorry about that. But, that day you didn’t cry or whine or complain, you even had a welt the next day and you didn’t tattle or say anything (secretly I knew you were proud of it, I never told you that I watched you rolling your sleeve up, admiring your bravery in the mirror). I knew you were a big kid that day. I knew you were going to do big things.

“When we went to ice cream and talked about what girls you liked and what subjects in school were your favorite—I knew it then, too.

“You are special. You are going to go places. And I promise, things get easier. I know this may seem hypocritical, but trust me, they do. Keep your head up. You will do big things. Just hang in there. You’re gonna be great.”

Desi was still sobbing downstairs. Emily and Robert snapping at each other. Until her sobs turned into screams.

“Oh my god,” Emily said.

“What?” Robert roared.

“My water broke!” Desi yelled.

“Quick, get her into the car,” Emily said. “I’ll get Noah.”

Noah heard a scramble downstairs.

“Noah, get down here!” Emily called upstairs.

Noah didn’t move. He stayed in his dark, brooding chambers.

“Noah, now!” Emily screamed from downstairs. “Don’t make me come up and get you.”

His mom had never yelled at him. Scolded, sometimes, but never yelled. She had never been more than slightly upset around him. Noah climbed out of bed with the same pace he had that morning. He shuffled down the stairs into his mom’s red-faced snarl.

“Get in the car.”

Noah walked in front of her to the car. Robert was still helping Desi into the car. She was howling and gripping the back of his neck.

“Where’s Jake?” Desi was moaning.

“We’ll call him on the way. It’s fine,” Robert said.

“What’s going on?” a voice sounded from across the lawn. “Hello?”

Jenny ran up, her oversized gardening hat flopping up and down with each gallop. She was still holding a small gardening shovel in her white-gloved hand.

“What’s all the commotion?” Jenny asked.

Emily circled around and got in the car. Noah followed his mom to the other side and loaded in. Robert was lifting Desi up into the backseat. Jenny clip-clopped her clogs onto the driveway.

“Yoo-hoo,” Jenny called.

“Mind your own fucking business, Jenny,” Robert said.

Robert slammed the door after Desi locked in her seatbelt and threw open the front door. Emily had already turned the keys in the ignition. Robert slipped the car into reverse. He eased his foot onto the brake and gunned it out of the driveway. Emily smiled and gripped Robert’s hand that was resting on the automatic shift. Emily pulled her phone out of her sweatshirt and dialed Jake.

Noah stayed out of the birthing suite. Emily and Robert remained in the room until a frantic Jake sprinted in. Noah could hear the screams and apologies behind the door. Noah sat in the waiting room, balancing his brother’s diary on his knee. He had snatched it off the couch on his way out.

The worn paper felt soft under the pads of his fingers.

August 24, Sophomore Year, Ian Dulance: age 15

Today I started Sophomore Year. My teacher, Mrs. Manx, said we have to keep a journal for the entire semester. She said she's going to collect it at the end and make sure we wrote in it each week, but she promised she wouldn't read it. Jake, my brother, says it's stupid. But he's stupid. What does he know?

Mrs. Manx told us to be descriptive. And to list what happened that week, and what we hope will happen next week.

There's this girl in my class. Her name is Abigail. She's pretty cool. We've been in class together since elementary school, but we've never really talked. She's nice. She has blonde hair. I hope I get her as my partner for class.

August 31

Abigail and I are working on a project together for school. She's coming over later today.

Next week...I hope we do well on our project.

September 7

Abigail and I present tomorrow. Mom says she's really impressed with our work. She liked our poster board. Dad said we did a good job. I told him I think we're going to get an A. He said "one step at a time."

Next week I think I'm going to go to the movies with Jake and some friends from school.

September 14

Got an A on our assignment. Abigail and I are going to the movies today. Dad said he'd take us. Jake wants to go too, but I told him no. He's so annoying sometimes.

October 1

I forgot to do this for a couple of weeks. Mrs. Manx said my entries need to be a little longer. What does she know?

Fine. I'll be more "descriptive." Abigail stopped talking to me after our project. She said she's really busy with things right now. That's fine. I don't care anyway. Today Emily made pancakes for breakfast. She doesn't usually, but I guess Noah started walking and she wanted to make a big celebration. Jake says Emily never makes us pancakes when we do things. I don't know. Maybe she doesn't.

Anyway, next week I hope my friends can come over for a sleepover. Maybe dad will take us to rent some scary movies. One step at a time. My dad started saying that a lot. I like it.

October 7

Dad says girls aren't worth it. He's right.

Next week I hope I never see another girl again. I just want to hang out with my friends.

"It's a girl," Emily said.

"What?" Noah says, interrupted from his reading.

“It’s a girl,” Emily said again. “Come see.”

“I’m ok,” Noah said.

“Noah,” Emily scolded. “Come see your niece.”

“Fine!” Noah said, agitated.

Noah tiptoed after his mom into the delivery room. He felt afraid to breathe. No one was moving. His dad and brother were both just standing over Desi staring. Desi was holding the baby in her arms. She was already wrapped around with a blanket.

“Her name is Elizabeth,” Desi said.

“Elizabeth Emily Dulance,” Jake said.

“Named after her grandmother,” Desi said.

Emily smiled through tears. She sucked in air in fierce gasps of happiness. Robert walked over and put his arm around Emily. He pulled her in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. His face was wet with tear tracks. Noah couldn’t remember the last time he had seen his dad cry.

“You have a niece now,” Jake said from across the room.

“Yeah, how does it feel?” Robert asked.

Noah shrugged his shoulders. He didn’t smile like the rest of him. He stood off to the side, feet pointing toward the door. He held the journal loosely in his hand.

“She’s beautiful,” Emily said.

Desi cried and held the bundle closer. Everyone was crying and smiling. The nurse walked in with a chart.

“How are mommy and baby doing?” she clucked.

“Excellent,” Jake said.

“Want to try feeding?” the nurse asked.

“Yes,” Desi said.

Desi looked up at the family with big proud eyes. She snaked a protective hand around her infant. Jake caressed the plush cotton of the tiny hat on Elizabeth’s head.

“Ok, well we’ll leave you two to it,” Robert said.

“Yeah, we should get back,” Emily said. “Noah’s probably pretty tired.”

“Ok, I’ll walk you guys out,” Jake said. He stood up and then bent over to give Desi a parting kiss. “I’ll be right back.”

Jake walked over to Robert and Emily. He shook his dad’s hand. A strong, fatherly shake. They exchanged the kind of grasp only fathers understand—a tight, but insecure up and down. Jake turned to Emily and she wrapped her arms around him in a large embrace.

“Thank you for taking her,” Jake said.

“Of course,” Robert said.

The family shuffled out. Robert’s hand rested in between the defined shoulder blades of Jake’s back.

“We’ll see you guys soon,” Jake said.

“Yes, please call us later. Let us know how Desi is doing. We’ll postpone Christmas until you guys are feeling up to it,” Emily said.

“Sounds good. I’ll see you guys later,” Jake said.

Emily and Robert walked away, heading toward the exit. Jake turned back toward the birthing room where his new daughter and fiancé were resting, tucked neatly in together. Noah turned toward him.

“How are you going to do it?” Noah asked Jake.

“Do what?” Jake asked.

“Raise a kid that isn’t yours.”

“Easy. Emily did it. Plus, he’s my brother’s kid. Our brother’s kid. Not some stranger,” Jake said. “He’s family.”

“Right,” Noah said. “Family.”

“And we do right by family,” Jake said.

Jake gave Noah and slap on the back and continued back to the room. Noah thought about Desi and her sweaty smile. Her big eyes mooning over her child. His brother Ian’s girlfriend raising a baby with his brother Jake. She seemed so happy. She picked Jake so easily.

Girls are dumb.

Robert cruised back home. He kept his hand out of the window, dancing it up and down in the wind. Emily placed her hand on his leg. The aura of bliss unshaken from either of them. Noah concentrated on Ian’s journal. He sped up a few months, feeling the softness of the worn pages flip by his palm. He paged through the seasons. His brother’s handwriting evolving from neat print to messy script, and then into an amalgam of both.

He settled on a section where Ian had started experimenting with writing only in capital, block letters.

Dec 25

I got called a faggot at school. How's that for description? Abigail apparently told everyone that I was gay. Now no one wants to sit with me at lunch. And no girls talk to me.

Not that I care. Who cares?

Dad said everything gets better. That everyone goes through high school problems. I don't know. He thinks I'm too sensitive. I heard him say that to Mom. He asked her why I don't ever seem to have girlfriends, only study friends.

Next week, I will still be on Christmas break. I hope Christmas break never ends.

January 26

I'm getting really good grades in school. The school counselor said I should start thinking about college.

I started talking to a girl named Rebecca. She's really nice. We eat lunch together.

Next week I hope everything stays the same. I'm going to start looking at colleges.

February 14

I want to disappear.

Next week, I want to no longer exist. No more steps at a time.

The carriage of the car bumped up and down as Robert pulled into the driveway.

“We’re home,” he said in a singsong voice. It was an unusual demeanor for Noah to see in his father.

Everyone was so happy. He didn’t belong in this family. He didn’t even know his family.

Maybe I should disappear.

V.

At home, Robert and Emily fell into an almost instant slumber. Noah stayed up. He had flipped through to the end of the journal. He fanned out the pages, giving cursory glances to whatever popped open. Two years of entries is a lot of reading. Noah licked his thumb and forefinger and peeled back pages all the way to the last entry.

June 11

I don’t even have to keep this stupid thing anymore. Fuck it. Fuck it all. Mrs. Manx doesn’t read this anymore, so I can curse all I want. Fuck. Shit. Bitch. Dick. Faggot.

For next year, I hope to never have to go back to high school. I mean that.

Noah closed the journal. He threw it across his room into the rest of his pile of homework on his desk. Papers sprayed across his desk from the force of the heavy journal. The letter from Ian was also on the table, in neat handwriting. Noah walked over

to it. He pinched the paper between his fingers. The encouraging message oozing off the page. Ian had written that Noah was going to be great. Noah looked at the letter in his hand and down to the graffitied notebook with his brother's high school memories.

Noah took the red marker that he kept on his desk. He scribbled a note underneath Ian's signature.

I guess you were wrong.

He left his bed and roamed around the house. He paced up and down the hall, taking in the family photos that littered them in a specific pattern Emily changed every few years. Each photo was of the three of them—the Dulance Boys—all gleaming white smiles and crinkled eyes. Ian always looked the happiest.

Fake. Liar.

Noah looked at Ian. He really looked at him. He studied his face, the subtle creases and warm features that made up the brother he lost. He judged the large ears, the gapped teeth, the dark and bushy eyebrows that they undoubtedly inherited from Robert. Noah had never seen many photos of Susan, but he was fairly confident she wasn't very hairy.

Same ears. Same eyebrows. If he could do it...

Noah took measured steps back to his throne—his tall black bed. He drew open the charcoal blackout curtains from his window. He admired the view he had forgotten about. The sun was just now cresting over the neighbors' roof. Golden and pink rays floated up into the chalky sky. It was a new day. Noah watched the sun continue to clear the tops of the roofs, rising up further in the sky. His parents would be up soon.

The sun started to pour slowly in through his window. He watched the rays lash at the toes of his chair. He watched it dance into his room. He watched his computer monitor and superhero figurines illuminate. He watched his wrist rip open up. He felt his eyes roll back.

The heat bubbled up his arm. Noah's lips parted like they did when he slept in his mother's arms as an infant, slightly open, his pink gums showing. But his bottom lip didn't quiver like it did when he was a baby. He didn't move at all.

Noah woke up to the beeping of his heart. It sounded like the last time he saw Ian alive—hooked up to machines. The morning crept in through the blinds and forced their way under his lids. His mom and dad sat curled up on the visitor chairs. His dad was resting his head against the ball of his fist, asleep. His mom was leaning hers against the wall, mouth agape. She was snoring.

Noah stirred, trying to get his bearings. A cushion of gauze was wrapped around both of his wrists. The beeping of the machine accelerated with his movements. Emily woke up to the rapid succession of beeps.

"Oh my god," she said. The sobs came down fast. "Thank god, you're here. You're still here with us. I wasn't going to lose another son. Not like this."

She kneeled down beside his hospital bed and gathered him to her, pushing his ear to the soft spot between her rib cage.

Robert stirred. He stood up and walked over. He shyly walked to the other side of Noah, placing his hand down on his shoulder. He was tender with Noah.

"I'm so sorry," he said. Tears welled in Robert's eyes.

Noah looked down at his gauze wraps.

“I am, too,” Noah said.

“What happened?” Emily asked.

“You can talk about it,” Robert said.

“I just. I was upset,” Noah said.

Emily held him tighter. No words passed between them. The safe space of silence that they each inhabited. Nothing said could undo the damage that had been done, or eliminate it in the future. They held on tightly, letting the broken pieces come back together. They were still a family.

“He’s awake,” Jake said.

“Are you ok?” Desi asked.

“I’m ok,” Noah said. “Did everyone come?”

“Of course everyone came,” Jake said. “We love you.”

“Really?” Noah asked.

“What?” Jake said. “Of course. What do you mean? You’re my brother. I love you.”

Noah felt the pressure rise up in his chest. A state of relief and embarrassment washed over him. His entire family had come to support him. They were there, and finally Noah when Noah looked over at Desi holding his niece, he knew they always would be.

Desi and Jake walked up to the hospital bed and looked Noah in the eyes. It was Noah’s turn to feel the tears stream down his face. Emily dipped her hands down into

Noah's hair and smoothed it down. The wells of Emily's tears continued to run over, streaming down her face like a monsoon of pain and happiness.

"We're going to go start the dinner," Robert said to Emily, over Noah.

Robert had a crinkle in his eye creases that he reserved for his family vacations and late night comedians. It was a look of contentment. Noah examined his father as his spoke. The crinkle was tighter around the corners than normal, though. It was a little too desperate—a little too disingenuous.

"Dinner?" Noah asked.

"Christmas dinner," Robert announced. "Had a little set back. A couple little set backs."

He smiled. He smiled a big, dad smile—lips slightly parted to show crooked yellowing teeth. Only his top teeth showed when he smiled. He never fully opened his mouth like Noah's mom did. She had a special smile they called the "Becker smile," after her maiden name. She and Noah were the only two in the family who had it. It was an eager, lipless grin that exposed all of the teeth. It even stretched wide enough to show the outline of some back molars. Noah rarely smiled so large, but his mom was standing next to him now. She was holding Noah's hand in one and Robert's in the other. Both of them sporting their signature smiles like an orthodontic attempt at normalcy. Yet Noah could see the cracks forming. And in that, Noah let his lips pull into a closed-mouthed curl.

"The doctor said you can be released after a 24-hour hold. So, at 7, we can take you home. Your dad and Jake and Desi are going to go home and set everything up," Emily said. "Since we weren't able to eat it yesterday."

“Doesn’t mean we can’t do it today. There’s no expiration on holiday cheer,” Robert said, bumping Noah lightly on the chin with his fist.

The family left. Jake wrapping his arm around Desi and Elizabeth as they exited. Robert peeking over their shoulder at his granddaughter.

“I was so scared,” she said, wiping tears from her cheeks. “What Ian did. It wasn’t right. I want you to know that. You can’t—“

“It’s okay, Mom,” Noah said. He grabbed his mother’s hand from under the thin hospital blanket. She held it back, tight.

“Yes, of course. It’s okay,” she said. She blotted at the tears. “Of course.”

Then the silence collected again and each of them trained their gaze across the room. A bulletin board with information on flu shots and a white board with the afternoon nurse’s name written in hot pink with a heart over the “I”: Nicki. It would take more than a day to rebuild. More than a twenty-four hour hold and a stale Christmas redux. Noah knew that. He could feel the pressure of his mother’s hand and knew she understood.

“One step,” Noah said.

“What’s that?” Emily asked.

“Nothing, Mom.”

Emily squeezed his hand again like she did when he was young. He savored it.

It will be okay. We will all be okay.

Ian

I.

You are going to get up and brush your teeth and brush your hair and take a shower. You are going to get up. You are going to get out of bed and get ready for the day.

No part of your body moves as the sun sinks into the house, warming everything with potential. The heat transfers into your stomach, into your gut, firing up your chest, up your esophagus.

“Fuck.”

Vomit—viscous, eggy vomit narrowly contains itself in the bowl. You crawl your hand up the tower and try to hammer down the handle. The bitter smell wafts up. You desperately flail your hand, looking for the flush—trying to avoid the smell before it settles into your nasal cavity. The smell will linger in your sinuses all day if you don’t find it. Find it. Your hand, like that spider in the children’s rhyme, all itsy bitsy keeps sliding down the slick porcelain of the toilet. It climbs back up. The smell follows it, chasing it. You’re searching. It’s getting closer to your face now—that toxic sweetness of freshly puked medication and bile. You’re so close. It’s closer. It’s closing in, creeping up. It’s choking you. You try to hold your breath. It’s pushing against your nostrils. Plunge. Finally.

The toilet swallows your transgressions down into its belly, relieving you of what was in yours. Your phone vibrates in another room. The entire apartment is only one bedroom, but crawling out there is like your own private marathon. On your hands and knees, you slowly move toward it, but break down after a few feet. The panting drying

your already parched tongue, turning it into a crusty dehydrated carcass of what it used to be. The water is in the kitchen.

Another few feet before the exhaustion and stomach seizing pain kicks in. The phone at least is in sight.

“Don’t forget your appointment tomorrow,” Jake texts.

“I’ll come over after,” he sends again.

They all still care. They swear you’re not a burden after carting you to and from appointments.

The letters lay on your desk. One for each family member. They all start the exact same way, the most clichéd way they can: I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what I’ve put you through, and I’m sorry for what I’m about to do. There are a million ways you can explain a sorry, a million ways to take it. And you’re sorry for all of them.

But they don’t sound right. And you rewrite them a million times before they hit the exact note. It’s hard to be sincerely apologetic about a pain you’re causing. But you are. You are so sorry.

To Jake,

I’m sorry. You were the best brother I’ve ever had. I hope this gives you some peace.

No.

To Jake,

I’m sorry. I love you. Keep everyone together—you only get one family in life, make sure you treat it well.

No.

To Jake,

I hope you find your peace.

You are true in that hope. You hope everyone's lives carry on, get better, are remarkable, after you're gone.

To Mom,

There's nothing else to say but thank you. Thank you for being the Mom I never had. And thank you for showing me that. Susan doesn't deserve the love you do. Don't worry, Jake will see it someday.

Know that I don't do this to hurt you.

I love you. I'm sorry.

To Noah,

Noah is young. Too young. His letter needs something long, involved. He needs to understand this isn't the way to handle problems. You need to be the bigger brother and show him that, even if you're not around to show him that. Convince him of that. He was like the child you always wanted and could have had. But can't.

To Dad,

Nothing I can say will explain it. But I hope you understand it anyway. And I hope you forgive me one day.

I love you. As my Dad, you were someone I always looked up to, even if I didn't show it. I thank you for everything.

Please forgive me.

Your son.

And last. Last, but not least. Your pen hovers over the looping letters. Are there any words to say? Maybe not in the English language. Too bad you don't know any other language. The pen is stiff above the paper.

What do you say to the woman you gave you your life back?

II.

"And that's why you have to be nice to the doctors, Ms. Buttons!" Ian exclaimed in a nasally voice.

His straight green wig nearly slid down his white face as he walked over to squeeze Ms. Buttons' nose. A goose-like honk fired off down the Children's Oncology wing. Fits of laughter followed closely after.

Ms. Buttons turned around and bonked Ian on the head with a giant inflatable hammer. Ian crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue.

"Oof!" Ian yelled.

"We gotta go, Mr. Blinky!" Ms. Buttons said.

"Ok!" Ian yelled out. "We gotta go, kids. Remember to be good!"

The kids all waved back as Ms. Buttons and Ian dressed as Mr. Blinky attempted to moon walk out of the ward, inevitably falling over each other with grand theatrics.

Ian slipped the wig off his head and rubbed at the make-up with the back of his clean hand.

"Oh, wow, watch out," Clara, Ms. Buttons, said.

Ian looked up just in time to avoid a romantic comedy moment where he bumps into the pretty female nurse and spills her papers all over the floor. He instead sidestepped and tripped over his absurdly large squeaking clown shoes.

“Oh my god. Are you ok?” Clara asked.

The attractive nurse in purple scrubs and thick, dark bun crouched down to check on him.

“You ok?” the nurse asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry. Just...wasn’t looking where I was going,” Ian said.

Clara shuffled over in her own laughably large shoes—two red tennis shoes laced tight with yellow thread. She helped hoist Ian up.

“I’m Ian.”

Ian extended a hand toward the nurse, now turning toward the triage desk, where other nurses sat. A surly woman with close cropped gray hair and pink scrubs adorned with kittens watched the group. Her eyebrows knitted together disapprovingly.

“Hi. I’m Desi.”

“Nice to meet you,” Ian said.

Desi smiled and walked away. Ian watched her sashay back to her post. The other nurses folded around her with medical charts and folders, obscuring her from Ian’s view.

“Hey, let’s go,” Clara said. “I’m starving.”

“Sounds good,” Ian said.

He threw out a wave in Desi’s direction as they shuffled by the desk, out toward the exit.

III.

Stuff them all into their envelopes. Done. Desi will deliver them. You don't know why she wanted to deliver them, but it's easier this way. That's the only way you can assure they'll get there after everything is done. Good thing your neighbor pities you so much. He'll take it down to the mailbox and send it out for you. He'll even buy stamps. Neighbor sends to Desi, Desi gives them to your family. Check that off the list.

You can't help your family any more. And you can no longer help yourself, except to save everyone from the monumental pain you're suffering. The radiation hasn't helped. It's just a waiting game.

You're tired of waiting.

Jake will be here tomorrow to pick you up for chemo—something he *insisted* on doing. Says he has something to talk about, something big. Some big break in his fighting career. You have never understood why he enjoys putting his body through that torture. His perfectly healthy and functional body. It makes you sicker than the poison you pump into your body.

But you can't tell him. Can't explain it to him without sounding off on your soapbox. It's his life. He can live it. And he should live it, to the fullest, like the rest of the family.

Dad and Emily will be fine. Noah, he's so young, he won't even notice. Jake, Jake is the one to worry about. You hope he finds his peace. The peace he's been searching for since Susan left. I hope Emily understands after the letter why you were curious in finding Susan, and why you are ok with letting it go. You hope Jake reaches the same

conclusions. Every boy needs a mom. And Jake's mom has been standing there the whole time, waiting for him to see her.

The pain in your stomach and your body aches worse, a dull thud like an exhausted knock at the door. A steady beat throughout your body. The pills Desi gave you before she left on vacation, after you told her nothing was working, after the last time you made love. After you told her you wanted to die, but were scared. After you told her you would never get to see the Eiffel tower, or the Pyramids of Giza. After you told her you would never be able to become a father. When you broke down crying and she grabbed you and held you close and your fingers found her smooth skin and her soft lips. After you pulled her on top of you and she told you it would all be fine. That she'd help. She always helps. That's just who she is. A helper. A problem-solver. The best.

IV.

They wore the humidity like an extra layer of skin. It touched every surface of them like an oppressive blanket. They couldn't sweat it away and when they wiped it off, it would reappear heavier and stickier.

Desi's mouth hung open as she tried to force breath into her body that wasn't wet. Ian took small steps and stopped every few feet, wrapping his hands around the peeling bark of palm trees for a break.

"It's hot," Desi said.

"It's Hawaii," Ian said. "It's supposed to be like this."

He feigned a weak smile. Desi rolled her eyes. They have planned this vacation for a while, but didn't think to research the weather.

“Let’s stop up there at that clearing. Looks good enough for our picnic,” Desi said.

“Sounds good.”

The patch of grass Desi had pointed to kept getting further away. It was like chasing a mirage. The picturesque opening where a rough-cut bench and two benches sat was becoming just a distant memory. Each step Ian took displaced dozens of ants. Desi continued to trudge ahead under the overcast sky, slipping through the dangling vines and leafy foliage in her way.

“Made it!” Desi yelled. She parked a seat onto the damp bench and started unpacking the picnic they had packed—an authentic Hawaiian feast with pineapple and sandwiches made from the succulent pork roasted at the Luau the previous night.

Labored breaths came up behind her.

“Thought you would never make it,” Desi called over her shoulder.

Measured footsteps walked up. A huge thud slammed onto the table. Ian dropped his hiking pack next to the food she laid out and flopped down onto the opposite bench.

“Looks good,” he said.

“Tastes better.”

They nibbled in silence. The chirping of birds kept them company, along with the clicking noise of photos being taken.

“Hey, do you remember when we first started dating?” Ian asked.

“Sure. You hit on me, and then I asked you out what seemed to be a hundred times before you finally said yes.”

“Ha. It wasn’t a hundred!”

“Felt like that.”

“Yeah. What can I say? Had self-esteem problems. Deep-seeded trust issues. Girl problems. All that.”

“Well,” Desi took a bite of her sandwich. “I’m glad you finally said yes.”

She put down her food and crawled her hand over to his. She threaded her fingers through his.

“Me too,” Ian said.

They each fell back into a rhythm of eating. Each worked through the pork sandwich and fruit methodically, thoughtfully.

“Do you remember when we first...found out?” Ian asked.

“Of course. You don’t just forget the day you found out your boyfriend has cancer. It’s like that thing people say about hearing really bad news—you always remember where you were. Like when 9/11 happened or JFK was shot. News like that, things you don’t want to remember, but can’t not.”

“Yeah,” Ian said, removed.

“Why do you ask?”

“Just thinking about it.”

Desi rubbed his hand.

“What about it?” Desi asked.

“Just...sucks. Best word I can come up for it. I think the picnic just reminded me. Because we were supposed to go to that barbecue with my parents that weekend.”

“Your parents barbecue a lot.”

Ian laughed. A pathetic warble of a laugh came out from his mouth before he was lost in a coughing fit.

“Sorry. Yeah, they do. I remember, I was finally going to bring you home to meet them. I’m sure they always wondered why I had never had brought a girl home before.”

“Why didn’t you tell them I was coming?”

“I don’t know. I always felt awkward talking to my parents about things. I thought it would be easier to just show up with you. Then we found out. Then I was only given a few months. Then, you know. I don’t know. Just never seemed like the appropriate time,” Ian said.

“It’s ok. I think you made the right choice. Telling your parents would have been more complicated. Especially after we talked about...our plans,” Desi dropped her voice an octave and looked around at the families crowding around to soak up the vista of green hills and cloudy skies.

“Ready to head back?” Desi asked.

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

Ian threw her a look—one of admiration and dread. He felt himself swell with love and fear, and then nausea.

“Hold on,” Ian said.

He ran to the spiky bushes with their leaves shooting up like swords from the earth. He bent over one of the less lethal spikes and threw up the lunch Desi had packed.

“Sorry,” he said when he returned.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m just feeling worse.”

“Do you want to head back early?”

“When’s our flight?”

“Two days. Noon.”

“Nah, I can make it. With you by my side, I can do anything.”

Ian smiled and nuzzled into her neck.

“I’m so glad I met you,” he said and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Now, onward!”

“You know, I don’t blame you,” Desi said while they were sitting at the airport waiting for the boarding to start.

“For what?” Ian said.

“For not introducing me. To your parents.”

“Where did that come from?”

“I don’t know. Just, you brought it up the other day on our hike. And...I just want you to know I don’t blame you. Introducing them to someone right before...well, right when you’re going through this. Especially with how paranoid you say your dad is. Probably would have thought I was some kind of gold digger!”

Ian laughed. Desi smiled in her peculiar way, one side hiking up higher than the other exposing one dimple on the left side.

“But, still,” Desi said. “I just wish I could have had some kind of relationship with them. I mean, since I don’t have parents. Losing your parents as a kid is tough. I always kind of wanted a family. Picket fence. Etc.”

Ian nodded and rubbed Desi’s stomach.

“And then I go and fall in love with some dying guy!” Desi said.

She shoved an elbow lightly into his torso. Ian let another laugh escape. The diagnosis had brought a gallows humor in both of them. Something they found oddly comforting—something that set them apart from others, their own little brand of comedy that kept them together and others out.

“Now boarding Group 3,” the announcer called over the PA.

“That’s us,” Ian said.

He got up and gathered up his backpack and carryon. Desi stayed on the floor, slowing disconnecting her iPhone from the charging. She then unplugged the charger and wound it, carefully, around her arm. Ian gave her a hand up. She kept her eyes trained on the floor as he kept picking up stuff around her. He felt a drop on the back of his neck. Ian looked up into Desi’s face and avoided another tear drop landing on him.

“Hey, hey. No, don’t cry. It’s going to be ok. You’ll be ok,” Ian said. “Promise.”

“How can you promise that?” Desi said.

“Because I know. This is what’s best. For both of us. You’re doing the right thing. *We’re* doing the right thing.”

“Ok,” Desi said.

Ian gave her a tight hug.

“Now, let’s go get on that plane before they leave without you and your dying guy.”

Desi smiled. Ian kept his hand on her back the walk down. As soon as they were seated, her grabbed her hand and nestled into her shoulder.

“Promise,” Ian whispered into her ear.

He slept clinging to her during the flight. He slept the whole way, unaware of the turbulence happening outside. Desi gripped him back, never taking her eyes off the blinking seatbelt fastened sign.

V.

Desi asked you if you were serious about a hundred times, and then some more. You tried to promise her you would beat this. But that was a lie. And she knew that was a lie. She’s known you for so long, she knows when you’re not telling the truth. Then she lied too, and said she knew you would. That you would beat this. The unspoken words trailing off *one way or another—you’ll beat this one way or another*. This is one way, you guess. Or another.

Now you have the pills sitting in front of you. Desi left for vacation. You’re all alone, which is better.

The horse sized pills that you have taken religiously for the past eleven months, all laid out into their neat little compartments. All tucked away in their homes in the weekly pillbox that Emily bought for you to help out. The mom you never had, but always had and never appreciated. Or appreciated and never knew how to show it.

Your Dad always believed you were making it up, that this was all in your head. He cut out articles about psychosomatic disorders. He scoffed at the pill regimen when you were at their house, counting out pill after pill into your hand, and then into your mouth. Deep down, you know he scoffed because he was scared. He always thought you would beat this. That it wasn't really cancer. You were his son, and his son is stronger than this. The Dulance Boys. The Dulance Boys are stronger than everything.

And you are strong. Strong enough to live your life on your terms. Strong enough to take trips to tropical lands. Strong enough to love a woman after your diagnosis. Strong enough to smile big, and admit fears. And strong enough to decide when enough is enough. When enough suffering is enough suffering. You are strong enough to make tough decisions. And strong enough to follow-through.

People don't realize how brave it is to quit. The negative connotation surrounding the word. It escapes with a disgusting pulled back lip, revealing a snarl of anger and hate: quit. But quitting can be the bravest decision you make. Reclaiming your life, taking back what you want by quitting what you're doing—that's true strength.

You send a text, and wait for the gulping sound to indicate it went through.

Rattling the bottle around like a cup of dice. A betting man's aid. Which action do you take? Pop one in your mouth. Tongue another. Swallow both, hard and rough. No water, yet. Take another. Easy. And another. Use water this time. Now by twos. Two-by-two, until they're gone. And then they're gone. And you wait.

The shakes start. The eye tremors. The pinhole vision. The chest constriction. It feels like a belt is strapped against your chest—someone pulling it tighter when you

inhale. The deepest part of your lung is cut off. All the breath only fills your chest. Now it sits in your mouth. Nothing can get past your nostrils. The pinholes dwindle into nothing. Silence.

You feel the quiet. It's all done.

Epilogue

Desirée

Elizabeth, your Daddy was a kind man. A brave man. A man of a thousand looks and few words. And he deserved to be treated with dignity, and given the choice of how he lived.

People will tell you things about him when you get older. When you are big enough to hear about what he did, but maybe not quite mature enough to understand it. So, I'll tell you this: he loved you. He knew about you, and he loved you. He loved you so much; he wanted to give you the best life possible. And he thought that was with someone else. Someone more physically capable. Family always comes first.

Your Daddy, now, was your Dad's brother. And he loved him so much. But Jake struggled. Jake needed a purpose. From the moment I met him, I knew he needed help. Ian would say he worried about Jake, but didn't know how to help him.

You are, now, his purpose. And he loves you, so much, too.

You saved him.

But your real Daddy was not a bad man. He was not a selfish man. He was an honest man, one who knew himself fully. One who wasn't afraid to look in his own eyes and know the answers.

He did what he did because he had to. And I did what I did because he had to. Even if you don't understand this until you're much, much older—the only thing you need to take away is that you're loved. In this family, there is nothing but love.

I scooped up Elizabeth from her bassinet and inhaled the wispy tuft of brown hair on her smooth skull. Her gray-blue eyes fluttered between sleep and waking, her upper lip pinched upward toward her tiny nostrils.

“Is she sleeping?” Jake whispered, walking into the nursery.

The house was a clean, modern two-bedroom we could barely afford. Emily and Robert co-signed for us, mostly just to keep us in the neighborhood I suspect. Jake wrapped his arm under mine, bringing Elizabeth and me close in his embrace.

“She’s getting there. I was just telling her a bedtime story,” I said.

“She’s lucky to have you,” he said.

“And you,” I said.

Jake kissed me softly on the cheek and left. I rocked Elizabeth in my arms until she had fully surrendered to sleep. Three months old, she was starting to sleep in longer intervals.

I gently replaced her, swaddled in an old shirt of Ian’s Emily had stitched into a quilt. She whimpered before fading off under her mobile.

Ian’s letter to me was tucked into one of the books I kept stacked next to her baby books. An old bible Ian had saved from a garage sale. It had ripped edges and a padded face.

“An antique!” he had claimed.

It was from the 1950’s. But he kept it anyway. Transporting it from apartment to apartment. Room to room.

I cracked it open, the piece of paper folded in fours. It was compacted into a corner, tucked deeply inside. The simple note I had read over and over every night since I retrieved it that morning I came back from my parents' house in Montana. I started and ended all my nights inside Ian's last words. The words I knew were coming, but was never really ready to hear.

I read them out loud, to Elizabeth writhing around in her baby gloves and cotton onesie. She had on a little bow that Emily also made. I pushed the ball of my foot on the rocking horse next to the bassinet and rocked it to and fro as I read the simple words to the room, filling it up.

To My Dearest Desirée,

Thank you.