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Beulahland: A Novel

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BEULAHLAND: A NOVEL

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Beulahland: A Novel

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Beulahland follows Esther and Beulah Baxter, a pair of orphaned sisters traveling across the American west with their evangelist uncle in 1994. Raised on the seedy motivational speaking circuit of small towns and youth groups, Esther is determined to free Beulah from this nomadic way of life under from the neglectful care of their uncle August, a fame-chasing bodybuilder who wants to bring the world to God through his demonstrations of physical strength. This plan is put on hold when Beulah falls ill during a routine performance in the wildfire-wracked town of Orchard, Washington, and almost dies; her near-death experience and miraculous recovery sets in motion a series of unexplainable events that turn her into a local celebrity nearly overnight. Beulah's newfound miraculous powers hold Orchard in thrall and give August a renewed sense of purpose as an evangelist, but they create myriad problems for Esther, who must grapple with her own lack of faith and a fracturing sense of loyalty to her family, her newfound camaraderie with a local girl named Zoe, and her responsibility as a caretaker and sister to Beulah.

I.

The day my sister rose from the dead, the Badladder fire jumped the highway. It was already making its way through the McCloskey Wilderness and was raging towards Orchard unabated when I found her hovering several inches above her bed as if lifted by invisible palms, blood-flushed lips parted and fingers twitching. Her eyes were closed, sweat-dampened hair cascading towards the pillow. She looked impossibly peaceful; I had come in that morning expecting to find my sister dead, or at least worse off than she had been the night before, blue-skinned and rigid. But Beulah Baxter, against all odds, was not dead. Far from it. And while I watched her floating there, the Badladder fire changed course—a sudden, unforeseen shift in the wind—and raced away from us, the mandatory evacuation orders were lifted, and the people of Orchard unpacked their cars and wondered aloud at what a miraculous stroke of fortune had been visited on them.

Beulah fell when she woke, landing softly and rolling over on her side, and when she opened her eyes she saw me with my hands over my mouth, watching her, and smiled as if to reassure me.

"He sent me back," she said, her throat creaking with lack of use. Her hands trembled as she reached out to me from the bed and her breath came in gasps, like a drowning girl thrashing to the surface.

"It's all right," she said. "He sent me back."

The popular versions of the story are much more dramatic; some have Beulah up on the ceiling, floating upright like a ghost with her blonde head wilting gently to one side. Some depict her glowing, an angelic circlet of light appearing behind her head, and me falling to my knees in the doorway, overcome like the Bethlehem shepherds on Christmas night. But in reality I just

watched, dumbstruck, as my sister surfaced from some heavenly sleep and reached for me from that dirty bed, her pale owl's eyes swimming with tears. She started small, I think, because it was easier for us to handle.

Before I could reach my sister the room was crowded—Uncle August, the Olsens, the doctor who had come in special on Sunday because he heard a girl from out of town was dying. Even the dog, shoving his snout in Beulah's face to lick away her affliction. She was gone from me then, our moment of shared salvation cut short, and though I couldn't see it I sensed a door slide shut between us, a shuttering of some kind; I had not lost Beulah to her illness, but I should have known then that I'd lose her all the same.

The stories people tell—I wonder sometimes. Memory is a tricky thing, after all, shifting and expanding endlessly, never the same twice. Strange things bring it back: the sweet rancor of rotting apples, a rabbit caught in car headlights diving off the side of a highway, a half-scratched lottery ticket. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and am convinced I dreamt it all, a livid fantasy conjured from wildfire smoke and too many years on the road. But then I return to that moment before anyone else knew, my little sister looking up at me from her pillow, gray and stinking from uneasy confinement, telling me that she'd been sent back to Earth. The way she said, with piteous reverence, "He sent me back," as if it was something she really believed. How her eyes, solemn and scared, fixed me there for the last time, how they would go on to fix everyone, holding us in her spell for those dizzying, endless months. But at that moment, she had only me.

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We had come into Orchard with the fires following us. This was in June, the start of the summer we thought the world would end, the sky an apocalyptic shade of rust from morning to

night. You could taste it on your tongue, hot like scorched metal, and no matter how far north we drove it never let up, the air running thick with the smell of burning pine. The worst fire season anyone could remember, at least in this part of the country—it was all they talked about, in gas stations and diners and barroom casinos. “One for the history books,” they said, shaking their heads back and forth. In only a decades’ time this fire season would be all but forgotten, eclipsed by unimaginably bigger ones, dry seasons that dragged from one end of winter to the next, but for now everyone was content with throwing their heads back and wondering why God saw fit to punish us like this.

Beulah was asleep in the back of the truck, sick already though we didn’t know how badly, lulled by the double serving of cough syrup I’d given her when we left Yakima.

“Really roll this place up at night, don’t they?” August craned his neck to peer out at the low-slung and shuttered storefronts. In the reflection of a darkened display window, the truck moved like a warped black carcass, the white hand-painted sign on its flank advertising the “Caravan of Revelations,” with a smaller admonition to “Repent Now!” scrawled underneath. We passed through the brief downtown in silence, the only noise the occasional clang and sputter from the exhausted truck.

“Easy, girl,” August said once when the engine let out a particularly shrill whine. He patted the steering wheel, cooing as he did to his prop animals. “We’re almost there, I promise.”

From what I could see in the headlights of my uncle’s truck, Orchard was like every other town we came through. The buildings fell away seamlessly, as quickly gone as they had appeared, and as we moved deeper into town spectral homes and shacks began looming out of the darkness into our brief net of light. A single church, white paint scabbed with rot, housed a stone-studded graveyard. It was the sort of place August loved to visit, versions of which were

scattered, near-identical in form and function, across the west: frozen in time, almost, and so quiet that when you came upon them at night it was like driving through a crypt. The kind of place, according to my uncle, that still embraced "traditional values" like the importance of family and faith, still married young and prayed before meals and gave a shit about the Christian origin of this nation. The kind of place, in other words, that would still buy what he was selling.

As we drove, August told me what he knew about Orchard, all of which had come to him in a dream sent by God but was most likely from the AAA guidebook: originally one of the many unlucky settlements cobbled together at the edge of the country, flint-skinned people led by promises of fertile abundance on the Northwest coast. How they stopped too late to realize their mistake, how different the soil was here than on the other side of the mountains, how they refused to admit defeat and coaxed the town into existence out of sheer stubbornness.

"That's how come it's called Orchard but there's no apple trees," August said. Our headlights bounced off the church as we passed. "The people who founded it didn't realize you can't grow that stuff out here."

I didn't respond; even offstage, August preferred monologuing to call-and-response. It was a common theme we came across, towns that were still paying for the miscalculations of those bright-eyed pilgrims who believed they were following in God's footsteps. Lured by bounty and finding only trees that could not regrow fast enough for the rate they cut them down, clogging the rivers with timber until the fields were empty. Nothing left but a defunct mill and roads lined with empty liquor bottles and rain-soaked panties, maybe a halfway-decent high school football team if they were lucky. Really embodying that pioneer spirit their ancestors struggled for.

“The Lamplighter,” August said to me, gesturing to the map on my lap. “Should be coming up here pretty quick. I tried to call them in Cliffdell but nobody answered. I hope they’ve got room for us.”

We passed a row of single-story houses, all with porch lights off and American flags fluttering listlessly in the slight breeze.

“I’m pretty sure there will be,” I said, and sure enough when we pulled up to the motel the Vacancy sign was stuttering back at us. The Lamplighter was a low-slung building painted forest-green, the parking lot half-full of ramshackle trucks with beds full of junk tied down under muddy tarps. A pot of dead perennials—petunias, I guessed, from what I could see in the greasy orange lamplight—hung in front of the office door. The same type of place we’d stayed at hundreds of times before.

“Stay here with your sister,” August said when we parked. “I’ll go get the room and we can start unloading.” He groaned as he eased down from the front seat and I could hear his knees cracking. He limped a little walking across the parking lot; all the lifting and long hours of driving were beginning to take their toll. I waited until he was in the lobby and climbed into the backseat, rummaging through our bags until I found the cash box. The code had been easy to crack—203, my father’s birthday, and August had never once changed it in all the years we’d been moving around—and when it popped open with a clang I heard Beulah stir beside me.

“Essie?” she mumbled, rubbing her eyes. “Are we there?”

“Yeah,” I said, counting out bills in the dim light. “August is getting us a room.”

“I don’t feel good,” Beulah said. I stopped counting for a moment and reached across to feel her forehead. It was clammy and hot, the same as it had been a few hours ago.

"You have a fever," I said. "I can get some Advil from the motel. They probably have some. Can you eat?"

"Yeah," Beulah murmured, and I gave the bills one more look before stuffing twenty in my bra.

"How much did we get?" Beulah asked. I closed the box and shoved it way under the rest of the bags, throwing a blanket on top of the mess.

"Just twenty," I said. Yakima hadn't been a big payday, and I only ever took ten percent on principle. August wasn't good enough with money to ever notice it was gone.

Beulah yawned. "Just twenty? So that's ten-twenty now?"

"One thousand-seventy, actually," I said, scrunching down in the seat so I could see her clearly. Her hair was matted in the back from sleeping against the headrest, and the seatbelt had made a rash-pink dent on her neck. Her braids had come undone in her sleep, and beneath the smoke and exhaust of the car I could smell her hair, warm hay and musk, a smell I knew almost as well as my uncle's cigarettes or rain on dust roads. "Some lady in Wenatchee gave me fifty when August wasn't looking. He won't even know to miss it."

Beulah peered out the window. "Where the hell are we?"

"Don't say hell," I said automatically. Beulah rolled her eyes. She was turning twelve soon and had been trying to get away with more colorful language when August wasn't around, stumbling over the lesser curse words like a baby deer on new legs.

"Why not? Uncle August says it all the time."

"That's different. He's talking about actual hell," I said.

"That's what I meant, too. I meant the actual hell."

"No, you didn't," I gave her braid a yank, and she winced. "You must be feeling better if

you've got the energy to pick a fight with me."

"I'm not fighting," Beulah insisted. "It's in the Bible, so it can't be bad."

I sighed. "Whatever, loser."

"You say it too. I've heard you say it."

"I'm allowed to," I said. "I'm older."

Beulah stuck her tongue out at me, and I stuck mine out back. It was easier than saying *I love you.*

"We're in Orchard," I said.

"Where's that?"

"Washington."

"We're still in Washington?" Beulah pushed the heels of her hands into her eyes and groaned. "We've been driving all day and we're still here?"

"You're telling me," I said, and leaned against her shoulder. Beulah was radiating heat, soft pulses of it coming off her with every inhale. "State's big as *hell."*

August came back out into the parking lot and opened the car door, peering back at the pair of us slumped on the seats.

"We've got a room," he said, jangling the key. "3A. You two can head over and I'll park the car." He smiled at Beulah. "How's our patient doing?"

She shrugged. She had what our mother used to call "sick eyes," glassy and pathetic like a kitten's.

"Not well," I said. "She still has a fever, I think. Does the office have a vending machine?"

August pulled himself into the car, grunting again as he did so. "Yeah. You go in there and move the car."

“Get me some Lifesavers,” Beulah said. I got out and walked towards the office, feeling my body unspool after so long on the road. The AC in August’s van was shit, and he refused to get it fixed because he claimed he could do it himself, and cheaper than those crooks at the auto body place would do it for, but he never did it. Never enough time, he claimed. My body was slick with sweat and the jumble of bills clung to my chest where I’d stashed them, whispering back and forth as I walked. Overhead, the moon was a faint orange wedge behind a veil of smoke. No stars to speak of.

The girl at the front desk had piercings in both eyebrows and was reading a fantasy novel when I came in. There was a cloudy sheet of bulletproof glass separating her from me, and the placard in front of her desk read *Stephen.* She didn’t look at me. The lobby smelled like piss and fire—although everything smelled like fire these days—and a single fan rotated lazily on the ceiling.

The vending machine was a wasteland, a dismal assortment of faded-looking bags drooping against the glass. I was good with vending machines—most of the time, you could make a fairly decent meal if you knew what to select even when the offerings were generic. But this one was particularly barren. Luckily it had Advil, nestled in little plastic packs between the condoms and the toothpaste, and I punched the number in over and over until I’d taken them all. There was an ancient-looking pack of m&m’s in the machine, the wrapper blanched almost white, and I grabbed those too.

“That shit’s all expired,” the girl at the desk—Stephen?—was talking to me now. I turned around.

“Huh?” I said.

“I said it’s all expired.” She spoke fast through her teeth and her words were slushy.

“We’re getting someone to come and refill it next week.”

“Even the Advil?” I asked. Stephen nodded and closed her book.

“Yeah. I probably wouldn’t take it. It’s not gonna do anything.”

“Okay,” I said. I never knew what to say to strangers, especially when I was alone. I usually just went mute or said something dumb, which was worse.

“Do you need medicine?” Stephen asked, standing up behind the glass. I nodded.

“My sister,” I said. “She has a fever, I think.”

“That sucks,” Stephen bent down below the window for a moment. She resurfaced with a massive white pill bottle and rattled it at me.

“Generic Ibuprofen,” she said, pulling off the cap and shaking a bunch of pills into her hand. “I promise it’s not expired.” She pushed her hand through the window opening and offered me the pills, dull red and nondescript. Stephen had a tattoo barbed wire around her wrist, a drop of tattooed blood blooming from one of the thorny points.

“Take it. We keep them back here for the staff but we have a bunch.”

“Thanks,” I said, counting them out and putting them in my pocket. There was a little I-2 stamped on each one, so I knew they were real. Two hundred milligrams, enough to bring a fever down if Beulah took two right away. My hands were sweaty and I felt the pill coating coming off on my fingers.

“Are you with that bald guy that just came in here?” she jerked her head towards the parking lot.

“Yes,” I said. Stephen snorted.

“Is he your dad?”

“No,” I said. This was a common question. “He’s my uncle.”

Stephen’s eyebrows twitched and her little diamond piercings flashed up and down. I knew what she was thinking—a big bald guy shows up in nowheresville with two girls who claim to be his nieces and they’re always gone the next day. The girls don’t talk. Sometimes at the nicer places they’d ask me if we’d been kidnapped, and I’d laugh. Nothing so ordinary as abduction. I put the last of the pills in my pocket and wiped my hand on my jeans.

“Don’t take them all at once,” Stephen said, and I shook my head.

“I won’t.”

“You promise?”

She actually sounded a little worried I might do it. I looked her in the eyes, gray and frosted with mascara.

“I promise,” I said. “They’re not for me, they’re for my sister.”

It was nice that Stephen thought I might kill myself and didn’t want me to. She sat back down and picked up her book. On the cover, a pale elf-looking girl with a long dress and big breasts was embracing a hulking, unsmiling orc.

“What are you guys doing in Orchard?” She asked, checking her wristwatch.

“My uncle’s a preacher,” I said, and Stephen’s diamond eyebrows bobbed again. “We’re doing a Revelation tomorrow.”

That was what August wanted us to call it—a capital-R Revelation—but really it mostly amounted to August ripping phone books in half and talking about abstinence. No gig was too small for him—schools, youth groups, corporate retreats, prayer meetings for men dealing with divorce. It was all the same to him to show up wild-eyed and smiling and strap himself to a bus

with the brakes on and drag it across a parking lot to demonstrate the power of God's love. To call it a Revelation made it sound much more impressive than it actually was.

"Oh," Stephen said, and opened her book. "Okay. Well, you guys have a good night. I hope your sister feels better."

She sounded like she meant it, so I said, "Thank you, Stephen," and left. August had unloaded everything by the time I got to the room and Beulah was in the shower. The room had two beds with dark green floral bedspreads and not much else; Beulah had claimed the bed closest to the window for her and I. It smelled worse than the lobby but at least the air conditioning worked.

"I found some medicine," I said to August, who was rummaging through his bag for the itinerary.

"Excellent," he said, though he was distracted. He always started to freeze up once we got into town, mentally preparing for the show. Excuse me, the Revelation.

"We have to be at the high school tomorrow at ten o' clock," he went on. "I had the girl at the front desk promise to give us a wake-up call. But set an alarm just in case."

"Okay," I said, flopping down on the bed, and August pulled a pile of styrofoam boards from his bag.

"Are you going to take a shower?" He asked, and I shook my head. As stiff as I was from being cooped up in the car all day, I didn't want to get up.

"Teenagers tomorrow," August went on, uninterested in my response. "A rededication ceremony. You'll be on tip duty."

There was a huge crack on the ceiling, forking off like lightning towards the door. "Got it," I said.

"I think this one could be big, Esther," August said. He pulled a five-pound dumbbell from his bag and curled it experimentally. "The youth group leader said there's a lot of kids. Some of their parents are going to be there, too. Just for us," he grinned at me, eyes gone vacant the way they did when he talked business. August really wanted to be a member of the Power Team, the oiled-up strongmen who did kickflips and broke boards in half while talking about Jesus. He'd never admitted this, but I found his audition tape in a pile of old props a few years ago when we were outside La Grande. In the video he described himself as a "modern-day Sampson" and ripped phone book after phonebook in half with near-robotic intensity, all while shouting Bible verses at the camera.

"For God so loved the world," he bellowed, the veins in his arms writhing like worms, "That he gave his only"—*rip*—"begotten"—*rip*—"Son!" This was before he grew the big beard, and in the video he wore a t-shirt with the sleeves cut off and the words POWER TEAM written in Sharpie.

"Those guys are basically frauds, anyways," August told me and Beulah on more than one occasion, though we never brought it up. "They talk about technique and training and all that horsehit. Excuse me," he'd cross himself; profanity was his burden to bear and he was having a hard time getting rid of it. "They talk about technique and training and none of it means anything, it's basically admitting you're making it all up. What I've got," he'd flex his arm for us, Beulah and I watching unimpressed. "What I've got is *God-given."*

Our act varied slightly based on the audience, but the central theme was always the same: August showing off and calling it evangelization. He had a wide variety of props to pull from—break boards, flaming tires, dumbbells with vague and impressive weight assignations painted crudely on either end that Beulah and I would cart onstage, buckling comically under the

perceived weight and letting it crash to the stage floor. It was always meticulously rehearsed; August planned the demonstrations based on what he figured the audience might like to see based on age, location, the average income of the attendants. Kids and teenagers were more taken with the flashy displays of strength, for example, while the retirees and adult baptism groups preferred the drawn-out demonstrations, the agonizing slowness of August bending a barbell in half with his bare hands while glitchy synth music poured through the speakers.

Despite his height, my uncle was an intimidating figure: in early days, he had styled himself like a nineteenth-century strongman—slick bald head, waxed mustache, a rubber bodysuit with a peeling gold star emblazoned across the chest. But recently he had begun to embrace his moniker, "the Samson for a New Millenium," had grown out his beard and wore sandals—"like Jesus did," he claimed. He swapped the bodysuit for a shiny black vinyl sweatsuit adorned with thorny crowns and jagged crosses. Beulah and I had matching suits, but only Beulah had to wear hers because she was the only one of us who was ever onstage with him. She was easier to lift, for one thing, and the crowds loved it when she'd sit on his shoulder and sing "Amazing Grace" at the end of each Revelation. In years past, if props were especially scarce or the dumbbells weren't making their usual impact, he'd balance Beulah on the palms of his hands, holding her out in front of him like he was presenting a statuette at an awards show.

"God holds all of us just like this," he'd shout to the open-mouthed onlookers, his arms and legs visibly trembling while Beulah waved. "He has us in the *palm* of his hand"—and at this he would pull one hand away, supporting Beulah with just one arm. "But he will never let us fall!" And, just like August promised, Beulah never fell, not even in practices. She was always small for her age, coltish and knock-kneed, which probably helped.

I could never tell if she liked it or not. She smiled a lot while it happened; it was yet another reason why August preferred her over me for crowdwork. She actually looked like she was having a good time, and according to August my "poker face" needed work, his roundabout way of telling me I had an unpleasant expression. Beulah and I never talked about the Revelation, maybe because we were both too scared to discover what the other person thought. She'd never known any other kind of faith, after all, and it showed during Revelations. It came naturally to her, whether she bought it or not, and people liked her for it. They were drawn to her even before everything happened.

"Sounds great," I said, and I meant it even though it didn't sound like it. If there were more moms hanging around the merch stand, the more likely it was that I could take a little extra before August got a look.

Beulah came out of the shower with her pajamas on, damp hair making puddles on her shoulders. Her eyes still looked glassy, but when I touched her she felt cooler than before. I cracked the bedspread and slid under with my jeans still on and shimmied out of them under the blanket.

"That shower was gross," Beulah said, climbing into bed next to me as August moved into the bathroom. "There was a dead bug in the tub."

"Ew," I said. "What kind of bug?"

Beulah regarded me seriously. "A big one," she said, and I laughed.

"Don't worry," she went on. "I rinsed it down the drain."

"Thank God," I said, and then when she shot me a look, "I mean, thank goodness." I leaned over and fumbled in my backpack for a hairbrush and gestured to Beulah to turn around.

"Feeling any better?" I asked, moving the brush through her hair. Beulah was blonde like our mother but a little darker, and when her hair was wet it was the color of fresh soil. I squeezed the shower water out of her ends and it slid down my wrist onto the mattress.

Beulah shrugged. "My throat hurts," she said, and I reached in my pocket for the pills.

"Take two of these," I said, handing them to her. "The girl at the front desk gave them to me. They'll help you sleep."

Beulah sighed and tossed the pills back, swallowing them dry. If she was still feeling bad the next day I'd see about finding a doctor, or at least try to convince August that she wasn't up for doing the Revelation. August didn't like doctors on principle—they hadn't been able to save either of my parents, after all, so what could they really be good for?—but the bigger issue was that we couldn't afford them. Nobody gave health insurance to traveling Jesus salesmen, and August claimed to still be paying off the ER bill from Beulah's emergency appendectomy a few years back. Our preferred method of disease control was Advil and prayer, and so far it had worked, but it had been a long time since Beulah had been feverish for so long. We were both pretty healthy, me moreso. I couldn't remember the last time I'd actually been sick, and even then it was never more than a sore throat. It was like my body understood that I couldn't shut down, that my sister needed me, and kept the germs at bay.

"When do we have to be up tomorrow?" Beulah asked. I threaded my hands through her hair and separated the sections for braids.

"Ten o' clock," I said. "But if you're not feeling well you don't have to do it." I felt the cradle of her skull rest against my hands as I wove her hair together over and over, and when I was finished I pressed my lips to the back of her head, breathing in the motel shampoo and hay smell that lingered beneath. In a year I would be eighteen and could legally make Beulah my

problem and all this would be over. I just had to make sure we had enough saved by then, enough to get us to Petaluma to find Mom's family and convince them to let us stay. In the meantime, August was in charge, and that meant motels and magic shows in Orchard and whatever other godforsaken towns wanted to see him bend barbells and talk about the Day of Judgement.

"Try to get some sleep, okay?" I said, and she lay down on the pillow.

"I'm not sleepy," she said, but she was out in five minutes like she always was, huffing and puffing with her baby-pink mouth slightly ajar. When August came out of the bathroom he turned off the lights and I heard the wet thump of his towel hitting the floor—he wasn't as shy about changing in front of us as we were in front of him. He rustled around the room for a few more moments, then I heard the hiss of the sheets as he climbed into his own bed.

"Say your prayers," he muttered into the darkness. It was how he always said goodnight. Soon he was snoring too, adding to Beulah's breathy cacophony. I stayed awake for a while next to my sister, looking out the window. I still had the old m&m's in my jacket pocket, so I chewed on them for a while, and even though they were definitely expired they still tasted like chocolate. Fat moths skittered in front of the streetlamp outside, hurling themselves at it again and again. Somewhere I heard a coyote calling, high-pitched and desperate, and not a single car passed on the highway. It was a sensation I should have been used to, but had never been able to be comfortable with; in these late hours, lying in the silence, it was easy to believe that we were the only living people for miles.

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The first fingers of dawn were creeping over the horizon when I woke up, the sky still sick-yellow with smoke. My mouth tasted like ash and sugar and my back and legs ached from the previous day's driving. I must have slept, but I didn't remember it. August was already

moving around the motel, murmuring to himself as he went through the bags. I lifted myself up on one elbow and looked over at Beulah, whose thin chest was rising and falling with alarming slowness. Her right hand was splayed across her cheek—Dad tried to get her to quit sucking her thumb when she was little by dousing her hands in vinegar, but she still did it in her sleep sometimes. I felt her forehead; dry as marble, and too warm. She didn't stir from my touch, and the glaring red eye of the motel clock read 6:30, so I let her sleep.

August went into the bathroom and I shoved my hand into my bra; all the money was still there. Sometime today I'd have to put it with the rest of the cash for safekeeping, but not yet. I only took what we needed, Beulah and I, kept it in a tampon box that I knew August would never touch—and even then, just in case, I hid all the money inside a pad wrapper.

For years as we drove through the rain—and now, through the smoke—I dreamed of the jasmine and orange-blossom scented days we could spend in California, no more sticky car trips or tents or mold-crusted motel rooms in mold-crusted towns. We'd need a lot to get us there, but August was nothing if not good at making money. And it's not like it was his to begin with. August relied on the kindness of believers for everything—food, clothes, all of it came from donations, and some of that was for Beulah and me anyways. I liked to imagine that if those firm-handed believers knew I was using their bills to get my sister to California, away from August, and in the meantime pay for our vitamins and maxi pads and all the other things he wouldn't pay for, they'd still be happy with their donation. More often than not August's money was going towards scratchers and Stanzolol anyways, which I can't imagine they'd be all that happy with.

Next to me, Beulah stirred in her sleep and rolled over. "I'm not here," she murmured, eyes twitching behind closed lids. I heard August come out of the bathroom and lay back down,

turning myself towards the window again. Outside, a pair of crows chased a skittering plastic bag across the parking lot.

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Orchard was no more or less impressive in daylight. Maybe it was the flat yellow sky casting a pall over everything, or the fact that nobody had eaten and August was frantic, slapping the steering wheel to the tune of an unknown song as he drove. But either way it seemed a particularly ugly place, rows of single-story houses with colorless lawns and moss-fringed roofs, the only evidence that it once rained here, and rained often at that. We drove past a house with a yard full of fountains, all unplugged—Orchard was in a drought, August explained the night before, the first time in its history. A stone basin full of tumbling baby angels stared me down as we went by, their puckered lips poised to spew nothing but dust. The only things that seemed to be thriving were the wild blackberry bushes; there were thick tufts of them everywhere you looked, ash-dusted leaves reaching up out of the side of the freeway and crawling across the Fred Meyer parking lot on Main Street, pushed up against the bus stop by the library. They erupted out of sidewalk cracks, sometimes just a single thorny branch looming towards the road.

"Why don't they get rid of all those things?" August asked as we passed a field of blackberry bushes that had consumed what appeared to be an abandoned shed. "Just get some goats out here, they'll clean all that up. It's an invasive species, you know," he said to nobody in particular. I didn't respond.

There was a woman outside waiting for us when we pulled up to the school, the only other person in town I'd seen since Stephen. She wore a baggy blue sweatshirt with the words FAITH FORMATION emblazoned across the chest and her tennis shoes were yellow-gray in that

particular way that suggested they had originally been white. She came right up to the truck and peered in through the open window.

"You must be August," the woman said, smiling wide to reveal a mouth full of tiny, cramped teeth. "I'm Martha, I'm the Youth Group Leader for Orchard First Baptist. We're so happy to have you here."

"Happy to be here, ma'am," August said, his voice deepening. He was in show mode now, assembling his persona for the morning: somewhere between a granite-eyed cowboy and a Revival preacher, serious enough for the adults to be intrigued but enthusiastic and dangerous enough to keep the teenagers' attention. It was a delicate balance, but he always knew how to strike it somehow. Martha directed us to park by the gym, a big sandstone building that looked bigger than the school itself.

"This is gonna be a good one, I can tell," August said to nobody in particular. I glanced in the truck's side mirror—Beulah was in the backseat, forehead pressed against the window. She had developed a cough sometime in the night, dry and thin but new all the same, and even in the shadow of the truck window I could see the hollows under her eyes, sick eyes that were getting sicker.

"I don't think Bee should do it today," I said, and August frowned at me.

"What?" He turned around in his seat and Beulah sat up straighter. "Are you still not doing good?" The show voice was gone, replaced by the patronizing high register he used when talking to Beulah. It made sense when she was little, but she'd grown out of it now, and every time August talked to her like a baby it made my bones hot. But Beulah never said anything. She was a people pleaser through-and-through, just like Mom.

"I'll be okay," she said, her voice wobbling, and that was all he needed to hear.

“I can stay with her in the car if you want,” I said, but August was already unbuckling his seatbelt. When he decided to take us on he regarded us as little more than pets, essentially, though more self-sufficient and logical. Like my father, he didn’t know what to do with two young girls and generally expected me to take care of everything we needed—if either Beulah or I needed to assuage our hunger, thirst, illness, or exhaustion, it was up to us to do it. He certainly cared for us, at least as far as survival was concerned: we were a part of his act, as vital to its success as his barbells and tent poles, and any potential threats to our wellbeing needed immediate attention.

“She’s fine, she said she’s okay,” he replied, and bounded out of the truck. I turned back to Beulah again.

“Are you sure?” I asked, lowering my voice just in case August could still hear. Beulah nodded.

“When can I take some more medicine?” she asked.

“Two more hours,” I said, and she pouted. In two hours we’d be in the full swing of the show and there’d be nothing I could do if her fever spiked onstage. August certainly wouldn’t stop.

“Fuck it,” I said it under my breath, digging in my pocket for the Ibuprofen Stephen gave me. Beulah still heard me and let out a delighted laugh, the way she always did when she caught me swearing.

“Hey!” She kicked the back of my chair. “No bad words!”

I fished two of the pills out of my pocket and passed them back to my sister.

“Just take them now,” I said, and she did. A couple extra Advil wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world for her, I figured. Certainly better than feeling bad onstage.

We unpacked the props from August's truck, the karate boards and phone books and baseball bats that August snapped against his knee if the crowd wasn't responsive enough. The air was fetid and still, heavy on my shoulders like something living.

Martha led us inside, taking us through the school and down the hallway towards the gym. It was eerily quiet with nobody else in the building, the recently-abandoned classrooms lying in wait for September. The air smelled like Pine-sol and pencils and something else—teenage nerves, maybe, the tang of changing bodies that never quite goes away no matter how much scrubbing. I was only in middle school for a year before Dad died and August pulled us out, but I noticed that smell there too—armpits and sour breath and stomach-curdling anxiety coming off everyone in waves. Back then it was agonizing; now it just made me feel lonely.

"The kids are so excited to see you," Martha's hand was on August's arm as she led us towards the gym. Her shoes squeaked on the tile. "They all slept in the gym last night as part of the retreat, and ten is a little early for some of them, so don't be surprised if they're a little subdued. You know how teenagers can be," she turned back to me and Beulah and winked. Neither of us said anything.

"Your daughters are lovely," Martha said, and August laughed, the strange patronizing laugh he did at shows that made my skin crawl.

"They're not my daughters," he said. "They're my nieces. Their parents passed away several years ago and I've been taking care of them ever since."

"Oh," Martha spun around again and grabbed Beulah's shoulders, bringing the two of us to a stop. "You poor *babies.* Was it an accident?"

It took me a minute to realize she was asking how our parents died; I thought she was asking if it was an accident that we ended up with August.

“My father fell off a roof,” I said. “And my mother died in childbirth.”

I saw the wheels turning behind Martha’s eyes and she dropped her hands, not making eye contact with Beulah, who looked at me. We were used to this reaction.

“Well,” Martha said, spinning on her heel and hurrying to rejoin August. “You girls are very lucky to get to work with your uncle like this.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. Beulah coughed, so long and loud I could practically hear her lungs rattling against each other in her chest.

People always assumed that we were his daughters at first glance, left motherless to follow our gifted father from place to place. Early on, August played this up; August was near-identical to our father, which is to say he was nearly-identical to me. We had the same dark hair and dark eyes, skin that held sun and a thin face. In August's case, the thin face was helpful in accentuating his divinely-built shoulders, aided in part by a diet that consisted primarily of rare steak and—based on what I found in the truck—a shitload of steroids. Beulah was all Mom: blessed with her coloring, skin milky like baby's breath and hair the color of cornsilk and big pale eyes that you'd swear could see into heaven, and that was even before everything.

I hated that phrase, “died in childbirth”—like my mother was some Victorian waif whose body couldn’t handle itself. But it was how she died, and if a less pitiful phrase had been invented for it, I wasn’t aware. The doctor said it was a blood clot that killed her, detected too late, and by the time anyone knew about it her blood pressure was already through the roof. Preventable, he said, shaking his head, as if that was supposed to make us feel better. I was holding Beulah while he told us, although she wasn’t Beulah yet; my parents hadn’t picked a name and my mother had really wanted to name her Rose. My father ignored that wholeheartedly; naming my sister Beulah, a name nobody had heard in decades, was the

beginning of his long slow descent, though I didn't know it at the time. He gave her Rose as a middle name, but the damage was done. Beulah—an idyllic land, a long-promised place. But it was also a final destination, a place one goes to at the end of life. With the birth of Beulah and the death of our mother, the Baxter family had arrived at a similar end point.

That day I sat in the hospital and stared down at my baby sister, her big eyes that swallowed her face staring back at me. She reached a tiny hand out of the starchy hospital blanket, pawing for my fingers, her nails impossibly small. She was too frail, I thought, even though the doctors assured us she was a healthy weight and size, and there were no health issues they could find. And what did I know? I was only six.

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The gym seemed even bigger inside than it did outside, but that could just be in contrast to the tiny crowd we had. Mostly teenagers, as August promised, moving around the waxed floor in sullen groups. Exactly the same type of kid we saw everywhere—everyone's faces stubbled with acne, greasy foreheads shining under the gym's harsh fluorescents. Hollow-faced farm boys in faded jeans, girls with downcast eyes and stringy hair shrinking into oversized sweatshirts, and the handful of well-scrubbed and skinny girls and boys who God had chosen to smile on, blessing them with natural athletic ability or charisma or perky breasts. Some stuck close to the walls, aping indifference if not outright antagonism towards the proceedings. A boy with severe bedhead leaned against a tiny girl who I assumed was his girlfriend, his hand tucked experimentally in her back pocket. A few tired-looking adults hovered at the edges of the gym—covering the exits, it looked like, trying to keep any of the less enthused participants from making a break for it.

“Excellent crowd,” August said, then turned to me. “You wanna set up in the back by the doors? Martha said they’re gonna go to lunch after this so they’ll use that exit.”

He asked it like I really had a choice. “Sure,” I said, and while Martha led him and Beulah to the changing room I dragged my props—cash box, still jangling with the uncounted money from Yakima, a handful of August’s self-produced spiritual lecture CDs, black t-shirts with a crown of thorns that matched August’s tracksuit—through the gym. I felt heads turn, eyes following me, but I kept my head down.

This was another thing I never got used to. A feeling I got around people my age, or close to it: like my blood was too hot, too fast, like it was trying to get away from my skin. I don’t think that’s possible but it sure felt like it. I was always ruffled by their laughter, the easy way their bodies interacted, the touches and gestures and pats on the back. The feeling, always, of a language being spoken that I was not fluent in, and could never be, purely by virtue of my upbringing. Even our shared experience of sitting in an over-air-conditioned gym and watching my uncle bellow about God’s saving love was fragmented; when it was over, they went back to their homes, their rooms with bedspreads they picked themselves, probably would forget about the strange bald man and his melancholy children in a couple weeks. But once the gym emptied, Beulah and August and I got back in the car and did it all again.

I found a place by the wall and started unloading the goods. A couple girls stood across from me, eyeing me as I put on my sweat jacket.

“Are you part of the thingy?” One of them asked, jerking her head towards the stage. I just nodded.

“What is it?” The other girl asked. She was tall and there were holes in the knees of her jeans that looked intentional. Someone had drawn a jagged smiley face on the back of her hand. “They won’t tell us what this is. Is it, like, a baptism or something?”

“No,” I said, fanning out the CDs in a lopsided half-moon. “A rededication.”

The girl wrinkled her nose. “What’s that?”

I shrugged. How did you describe what was essentially a circus performance without actually saying it?

“God,” the girl pinched her fingers to the bridge of her nose and sighed loudly. “This is gonna be so *boring*.” She looked at me. “No offense,” she added.

“It’s fine,” I said, and it really was.

“I’m Zoe,” she said, and gestured to her friend. “She’s Sarah. What’s your name?”

“Esther,” I said, and she nodded, a little pleat appearing between her eyebrows. People were thrown by our names, Beulah’s and mine—old lady names that didn’t suit us, we were always told. But Zoe just said, “Cool name,” and elbowed the girl she was standing with. I just stared at the pile of merch in front of me, picking a piece of lint off a “Samson for the New Millenium” T-Shirt. Somewhere in the gym a boy laughed, twangy and thunderous with puberty.

“You guys do a lot of this kind of thing?” Zoe was still talking to me, picking at the polish on her nails.

“What thing?” I asked.

“You know,” Zoe put a finger in her mouth and gnawed. “Retreats and stuff.”

“Oh,” I said, then, “Yeah, all the time. We’ve been all over.”

“All over the state?” Zoe’s eyes widened.

"No, like…all over," Technically in the five years we'd been dragged around with August we'd never made it farther east than South Dakota, but I didn't feel like elaborating and Zoe didn't press.

"Wow, that's so cool," Zoe elbowed Sarah again. She spoke in that indulgent, honeyed tone I'd heard teenagers use before, the tone that always set my back teeth on edge because I could never tell if it was sincere. It was the word "so," I think. That's *so* cool. You're *so* pretty. This is *so* interesting.

The gym was suddenly filled with a loud popping noise—the speakers coming on—and everyone in the gym jumped, followed by a collective laugh. Zoe rolled her eyes exaggeratedly and leaned over to whisper something to Sarah. One of the adults standing by the exits saw this and frowned.

"Zoe," she said loudly, and Zoe jumped.

"No talking," the woman said, her mouth in a straight line.

"Sorry, Mom," Zoe said, and nudged Sarah, who giggled. I chewed the sleeve of my Revelation jacket and briefly considered setting myself on fire.

Finally the gym lights went off and August's theme music churned out over the speakers, a synth-heavy royalty-free concoction that sounded like every bad power jam playing at once. August bounded onstage, and a few people in the audience clapped politely as he went from one end of the stage to the other, reaching out into the gym as if he was a rockstar and the crowd of half-awake teenagers were adoring fans straining to brush against his fingers.

"Good morning, Orchard!" August bellowed into his headset, arms spread wide. He was breathing heavily already, and it sounded like gusts of high wind in his microphone, emphasizing the crowd's silence.

"Oh, come on, you can do better than that," he said, and his voice clipped on the mic. "I said, Good *morning*, Orchard!"

A few voices called back, "Good morning," and August raised his fist in triumph. Across from me I saw Zoe and Sarah leaning close to each other, heads bent in muffled conversation. Onstage, Beulah had just joined August. She usually ran out right behind him, braids bouncing as she waved to the crowd, but today she walked onstage as if held at gunpoint, shoulders slumped. In the harsh stage lights she looked pale, too pale, and even from the back of the room I could see the circles under her eyes. Hopefully the Advil would hold her over.

"My name is August Baxter," August said, lowering his voice. The high-energy tactic hadn't worked, so now he was getting serious. "And your church has brought me here today because, well," he stroked his beard, casting his gleaming eyes about the crowd, "Because they know that you're hurting."

Onstage, Beulah coughed. The crowd was silent.

"You're hurting," August said again. He licked his lips and adjusted his headset, always a tell for when he sensed things going badly. Even the limpest crowds generally had some reaction to my uncle's appearance, whether it be adulation or revulsion or curiosity. The teenagers of Orchard, however, were watching August with something like guarded expectation, the beginning of a movie they thought they knew the ending to.

"You've got a lot going on in your lives," August said, reaching for his bag of break boards. "School, homework, relationships, stress" He pulled the boards out one by one, stacking them on top of each other as he rattled off his list.

"You don't know how you're supposed to handle it all," he went on. "Everything just keeps piling up and up and up." He stepped back from the boards, pausing for a moment.

"Homework? It's summer," I heard Sarah whisper, and Zoe's shoulders shook with laughter.

"But you know who sees that burden?" August paused again, raising his arms out. "God does. And do you know what God does?" No response. Beulah coughed again. August raised his right arm, palm angled, and brought it down on the stack of boards to chop them neatly in half.

"He *destroys* that burden!" The music flared again, and a few kids in the audience let out startled noises as the boards cracked, balsa wood splinters flying into the crowd.

"He will crush what is holding you down!" August was getting going now, and there was a little surge of energy from the crowd. Someone whooped and August pulled off his crown of thorns jacket, revealing his sleeveless t-shirt with a cartoon drawing of Samson on it, the same one I'd be selling for $10.99 after the performance.

"Now, friends," he said, his voice taking on its sonorous and folksy edge; the "big picture" voice, I called it. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the wall. I knew what was coming. I could practically recite it from memory. August's speeches changed a little from place to place, depending on the venue and the age of the crowd—for high school audiences he talked about homework and dating, while the retired men's groups preferred hearing about the struggles of applying for Medicaid and the changing values of today's young people. But it all had the same underlying idea: Everything is going to hell.

The new millennium was approaching. It was an impossibility, a year we likely never should have reached, and it rang with a promise of alien wastelands, a horizon impossible to breach. Our nation is losing its way, August said, and gestured outwards to confirm what his audiences already knew. Look to your televisions, your movie stars, the music on your radios. Brother fighting brother in the streets, guns in waistbands as common as pocket change or bubble

gum. Fourteen-year-old mothers lip-syncing to Britney Spears, pornography on premium cable. Jesus, our country's founder, shoved to the sidelines in favor of hip-hop music and free birth control.

August told them what they wanted to hear: your children are doing drugs. Your spouse is no longer faithful. Your mortgage is going up and there's nothing you can do about it, about any of it. But his body, he claimed, was all the proof one needed of God's continued presence: if God could make a man as strong as August, it seemed, could imbue him with the strength of Biblical heroes in this forsaken era, then nothing—*nothing*—was impossible. And most of the time, even if people didn't buy it, they were comforted, which was the next best thing. They saw Beulah onstage with August, cherubic and docile and eager to proclaim the word of God, and were relieved that there were still *some* children out there who obeyed their elders and said grace before meals. They pressed money into my hand and said, without looking in my eyes, "For your uncle's good work," and they went home and felt good about the fact that they were supporting such a good cause, that God saw their act of financial generosity and that they, too, might be blessed in kind.

"You've got a lot going on in your lives"—a pause; I opened my eyes. He had repeated the same line twice. He was supposed to say "I've been called to you by the Lord," and I watched him process the mistake.. He cleared his throat, a high nervous sound at odds with his thunderous sermon voice, and started again.

"My friends, I understand that life feels like too much sometimes. There's a lot of pressure coming from all sides." August reached behind him and Beulah handed him a frying pan, which he took between his palms and began bending in half. Someone in the audience gasped.

“It feels like this, doesn’t it?” he shouted to the crowd, but nobody responded. Beulah started coughing then, just once and then a volley of guttural hacking noises, so long and loud that she doubled over. August smiled to the crowd.

“My assistant, Ms. Beulah Baxter,” he said, gesturing towards her as if she had just performed a particularly impressive trick. “You’ll have to excuse her, folks—the smoke is not agreeing with her.”

Someone near the stage clapped. Sarah leaned over to whisper something to Zoe again. It bothered me that they knew I was related to August; I could tell they thought he was embarrassing, and by extension that made me embarrassing in their eyes as well. It made me itchy.

I watched August’s face; I could sense the desperation growing. We hadn’t bombed this hard in a long time, and as he bounced from foot to foot I saw him weighing his next move.

“And these fires, huh?” He was improvising now; all his cues forgotten. He’d blame us for not giving him enough time to rehearse, blame Beulah’s coughing for throwing him off his rhythm.

“These fires…they remind me of something,” August stroked his beard exaggeratedly. “They remind of another place that’s very hot, another place with a lot of flames…anyone know what I’m thinking of?”

Zoe collapsed into a fit of giggles. “Zoe Marie,” her mother hissed from the door. I closed my eyes again. Martha, who was perched below the stage, had been smiling indulgently through the whole enterprise but I could see her face beginning to flicker. At least the Power Team would have stuck to a script.

“Okay, friends,” August clapped his hands together and the sound cracked through the room. “Let’s start over. You can see as well as I do the flames licking at our heels. It’s everywhere, and it’s scary. It might make you question, why would God allow something like this to happen?”

A prolonged silence; I opened my eyes. August was looking behind him at Beulah, and something was passing between them. He seemed to be mouthing something to her, and Beulah shrugged in response. August repeated himself. Beulah was visibly sweating, shiny tracks running down her neck, but she walked towards him and August flashed a shaky grin at the audience.

“Friends, I want you to look at this,” August said, and he knelt down in front of Beulah and laced his fingers together on the ground, offering them to her like a stirrup.

“No,” I said, and it must have been loud because Zoe and Sarah looked over at me. Beulah placed one grubby Ked into August’s hands, then the other, and then just like that she was in the air, held aloft with one foot in each hand. The crowd gasped, and there were renewed cheers and applause. Beulah’s face looked blurry in the spotlight—her eyes were unfocused, the tremor in her hands visible.

“Brothers and sisters!” August wailed, sweat and spit flying. “This is what God will do for you! He will hold you in the palm of his hand and never, ever let you fall if you just dedicate yourself—”

And then the crowd came alive, but not because of August: in a single fluid movement Beulah collapsed, falling head first from August’s hands towards the gym floor. It was not too far of a fall, and she hit the ground before anyone could reach her, landing with a chillingly dull thud.

I left the money and bolted for the stage; her eyes were open when I got there, but she was white as a sheet, trembling and unfocused, and her hands were in fists.

"Bee?" I shook her a little, but she didn't respond. "Bee, what happened?"

"Call an ambulance," I heard someone say, and August bellowed into his headset, "No, no ambulances, please, no ambulances, she's alright!"

The audience strained forward, shaken from their stupor at last. Someone turned on the lights, bringing the room into stark fluorescent clarity once again.

"Did she hit her head?" I asked—I didn't know who, just anyone who might have seen, but when I looked around nobody seemed to know. "Her neck?"

"Give her some room," a voice came from behind me; the woman from the door, Zoe's mother, knelt down over Beulah.

"She landed on her side, I think," she said, moving her hands over my sister's abdomen. "She might have hit her head but I don't think there are any spinal injuries. Can you move your hands, honey?"

Zoe's mother spoke with such calm authority that I was stunned into silence; Beulah's hands opened and closed with no indication she had heard anything.

"Good, good," the woman said, then looked at me. "She's really hot. We should take her to the emergency room."

"Oh, God," August's voice echoed across the gym, but this time it wasn't an invocation. "No ambulances, please. She's okay, she's okay, she doesn't need an ambulance."

The woman was still looking at me. "She could have head trauma," she said. "And she has a fever."

August would never take Beulah to the hospital unless she was bleeding or dying; I knew how little money was in the cash box, and it was more than August had in his wallet.

"I gave her Advil," I said, stupidly, and I hated how my voice sounded, whining and shaky.

Martha was hovering over us now too. "Is she okay?" she yelped, and as she did Beulah twitched and seemed to return to Earth, shuddering back into her body with a gasp.

"What happened?" She mumbled, and August crowded over her as well, reaching for her head.

"It's okay, honey," he said, a name I'd never heard him use for either of us before. "You passed out. Are you okay? Do you need some water?" He turned to the assembled crowd. "Can someone get her some water?"

"She needs to see a doctor, just in case," Zoe's mom said, this time to August, but August shook his head.

"We don't do doctors," he said, covering the headset mic with one hand. "I think she's okay, she's just been sick for a couple days. She probably hasn't eaten enough," August looked at me. "Did she have breakfast?"

I gaped at him. We both knew the answer was no, that it was actually August who sped us past the McDonald's drive-thru claiming we were going to be late, that there was no time to load up on "poison" this morning.

"No, she didn't," I said, but Martha came to my rescue.

"I can get her some juice," she said, and scurried off. I glanced at the assembled crowd of teenagers, who seemed grateful that their rededication had been cut short. A few were edging towards the doors already.

“If she can’t go to a doctor, she can at least stay with us at our place,” Zoe’s mom said. “I’m a nurse, I can keep an eye on her. If that’s okay with you,” she turned to August, who was busy assuring another parent volunteer that Beulah was fine, just taken with the spirit. “It happens sometimes,” he said. “Especially when the Revelation is especially powerful.”

“Yes,” I said, and she turned back to me. “It’s fine. I’ll go with you.”

Zoe’s mother nodded. Martha returned with juice and she whisked it out of her hand.

“We’re gonna have to carry her out of here,” Zoe’s mother said to me. “I don’t want to sit her up just in case there is head trauma.”

“Okay,” I said. My tongue felt two sizes too big for my mouth. Martha was telling the assembled teams to go back to the school for the rest of the retreat, but it didn’t seem like anyone was listening and was using the chaos to get out early.

“My car is just outside,” Zoe’s mother said. “You take the top, I’ll take the legs.”

I positioned myself above Beulah’s head and slid my hands under her back, struggling to get a grip against the nylon Revelations jacket she had on. I staggered slightly when we lifted her; she felt heavier than I expected, her body limp and leaden as a rock. Her body was warm, warm enough that I could feel it radiating through her clothes, and her heart was hammering away at its hummingbird pace. Angie led us through the gym doors to her car, and as we left the gym I heard August asking Martha, “So we’ll still be getting the full hourly rate, is that correct?”

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The drive to Zoe’s house was tense. August stayed behind to load up the truck, but I stayed with Beulah and Zoe, my sister and I in the backseat with her head in my lap. She was lucid still, her eyes darting back and forth, and when I tugged her braid she flinched and stuck her tongue out at me. But she wouldn’t talk.

The radio was on low, a song that was supposed to be cranked loud struggling its way through the speakers. The sky had lightened in the time we'd been in the gym, but there was still a sick-yellow haze over everything, and Mrs. Olsen drove with the AC off to avoid getting more smoke or ash in the car.

"I keep saying, it's like when Saint Helens blew," Mrs. Olsen said. She caught my eye in the rearview mirror. "I don't know if you girls were old enough for that."

I shook my head. I vaguely remembered the pillows of ash on our front lawn, the sun angry and red in a dust-colored sky. My mother crying as she watched the news, even though that wasn't unusual.

"It was just like this, only worse," Mrs. Olsen went on. She gestured out the window at the endless haze. "We weren't close to it but we still got a bunch of smoke and ash and the first day it was pitch-black at noon. It really felt like the end times. I told Zoe's father, I think this is it."

"Jesus, Mom," Zoe piped up suddenly. "Don't say stuff like that."

"Zoe Marie," Mrs. Olsen shot back. "Watch your mouth."

"Sorry," Zoe said, slumping down in the front seat. Mrs. Olsen turned around to look at me and Beulah.

"You girls can call me Angie, by the way," she said, smiling. Her hair was dishwater blonde like her daughter's, but her eyes were an icy blue, almost like a husky's, slightly unnerving in an otherwise pleasant face, the sugar-cookie smoothness of a woman who drove a gray minivan and talked casually about the end times. Zoe's face was harder, leaner, her whole body buckling with teenaged indifference, but it wasn't hard to see the similarities between the

two of them, they way they both tucked their hair behind their left ear and chewed their lower lips during breaks in conversations.

"I'm Esther," I said, and gestured to my inert sister. "This is Beulah."

Angie smiled politely and turned back to the road. "Esther and Beulah," she said. "How Biblical."

We pulled up to the Olsen house, a gray-green two-story with a wraparound porch on the edge of town. There was a Toyota truck in the driveway that looked brand-new, and the porch was brimming with flowers, pinks and reds that were almost garish against the muted sunlight. The wreath on the front door was made of wheat and trimmed with a gingham bow.

"I'll put her in the guest room," Mrs. Olsen said. "Esther, you can sleep in Zoe's room."

"Where am I supposed to sleep?" Zoe asked, and her mother shot her a dark look across the console.

"It's okay, really," I said. "I can sleep on the couch, or on the floor, it's—"

"Absolutely not," Mrs. Olsen said, her voice crisp. "You'll have Zoe's bed and she'll be just fine with it. Now, I'll help you get Beulah up the steps."

—

There was wheat everywhere in the Olsen house. Small bouquets on the mantelpiece flanked a carriage clock that wasn't ticking, and more bundles were scattered on bookshelves and hung upside-down on the walls with red ribbon. Above the kitchen sink was a framed quote: *Unless a grain of wheat shall fall upon the ground and die, it remains but a single grain with no life.* I vaguely remembered August using it once during a Revelation, at a corporate retreat for a Christian bread company in Camas that was no longer in business.

“Can you tell my grandparents were wheat farmers?” Zoe caught me looking and smirked. “My mom’s obsessed. She took a bunch of it from my grandpa’s farm when he died and now it’s everywhere. I keep telling her that if the fires ever hit us here the whole house is gonna burst into flames.”

“I think the house would catch on fire anyways,” I said, and Zoe let out something like a laugh, a slushy kind of snort. I couldn’t tell if it was affirmative or she was laughing at me.

“You can put your stuff in my room,” She said, and led me down the hall past gold-edged picture frames with family portraits and pictures of Zoe. So many pictures of Zoe—baby pictures, toddler Zoe with wispy brown bangs in a mouse costume, Zoe in stockings and Mary Janes on Santa’s lap. Middle-school Zoe in a graduation cap, braces studded across her teeth. I paused at a picture of Angie and Zoe and a man who I assumed was Zoe’s father on the beach, golden light playing across their smiling faces. The wind tugged on Zoe’s hair and she was laughing, her father’s arm hugged across her chest. There was another girl in the picture too, a few years younger than Zoe, with blonde curls that practically glowed in the sun. Her eyes were half-closed.

“That was in California,” Zoe said. “Point Reyes. You ever been there?”

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “We’ve never actually been to California.”

“Really?” Zoe led us further down the hall. “I thought you said you’d been all over.”

“We have,” I said. “Just not California. But my mom’s family is still there.”

“Cool,” Zoe said, clearly uninterested, and we arrived at a white door draped with a curtain of purple beads. A sign on the door, hastily scrawled in thick Sharpie strokes on a piece of notebook paper, read KEEP OUT.

“This is my room,” she said, and pushed open the door, the beaded curtain jangling tunelessly in her wake. It was a small room, made smaller by the unmade queen-sized bed that took up most of the floor space. The bits of wall that were visible behind all the posters —fraying advertisements for concerts by bands I’d never heard of, a few of tanned and glistening shirtless men pouting from behind curtains of intricately mussed hair—were gray-green like the rest of the house. There were shiny photographs stuck to the wall with duct tape of girls laughing, the flash so bright it obscured all their features save for dark eyes and lips. Pants puddled on the floor right where they’d been stepped out of, and a lacy pink bra hung off the back of the office chair by the desk. An open can of Diet Coke was perched on the nightstand on top of a thick paperback that I assumed was a youth Bible, but on closer inspection realized it was an Anne Rice novel. A room, in other words, where someone lived and breathed all the time, nothing like the sterile and transient motel rooms I was used to. Even when we stayed with believers, which was rare, it was always at some local reverend’s house or unmarried high-school principal whose apartment was as barren and staged as they were. Never so many signs of life, the bottles of nail polish and flattened socks and the insinuating smell of womanhood and clothes purchased new from a mall.

“Sorry it’s kind of messy,” Zoe said. “I didn’t know anyone was going to be coming over. Obviously.”

“It’s okay,” I said. She had a casual air to her that unnerved me, a perfunctory sort of self-assurance that was almost alien. The room smelled like fruit—body spray, maybe, or that glittery lotion you got at the mall—and I was suddenly very aware that I hadn’t showered in a few days, that I was wearing the same clothes I’d slept in the night before. I hadn’t even brushed my teeth before we left for the Revelation, and my mouth felt mossy.

Zoe saw my face and smiled gently. “Hey,” she said, and reached out like she was going to touch my arm but didn’t. “Don’t worry about your sister, okay? My mom’s a nurse. She works with dying people. I mean—” she blushed, her cheeks going rosy underneath her freckles. “She’s one of those home healthcare people, she works a lot with old people, people who need a lot of help. She knows what she’s doing. She’s honestly probably smarter than the ER doctors.”

“Okay,” I said, even though I wasn’t completely sure what a “home healthcare person” was. As long as she was smarter than August, I really didn’t care how equipped she was. Zoe flopped down on the bed, sending a pile of CDs splattering to the floor.

“You *flew* up there,” She said, her eyes on the ceiling. “I’ve never seen anyone move so fast before. I thought her falling was just part of the show, but when I saw you get up like that I was like, Oh no, something’s wrong.”

I wasn’t sure what to say, so I concentrated on a loose thread on my sleeve.

“Sarah said the same thing,” Zoe went on. “She was like, that’s weird that she fell like that. Was it her first time doing it or something?”

“No,” I said. I got the feeling that this conversation was a test, but I wasn’t sure what I had to say in order to pass. “She used to do it a lot. When she was younger.”

“Sarah used to be a cheerleader,” Zoe said, apparently not listening. “And she said that your uncle’s form was all fucked up. You’re not supposed to lift like that, from the floor. It can hurt your back really bad.”

“Good to know,” I said, hoping I didn’t sound sarcastic. August said my voice wasn’t happy enough most of the time. “I’ll make sure he practices next time.”

Zoe snorted and sat up on the bed. “Do you want to take a shower or anything?” she asked, and I nodded. Zoe gestured down the hallway.

“There’s clean towels under the sink,” she said. “I can change the sheets while you’re in there.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said, but Zoe was already pulling the covers back.

“It’s no big deal,” she said, and I tried to convince myself that she was right, that none of this was a big deal, just another odd little pit stop that I’d file away with all the others. Zoe wasn’t worried—she was thinking about things like showers and clean bedsheets, after all—and Zoe’s mom was a nurse, kind of. So I shouldn’t be either.

The bathroom was huge, a pair of untouched seashell soaps on the counter and a single stalk of wheat balanced in a bud vase next to the sink. The hand towels, dark green, were embroidered with pink roses and looked like they had never been used. I peeled off my clothes, giving myself a brief assessment in the mirror—no worse than usual, ribs still jutting in all the usual places, my hair ragged and lank from so many days without a wash. My clothes on the pristine bathroom floor looked obscene, the crusted smears of strawberry deodorant in the armpits of my t-shirt and the pale patches of white on my jeans where my thighs had rubbed the fabric down over time.

There was a rashy triangle forming between my breasts, and the edges of my fingernails were ragged—I hadn’t realized in all the morning’s events that I’d started picking at them again. It was a nervous habit Beulah and I shared, one I thought I kicked but still flared up whenever things got tense, which they had definitely been today. I turned on the water and let it warm up while I chewed the skin around my nails.

On the other side of the wall I heard Beulah cough and Angie spoke to her in low, calming tones. The water was warm when I stepped into the shower but I cranked it all the way up to hot; something about this house and its decorations made me want to scald everything off me, get the

road and the motel and even that sour-smelling gym off my body. I wanted to walk back into Zoe's bedroom with my skin scrubbed pink and raw, and maybe while I was under Beulah would get better, too, and we could pretend that none of this ever happened. I confess I stayed in the shower until the water ran cold. I prayed, actually prayed, for the first time in I don't know long, eyes squeezed shut against the sharp stream of water: *God, don't let anything happen to her.*

II.

My mother was born in a bathtub. It was August in Petaluma in the middle of a citywide blackout, and my mother didn't cry when she came out. In fact, she was so quiet and sweet in her little birth-puddle at the bottom of the tub that my grandmother knew right away she didn't want any more kids. She couldn't risk the chance that the next one might not be as good. I guess you could say that Marilee was already dedicated to not being a burden.

My mother's name was Marilee Frances Troy. She loved red licorice and Joan Jett and always wanted a horse growing up, but not like the way other girls did, sort of vague and half hearted with the deep-down knowledge that it would never come to fruition. She was determined to be a nurse when she grew up, delivering medicine on horseback to remote enclaves of the west with the wind in her hair. The horse would be named Caramel, to match its coat. But instead of a nursing degree, she got pregnant. And instead of a horse, she got a single-story in Puyallup that smelled like mold no matter how much she cleaned.

My father's name was Elijah Baxter, but he went by Eli. No middle name. He and August had a landscaping business together, inherited from their father as soon as they graduated high school. They were called Elohim Industries and drove around town in a black van with a crown of thorns stenciled on all the doors, which August had painted by hand. They had steady business in the valley, mostly lawn care and yard work, but people trusted August because of his muscles

and they sometimes got hired to do tree removals and stump grinding, hauling rocks from one end of a rain-tattered lawn to the other. My dad was the one who handled all the bookkeeping, answered the phones, and handled the money, because even then August had a few problems keeping his assets in order. They weren't as straight-edge back then, but everyone knew that Elohim Industries was closed on Sundays, and you could always see those Baxter boys in the front pew at the Friendship First Believers for weekly service, scrubbed clean of suburban refuse and smelling of their mothers' good soap.

They could have had their pick of girls in the valley, girls from good church-going families who knew how to cook chicken and clean a bathroom until it gleamed, but August was busy gambling away his life savings and my father wasn't interested in any of the clammy, dim-eyed pew pushers he was presented with. But one day the two of them were in Puyallup cutting down a dogwood tree in front of a two-story house full of UW nursing students and when the tree came down in a shower of pink blossoms there was Marilee on the other side of the window, blonde and long-legged and reading *Valley of the Dolls* on her bed. She glared at Eli with her hard-candy eyes and that was it, he was in love.

"I never wanted them to take down that tree," she explained to my father later. "In the summer I never had to close my window to get dressed. Nobody knew I was up here." That was how Eli and Marilee met; my father met my mother.

She was just shy of eighteen when she got pregnant with me, and they got married at a church in the next town over, one of those big beige new-build affairs with Bible verses painted on the walls. My mother wasn't showing yet, but they didn't want to risk it getting out that Eli Baxter had gotten an agnostic college girl in the family way. In the pictures, my mother is pink-faced and smiling with her hair puffed up five feet high, a single daisy behind her ear. She's

holding my father's hands and his suit looks too big for him, like a kid at prom. It was probably August's; he was the best man, the only other person from his side of the family to show up. There's another picture of them cutting the cake, my mother's hand disappearing into my father's mouth as she feeds him. His eyes are practically hidden in his cheeks. She's looking at him with so much love I can feel it between my teeth.

I'm glad he didn't shove the cake in her face. I always hated when people do that. It seems so mean and messy for no reason, especially after the woman puts all that time and effort into doing her hair and makeup. I have a theory that ninety percent of the people who get divorced in this country are the same people who shoved cake in each other's faces during their wedding. But things didn't end great for my parents either, so what do I know?

My dad moved out of the double-wide he shared with August and got a house for us in the suburbs, a single-story two-bedroom with a wrought-iron front gate and a patchy yard frosted with dandelions. He put in overtime with Elohim Industries and they started taking on bigger projects, week-long jobs on the other side of the state that left Mom and I alone more and more. It didn't bother me, because when Dad was gone we could watch whatever we wanted on TV, which for my mom was mostly soap operas and daytime talk shows and reruns of old black-and-white sitcoms where none of the jokes made sense but always made my mom laugh. If she wasn't laughing, she was crying. That was just how things were in those days.

A song on the radio might set her off, or a wedding on one of her soaps, or the morning we found a dead cat behind the house, pink guts spilling out of its little fanged mouth. I'd wake up and find her in bed with me, dead asleep with her hand on my head, and not know when she came in. In her good moods she sang a lot, drifting around the kitchen while the Grateful Dead played on the radio and humming along to "Stella Blue." That was her favorite song.

“I wish we would’ve named you Stella,” she told me once. I was sitting at the kitchen table and her back was to me, head bent over the burner as she made lunch. Even her back was pretty, willowy and graceful under her t-shirt, and the cutoffs she wore revealed the dimples on her thighs, the half-moon mole on the backside of her knee.

“Your dad wanted something more traditional,” she went on, flipping something in the pan. “I said, ‘Maybe just the middle name?’ but no, and you know how your dad is.”

I didn’t know, not really, but I always felt special when my mother talked like this, conspiratorial and casual like I was her friend and not her child, so I said nothing in fear of spoiling it.

“Anyways,” she said, coming to sit beside me and smoothing my hair away from my face. “You’ve got a little Stella in you, no matter what he says. It’s Latin for star. A little star.”

In this memory there’s snow on the trees outside, but it couldn’t be snowing because the heat in the house never worked well enough for her to get away with shorts in the winter. But in my head I see her framed by the big kitchen window, the fir trees outside dipping and swaying under the heft of new snow, drips of it already melting off the roof in big shiny bullets. The steam from the pan, whatever she was making, rose up around her like an oracle. Like I said about memory—never the same twice.

The whole pregnancy with Beulah was a wreck. My mother couldn’t get out of bed for days at a time, and when she did it was only for short periods. She puked a lot—“morning sickness,” she called it, but she was sick at all times of day and her knees grew dark and mottled from so much time crouched over the toilet. She sent me down the road to the gas station to get magazines and sleeves of Ritz crackers, the only thing she ever wanted to eat, and we’d sit in her bed together, watching TV and reading tabloids while my mom sucked on ice cubes and licked

the salt off crackers with her pale, gnarled tongue. In the later months I could feel Beulah moving in the bed with us too, saw the occasional bulge under my mother's t-shirt that suggested my sister was there with us, listening in on the celebrity gossip.

"It's all just made up to get you to buy them," My mother held up a *Star* magazine and tapped the cover, a picture of a shiny-skinned woman with impossibly white teeth and fluffy bleached hair.

"She's not divorcing her husband," Mom said. "There's no actual story, it's just speculation. People just want to know what's going on in famous people's lives."

"Like a book?" I asked, squishing together another peanut butter-cracker sandwich. My mom nodded.

"It doesn't matter if it's fake, it's fun and people like it," she said. I didn't know what any of it meant, not really. I knew divorce was bad, a dirty word as far as my father was concerned. "God hates divorce," I'd heard him say, apropos of nothing, and it always made my mother wince. It was like a refrain at this point, all the things that God hated according to Dad—divorce, non-believers, liars, adulterers, people who promised to pay for work and never did. And sinners. God hated sinner most of all, even though I was pretty sure all those things were sins. It got to the point where I wasn't sure if there was anything God loved, if the way Dad was talking was to be believed.

He thought I should be in school. "She's going to get behind," I heard him say to our mother once, when he came home at three in the morning to find us both awake in their bed, drinking sparkling cider and watching Princess Diana marry Prince Charles on TV. I sat on the floor outside their bedroom, dusting crumbs off the bottoms of my feet.

“I need her here,” Mom said, her voice thin behind the door. “She’s taking good care of me.” But the next morning she made me pancakes and told me that in the fall I would be starting kindergarten.

“You’ve done such a good job keeping an eye on me,” she said, bending down to eye level. Her breath in my face was sour, vomit-tinged, and up close I saw the pleats on her forehead, the sagging half-moons under her eyes. “But it’s time for you to be a kid again.” She ran her hands over her belly, which moved in response to her touch, a little alien hand pressed up against her skin.

“Your sister is already so lucky to have you,” Mom said, and placed my hand against her bump. The movement in her belly stopped, but Mom smiled at me and said, “You’re going to be such a good big sister. She can tell.”

And then she died and everything went to hell.

Dad decided a hospital birth was too expensive, what with our mortgage and business slowing down at Elohim, so when Mom bled out giving birth to Beulah it was in her own bed, blood and afterbirth mingling with Ritz cracker crumbs. We ended up in the hospital anyway, when the convulsions kept coming and the ambulance took her away, pulling up in front of the house silently with the red and white lights flashing. I wished they would have used the sirens. It would have been less terrifying. The sirens would have suggested, at least, that there was something to be alarmed for, a sign of life they were racing towards. But there was no need to rush by then, as the crease-faced EMTs rolled the gurney up our front yard, because Beulah was breathing and my mother wasn’t, and no amount of noise could bring her back.

A more poetic-minded person would make the observation that Beulah’s life was marked with blood and tragedy from the very beginning. It’s the sort of thing that someone on the outside

of a life looking in might say, who can see the whole thing as it stretches from one end of birth to the other without having to know anything about what happens in between. Beulah coming into the world as my mother left it, some wordless exchange of breath into air. My sister lying neatly on the bed, water-colored eyes staring eternally, confused and dismayed at her existence. But I was never poetic. I just knew that my sister was here and I had to take care of her.

My dad stopped going out of town as much and threw away our TV. No more "secular music," whatever that meant, and anytime the radio was on it was a man's voice, sonorous and angry, talking about hell and temptation and sin through a haze of static. We started going to church more often, once a week and then twice a week and then pretty much everyday. Not even for a service, just to sit and pray. Dad hired a full-time babysitter, a small woman with long dark hair named Sonya who was preparing to become a missionary and always wore turtlenecks, to care for Beulah while he was at work. She slept on a cot in my room, which was now also Beulah's room, her crib inches from my bed. I initially hated Sonya because she called Beulah "little sister" even though she was *my* little sister and never put her down, carrying her around the house singing to her like I wasn't there. She wouldn't let me near Beulah most of the time, worrying that I hadn't washed my hands or that I might accidentally cave her baby head in with my six-year-old strength. Over time she grew to trust me a little more, allowing me to hold Beulah on the couch or help her give Beulah a bath.

Sonya only read us Bible stories, per our father's request: Noah and the Ark and Lazarus rising from the dead and Joseph with his coat of many colors. When we got older she sometimes threw in a few of the more scandalous stories, the ones that were actually interesting. I liked the ones with violence, which there were a lot of in the Bible: how God turned the rivers into blood and killed Pharaoh's children when he refused to free the Israelites, King David sending a man to

his death so he could sleep with the man's wife. Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt just because she looked behind her. My favorite was the one about the soldiers pouring sour wine in Jesus's wounds while his flayed body sagged on the cross. I asked Sonya if it was like getting lemon juice in a paper cut and she made her eyes very wide and said, "A thousand times worse. A *thousand times* worse."

She was the only one who would let us talk about Mom, which made me like her a little bit more. Over the years my father refused to mention my mother, unless we were praying and Dad said "And Lord, bless Marilee who is with you in Heaven." I asked Sonya about heaven, what my mother was up to there. I knew about death, of course, and had some hazy child's understanding of Heaven as a golden place above the clouds. Sonya smiled and made me and Beulah lie down on the floor.

"Close your eyes," she said, and we did, our spines pressed into the gray carpet. Sonya stood above us, and I could hear her jaw working on a wad of bubble gum.

"Make your body as limp as possible," She said, and I did. I imagined my body turning into jello, absorbing into the ground.

"Okay, now imagine you're dead," Sonya went on. She was trying to whisper and failing, and some of her spit landed on my forehead. I tried to imagine it—Mom at the hospital, the color draining from her face too quickly, the look of fear, the knowledge that whatever was happening was beyond her control.

"Your soul gets up from your body," I felt Sonya's stockinged feet whisper by me. "It floats up to heaven, over your house, over the city, into the clouds, and you're leaving everything behind, you're going to see Jesus."

I felt a little sleepy, but I wasn't sure if that was how it was supposed to feel to be dead. My nose was itching like crazy—Sonya never vacuumed, even though she was supposed to—but I didn't dare reach up to scratch.

"You come into a beautiful golden room," Sonya went on. "And Jesus is there waiting for you, on his throne. He has long, flowing brown hair and sparkling eyes, and He is so happy to see you."

I tried to imagine the room, a massive throne with a gigantic Jesus astride it, the feeling of clouds beneath my bare feet as I approached him. But in my head, all I could picture was the Lincoln memorial in Washington, D.C. For some reason, Jesus and Abraham Lincoln occupied the same space in my brain—they were both tall and bearded, after all, and their portraits were both framed next to the American flag in my Sunday School classroom—and I'd seen a picture of the memorial in a copy of *Time* Magazine, a pair of tourists dwarfed by a massive stone Lincoln glowering over the National Mall. In my mind's eye I approached this pensive Lincoln/Jesus and when he spoke it was with a gravelly presidential drawl, great marble lips parting to tell me, *You're too late.*

"Everyone you know who is dead is there," Sonya's voice cut through my fantasy. "They're in heaven too, waiting for you. Imagine a big party, all kinds of food," Sonya snapped her gum and it cracked like a gunshot. "The best party you can think of. It's even better than that."

I thought of the one birthday party my mother had held for me when I was little, the way she emerged from the truck with a bunch of blown-up balloons from White Front bubbling out around her. She set up a folding table in the front yard so we could eat outside, even though it was early April and it was still pretty cold and windy, pinning down the blue plastic tablecloth

with rocks in each corner. There was so much food, the kinds of things Dad didn't usually like us to eat: family-size potato chips, a pitcher of syrupy red Kool-Aid, mini pretzels in the waxy yellow mixing bowl that my mother would later keep by the bed when she was pregnant with Beulah. A grocery store cake with my name misspelled in pink gel, defrosting in its plastic container. Mom told me I could eat as much as I wanted, so I did.

My mother had invited my dad's parents, even though he insisted that they wouldn't show up. But they did, my grandmother hobbling out of the passenger seat of a black BMW with an exquisitely-wrapped present in her hands. She hugged me briefly and I felt her bones swimming somewhere beneath her massive cardigan, her vanilla perfume so strong that I could smell it for hours afterwards whenever I turned my head. My grandfather patted my shoulder and called me a "goofball." He was wearing slacks and a tucked-in button down with pens in the pocket, even though we were just going to sit in the front yard on folding chairs. I think it might have been the first time they ever met my mom, because they regarded her like she was a particularly charming waitress.

My dad grilled hot dogs for everyone and the adults sat in the yard on folding chairs and attempted conversation, everyone chewing stiffly at each other. I was running around on the lawn, dragging my new Chatter Phone behind me to see how fast I could make the eyes move up and down. And something must have happened, I don't know what, because the next thing I remember there was a sharp cry from the circle of adults and my grandparents were hustling back to the car and my mother was in tears, running across the yard towards the house in her bare feet. We ate the cake with no candles—my mother forgot them, which she apologized for but I didn't care, I wasn't sure what they were for anyways—and she let me have as much as I wanted, which only ended up being one piece because the cake was still frozen in the middle. My mother

mashed blue frosting into her paper plate while my father yelled at his parents over the phone in the next room.

A party even better than that.

"He's sending you back," Sonya's voice cut through my fantasy and suddenly I was back on the floor, breathing in dust. "Jesus says that it's not time for you to leave Earth yet. He still has plans for you." I felt her hand rest briefly on my forehead. "You feel yourself shrink back into your body, flying away past all the clouds back into this room, laying back down into your body, and you sit up." She reached under me, sat me up, and I opened my eyes. Beulah was already sitting up, her thumb angling for her mouth.

"That's it," Sonya said simply, leaning down to tug on Beulah's braid. "That's what it's like to go to Heaven."

I have no idea if Beulah did any of it, if she even understood what Sonya was saying. My eyes were closed, for starters. Once I asked her, probably a year or two before we came to Orchard, if she remembered the time Sonya made us play dead. We were sitting on the motel bed in Graham, watching The Andy Griffith show while August met with his friend at the bar next door.

"She wasn't making us play dead," Beulah said simply, her eyes never leaving the television. "She was trying to get in touch with Mom."

When Beulah was six, Sonya decided she wanted to become a nun instead of a missionary and things got a bit more strained between her and my father. He didn't like that she brought her rosary around, with its shiny amethyst beads and diamond-studded crucifix. She was always late for work due to a strict morning Mass schedule so we always had to walk to school on our own. The last straw came when Beulah asked Sonya if our mother was in heaven. She asked this often;

it was a nervous habit, a constant need for reassurance of our mother's whereabouts, as if she might have gone somewhere else in the time since Beulah had last asked. In the past, Sonya had always said yes, of course, but this time she put down the apple she was chopping and looked at Beulah very seriously.

"Your mother is probably in purgatory," Sonya said, her eyes big behind her thick glasses. She'd gotten rid of her contacts in an attempt to live more simply. "Not in heaven."

"What's that?" Beulah asked.

"You have to go there to get clean before you go to Heaven," Sonya said. "You can't get into Heaven if you're not pure. Purgatory is where everyone goes to get clean first."

"How long do you have to stay there?" Beulah hooked her pinkies in the edges of her mouth absentmindedly, pulling her mouth into a frown.

"As long as it takes," Sonya said darkly. "It can take years. That's why you have to pray for the souls in purgatory."

Then she left for the day—since Beulah wasn't a baby anymore, Dad figured I could handle Beulah after hours—and Dad came home for dinner. After we said the blessing, Beulah asked Dad if we could pray for the souls in purgatory and his face got red, an angry brick shade we'd never seen before.

"Who told you that?" he demanded, and we never saw Sonya again after that. A few months later my father fell off a roof of a three-story house in Tacoma and died. In a way it was just as well—he never knew what to do with us, and even before Mom died he always regarded me with withdrawn curiosity, a type of animal he never expected to encounter in person.

He left us to August, the only living relative we had. It wasn't long after the funeral that our uncle decided that God was calling him to preach on the road. He sold our house and refitted the

Elohim Industries truck to fit the three of us and all his props, furnishings for an act he had been working on for some time but had only recently received the divine greenlight to take public.

"It'll be an adventure," he told us. "I've been missing the last piece of the puzzle, and God knew that I needed you, that's why he brought you to me." I wondered but didn't ask if this meant that God killed our father on purpose.

"What about school?" I asked. We were staying at the house still, mostly empty now except for our parent's mattress which Beulah and I had been sleeping on and the kitchen table where August sat us down to break the news. It was summer and the air conditioning wasn't working. August had made us bowls of Cinnamon Toast Crunch for dinner and the milk was already warm.

"You guys'll get to be homeschooled," August said, giving us a tricky smile. "Won't that be great? You won't have to get up super early and sit in a classroom all day. You can learn on the road! And besides," he lifted his cereal bowl and swallowed down the last of his milk, dribbles running down the sides of his mouth and onto his chest. "You'll learn more out there in the real world than you ever would in school. Those teachers don't know anything about real life." He wiped his mouth and grinned. "Besides, God is the best teacher of all. Taught me everything I know."

I was twelve. There wasn't anything I could do. I couldn't know that the Edenic lifestyle he promised was fiction, that we would spend the next several years churning from identical town to identical town, each one as flayed and lifeless as the last. I couldn't know that August's divine calling was actually an eviction notice from his trailer lot and that Elohim Industries had folded almost as soon as Dad died. I only knew that Dad wanted us to end up with him, and we

couldn't stay here alone in this empty house forever, so we would go with him. Beulah and I spent the last night on our parent's mattress, watching the moon rise behind the feathered pines.

"Do you think we'll come back?" Beulah asked me. "Will we visit?"

I stared at the ceiling, following the cracks that branched across the crumbling plaster. "I don't think so," I said then. Beulah and I lay on our sides, back to front like tinned fish, the way we had slept for years. Through my t-shirt I felt her heart hammering away—she always had a fast heartbeat, even at rest, pumping like a hummingbird's. When she slept she burned, as if even in her dreams she was moving fast, and most mornings I awoke to a silhouette of sweat across my back where she lay during the night.

"What will happen to the house?" Beulah asked. Her head rested between my shoulderblades.

"Somebody else bought it. They're gonna live here when we leave."

"Why can't we live here?"

"Because August is taking care of us now. And he wants to go somewhere else."

"I don't want to go," Beulah whined, and I rolled over to face her. Her chin trembled in the darkness, like she might cry, but she didn't. She hardly ever cried.

"I don't really want to either," I said. "But we're going to be brave and have fun. Okay?" I tugged the end of her braid, and she tried to smile.

"Can I take Granny with me?" Granny was her name for the massive Raggedy Anne doll that had belonged to my mother. Its arms were sewn together over its head so that it could hang around your neck in a permanent hug, and Beulah carried it everywhere, slung over her back like a yarn-haired shadow.

"You can take Granny with you. Anything you want, you have to take, alright?" I rolled over to face my sister, but she was already falling asleep, her eyes drifting closed.

"Alright," Beulah murmured, then was silent. I lay up most of the night, listening to the creaks and groans of the wind moving against the wood. When morning came, Beulah and I loaded our things onto the truck and August drove us out of town without ceremony. Our new life began, as swiftly and seamlessly as if there had never been any other way of being. We watched August spread the word of God in the backs of yellowed meeting halls, grew used to the rhythm of rumble strips on thin tires, the fungal glow of street lamps on rain-slicked pavement, hamburgers for breakfast and cereal for dinner. And we grew accustomed to the energy that lingered everywhere we went, like something leftover from another time, a feeling of relentless edginess, the wobble of a man's leg bouncing up and down below the table. It came off their breath, these people whom August found, an appetite for expansion that had pushed their ancestors to the lip of the country and left them wanting more still. A ravenous, delirious belief that thrummed on the interstate: *this can't be all there is.* And August promised them, on every stage, with every flex and burst of flame and synthesizer, that there was—would always be—more.

I thought about running all the time, right from that first night when we ended up in the motel in Aberdeen that smelled like cigarettes and we could hear people having sex in the next room. Get Beulah on a bus, maybe, or just hitch a ride with someone the way I'd seen in movies. On nights when I couldn't sleep, when the room was filled with the sounds of August and Beulah snoring and the streetlights burned through the window, I thought about going on my own. I could do it, I was sure. I could work at the local library or wash dishes and sleep in the back where they kept the big jars of mayonnaise and flour. Maybe I could go back to the house in the

valley and beg whoever bought it to take me in, pretend I was their long-lost daughter and let me sleep in my old room and not ask any questions. But every time I got close—and I did get close, sometimes all the way down the motel hallway or out the back door of a gas station bathroom—I thought of my mother's hand holding mine, pressing against her belly and Beulah inside.

"You're going to be such a good big sister," Mom had said. It was a compliment, something to make me feel better about the fact that everything was spinning out of control, but in my memory it was a covenant, sealed there in the kitchen with the three of us holding hands. I was going to be a good big sister, no matter what. There was no other option.

It was a refrain I clung to as time went on, with every strange motel room and long nights on the dark roads and every seedy church basement where August perfected his Revelation. I kept Beulah safe from the old men who complimented her pigtails with too much relish, from the muscle-bound dealers who came to August's door at night, from germs and car accidents and food poisoning and anything else that could get her. I taught her about periods and where babies come from and how to floss, how to order for herself at restaurants and how many nickels were in a dollar. I fed her vitamins and made sure she drank enough water, filled her up with Ibuprofen to stop every kind of ache.

"You've already taken such good care of her," my mother said, even before Beulah was born. And I kept doing it, kept the both of us going as August dragged us up and down the west, spreading the good news of the Gospel with his feats of strength. She was more mine than anyone or anything else, maybe even more than my mother. The cowlick that notched her bangs, the smudge of freckles on her forearm, the front teeth that overlapped just so, like a pair of crossed legs. How, the one year we were in school together—her in first grade, me in sixth—she followed me around at recesses, sobbing and adrift in the sea of sticky-faced children she didn't

recognize. How I let her follow me, always, because otherwise she might be led astray, and that was worse to me than being seen with my kid sister.

So of course it was my fault when Beulah collapsed on stage like that. Whose fault could it be, if it wasn't mine?

III.

Evening came imperceptibly, wrapping around the Olsen house so suddenly that I didn't realize it was almost dinnertime until I looked up and saw the moon, livid and red through the window. Beulah slept all day in the guest room, consumed by a deep sleep that kept her terrifyingly still. Angie assured me that this was good, that this was her body healing itself. August came back some time in the late afternoon reeking of cigarettes with a stuffed bear tucked under his arm. The bear had a graduation cap and a little felt diploma sewn to its paw.

"It was all they had at Fred Meyer," he explained, setting it down gingerly on the pillow next to Beulah's motionless head. "Must be the season for it, huh?"

He insisted on staying with Beulah into the evening to give the rest of us a break, so Angie made us spaghetti for dinner and the three of us sat around the kitchen table in silence, glumly chewing our noodles. Despite the quiet, the room felt warm and comforting in the yellow-orange glow of the lights; somewhere in the house, a dryer hummed rhythmically, the clack-clack of a zipper hitting the drum occasionally.

It was Angie who broke the silence first.

"I don't think she has a concussion, so that's something," she said suddenly, and across from me Zoe twitched.

I swallowed my mouthful of spaghetti too quickly and it burned down my throat. "Okay," I said, eyes watering. "That's good, right?"

“Absolutely,” Angie said. “I want to keep an eye on her while she sleeps, though. Just in case anything goes wrong.” She looked at her half-eaten plate of spaghetti, then picked it up and scraped the remains on my plate.

“Eat,” she said. “You look like you don’t get enough food. Neither of you do.”

“Gross, Mom, she doesn’t want your chewed-up food,” Zoe said, and Angie shot her a look.

“No, it’s fine, thank you,” I said, and it really was. It was the first hot meal I’d had in a while that wasn’t from a drive-thru, and despite the dull knot of worry that rested in my stomach I couldn’t stop eating. “Has her fever gone down at all?”

Angie shook her head.

“I don’t understand it,” she said. “It’s not breaking, even with the Ibuprofen. I’m worried she has an infection. Does she have any conditions?”

I shrugged. “I don’t think so. She got her appendix out when she was eight.”

Angie’s brow pleated. “In a hospital, right?”

I realized she was thinking of August, and how it wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility that if the timing was different he might well have tried taking it out himself.

“Yes,” I assured her. “Definitely in a hospital. But she’s always been healthy other than that.”

“I’d like to do some bloodwork on her,” Angie said, then leaned towards me and lowered her voice. “Is there a reason he doesn’t want her to go to a doctor? Is it a religious thing, or…?”

I shrugged again. Whatever I said, August would deny it.

“We’ve had bad experiences,” I said, and that was true. It was also true that the only reason every doctor visit ended in tragedy for the Baxter family was because we waited too long

to go in the first place. A doctor would have caught my mother's pre-eclampsia, for example. Or would have been smart enough to remove Beulah's appendix before the point of rupture. But I didn't know anything about Angie, not yet, and she could have already called CPS for all I know. I couldn't give her any more ammunition, not with eighteen and Petaluma just around the corner.

Angie nodded and twirled her fork in her hand. "Well, when we're done here we can talk to your uncle about the next steps," she said.

Next steps. A shard of ice formed in my lungs.

"She's okay, though, don't you think?" I said. "She didn't eat this morning, and we've been traveling a lot—she might just be really tired."

Angie didn't say anything, just stared down at her empty plate.

"I'm not sure," she said finally. "I just can't figure it out. Her fever should be going down by now. But I'll do everything I can." She looked across the table at Zoe, who was spinning spaghetti around and around on her fork.

"Zoe, why don't you clean up," Angie said, getting up from the table. "Esther and I will go keep an eye on Beulah."

A look crossed Zoe's face like she was going to say something snippy, but she just nodded.

"Okay," she said, and Angie touched my shoulder.

"You sure you don't want anything more to eat?" She asked, and it was the same tone Stephen used at the motel the night before. Like she was actually worried I would starve if she didn't ask. The golden glow of the kitchen that I had found so inviting now felt brutal, too harsh.

I nodded. "Yes, I'm sure," I said. I got up from the table and Angie led me down the hallway to the guest room where Beulah slept. We passed the wall of pictures again, the

sun-drenched photo of Angie and Zoe and the mystery man and girl. I hadn't seen either of these people all day, and Angie never mentioned them, so I didn't ask. There were so many rooms in the house, so many closed doors, it could be possible they were just out of sight somewhere, afraid for whatever reason to come out.

But I didn't think so, not really. I had a good sense for when there were more people in the room, even if they couldn't be seen, and so far I felt nothing.

August was nodding off the wicker chair beside Beulah's bed when we came in, head drooping towards his barrel chest.

"Is it okay?" He asked when we came in, jolting awake and looking around wildly. He rubbed his face and gave Angie a bashful smile.

"Sorry about that, ma'am," he said, a twinge of his Revelations voice coming through. "I didn't realize I was falling asleep."

"It's been a long day for you all," Angie said, crossing the room to take Beulah's pulse. She hadn't moved since I last saw her—she wasn't even sucking her thumb the way she usually did when she was deeply asleep, and the graduation bear lay next to her untouched. Her chest rose and fell evenly, and in the dim light of the bedside lamp she seemed to shrink into the bed with each breath, melting against the rose-patterned pillows. There were a lot of roses in the room, in fact—fake, I assumed, from the slightly dusty craft-store smell they gave off—and the way they were heaped around the room and on the bedside table gave me the distinct impression of standing in a funeral home, the dim light and plates of mummified potpourri only adding to this image. With her braids arranged beatifically on either shoulder, Beulah already looked dead.

"Indeed it has," August said, standing up out of his chair and stretching. His knees cracked loudly. "All that exertion this morning and I haven't even had a chance to refill the old tank." He

ran a hand across his stomach. “Any chance you’ve got any chicken or cod in the house you wouldn’t mind me having?”

“There’s spaghetti in the kitchen if you want some,” Angie said, and August pressed his palms together.

“Appreciate it, ma’am,” he said. “Thank you for everything you’re doing for us.” He headed for the door, I could hear his knees popping as he moved, pausing briefly to put his hand on Beulah’s head.

“Poor little Bee,” he said in his Uncle voice. He looked at Angie. “If anything happens, you’ll come get me,” he said, not quite a question or a command. Angie nodded, and he shot me an imploring glance.

“I’ll just be out there,” he said, tapping his knuckles against the doorframe. “Say your prayers.”

We stayed like that for a while, Angie with her fingers wrapped around my sister’s arm. August’s voice carried down a hall, a hymn or something like it that he was singing under his breath.

“Poor girls,” Angie said, but it didn’t seem like she was saying it to me, so I didn’t respond and settled into the white wicker chair in the corner of the room, my eyes never leaving my sister.

—

Around eight o’ clock Beulah stopped breathing. Angie and I were keeping vigil, the two of us watching her grow smaller and smaller in the bed. She hadn’t moved for hours, so when her eyelids twitched and her chest stopped moving it seemed almost expected, as if this is what we had been waiting for all along.

Angie moved toward the bed immediately and grabbed Beulah's wrist.

"There's a pulse," she said to nobody in particular, and leaned down to pull my sister's mouth open. She looked across the bed at me. "Get me some water."

I couldn't move. It seemed impossible to see my sister in this state, clammy and dust-colored all the way through, her face sweat-soaked. In that tiny bed, the picture of our mother, I imagined blood blooming around her, the smell of bodies and birth suddenly filling the room.

"Esther," Angie said, sharply, and the sound of my own name was alien enough to jar me from my paralysis. I raced down the hallway and wrenched open the tap. It's vivid even now, the slap of water against the rose-patterned basin, the prick of sweat against my upper back, the gush of water from the tap. The knowledge, even in that moment, that there was nothing about my sister's condition that a tub of water could fix, not at this point. Looking back on it she probably just wanted to get me out of the room, trying to spare me the agony of watching my sister die.

Angie was still breathing into Beulah when I returned, and the sight of my sister limp under Angie's mouth, chin tilted back like a dummy, made my feet numb. It looked like a movie, or a dream maybe, and when I put the water on the counter I was convinced that if bit the inside of my cheek hard enough I would wake up somewhere else, some smoke-stained motel on the state border, maybe, Beulah alive and well and her hummingbird heart steady against my own.

"Get Zoe and tell her to call 911," Angie said to me, and just then Beulah twitched and gasped; she was breathing again.

"Thank fucking God," Angie whispered, and I felt sudden and deep affection for her.

"Here." She picked up Beulah's wrist, limp as wet laundry, and place it in my hand. "Keep track of her pulse. If it stops, let me know immediately."

“Okay,” I said, my tongue like sandpaper in my mouth. I heard August thundering down the hallway then, his body filling the doorframe, chest heaving and eyes wild.

“She’s dead,” he said, and there was a look of genuine alarm in Angie’s face when she glanced up and said, “Not yet, she’s not.” Color was returning to Beulah’s face, leeching up her neck and into the hollows of her cheeks, livid and painful-looking. Her mouth was open slightly and I half expected blood to dribble out.

"I need to put my hands on her," August said, and before Angie could say anything he was on his knees before Beulah, enormous palms all but obscuring her tiny head as he rocked back and forth and murmured prayers. It was moments like these when I thought that August might believe in his own power, that he was actually gifted by God to heal and save people.

“You’ll need to get out of the way,” Angie said, and reached across him to open Beulah’s mouth. Her voice took on that cool, professional edge that it had that morning in the gym. “Now, please. She’s breathing, but you’ll smother her if you keep that up.”

“Sorry, sorry,” August got to his feet and moved to the corner of the room, hands clasped together so tightly that his knuckles were white. I don’t think I’d ever heard him apologize to anyone, much less a woman, before then. Angie pursed her lips and looked at me.

“I really don’t know what this is,” Angie said, and that scared me. All afternoon her unflappable air of casual concern, the repeated reminders that she was a nurse, had been the only things keeping me calm. I envisioned siren lights cutting through the windows, the silent arrival of a gurney, no need for speed or alarm because the worst had already happened.

“The doctor’s office is closed for the night already,” Angie said, as if she could read my thoughts. “The hospital is over in the next town so it would take some time for them to send an ambulance, but we could call them.”

“No doctors,” August bellowed from his place in the corner. His hands were covering his face and all his words were muffled and horrific. I saw Angie’s face briefly tighten in frustration.

“Okay,” she said. “No doctors, that’s fine.” She looked at me. “I guess she’s breathing again and her heart rate is okay, so we’ll just keep an eye on her here then. But if tomorrow morning nothing has changed,” she said, turning to August who still had his hands clamped over his face as if he couldn’t bear to watch, “I am taking her to the doctor’s office and getting her checked out.”

August didn’t say anything this time. He rocked back and forth, murmuring prayers to himself. I looked at Angie, who seemed to be having an argument in her head.

“So what should we do?” I asked.

Angie raked a hand through her hair. “If you want, we can pray,” she said finally.

—

We stayed like that for hours, the three of us watching Beulah’s chest rise and fall. Angie said the fever was going down, but that we weren’t out of the woods yet. August drifted in and out of sleep in the wicker chair, his snores cutting occasionally through the silence.

“You should get some rest,” Angie told me. “I’ll stay here, you can sleep in Zoe’s room.”

“No,” I said. “I can’t. I’ll stay with her.”

Angie reached for my hand again and squeezed. She was exhausted, her blonde ponytail hanging on by a few limp threads. That morning, with Martha and the empty classrooms and the gym that smelled like teenagers, seemed like a lifetime ago.

“I’m just across the hall,” she said, and moved for the door. “Yell if you need anything.”

Once she was gone, I nudged August awake.

“You can go,” I said. “Angie’s gone to bed. I’ll stay with her tonight.”

August ran a hand across his face and groaned. “What time is it?”

“It’s late. Don’t worry about it, I’ll stay with Beulah.”

“Are you sure?” August got up and stood over the bed again, one hand on Beulah’s head. A low murmur filled the room; he was praying again.

“Did you get everything from the motel?” I asked when he was done. He turned to me and frowned.

“No,” he said, as if it was obvious. “We can go back and get everything once your sister is better.”

“Okay,” I said. “So what were you doing all day?”

His eyes flicked across the hall to Angie’s room. “I was helping Martha and the other volunteers with the retreat clean-up. And I got your sister that bear,” he gestured towards the bed. Someone had wedged the bear under Beulah’s arm, its blank threaded smile aimed at the ceiling.

“That took all day?”

August sighed. “No, I had to make some business calls afterward. We’ve got a lot of shows coming up soon and I wasn’t expecting this roadbump.”

“It’s not a roadbump,” I said, trying and failing to keep the venom out of my voice. “She almost died.”

August paused, and I saw something slam shut behind his eyes. “She’s going to be alright,” he said, and there was a plasticine edge in his voice now. “I can feel it. I know it. God promised me we would be in this thing together.” He ruffled Beulah’s hair and gave me a tight smile.

“She needs a doctor,” I said, and he winced, as if the idea physically pained him, and turned to leave.

He paused at the doorframe. “We didn’t get any merch sales today, did we?”

I swallowed the bile in my throat and shook my head.

“I didn’t think so,” he said, and tapped the doorframe twice. “Say your prayers,” he said, and vanished down the hallway.

When everyone was gone I lay on the floor beside Beulah’s bed, listening to her even breaths and watching her chest rise and fall, the half-moons of blue collecting under her fingernails that hung over the side of the bed. I intended to stay up all night, but at some point I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew the room was pale with morning light and my face was crammed into a moldy-smelling velvet throw pillow and I could not hear my sister breathing anymore. And then the moment when I scrambled up off the carpet to see Beulah hovering almost a foot off the bed, skin glowing with sweat, the cornflower-blue Seahawks T-shirt that once belonged to our mother, hanging off her like a robe. It could have been a dream, a strange slant of light, but then I screamed and the world came pouring in, August and Angie and Zoe all bleary-eyed and expecting to find Beulah blue-lipped and rigid, but there she was struggling up among the blankets, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

I say that I screamed. It was really more of a shout, involuntary almost, like bringing your hand to your cheek after it’s been slapped. But whatever noise I made woke the whole house and Beulah fell and the fire that licked at Orchard’s heels shifted away—a miracle, they would call it. Then the room filled with August and Angie and Zoe, everyone speaking over each other, hands reaching and faces pressed against palms and it was over. They asked me what happened and I said, truthfully, that I was just surprised Beulah was awake.

Some years later I heard a priest on Easter talk about Mary Magdalene, how she was the first one to know Jesus had risen from the dead. The other disciples had all gone away,

convinced that Jesus was well and truly dead, but Mary stayed and for a moment, before she told anyone what happened, it was her and him alone. For that time, the priest said, she alone carried the miracle of Salvation.

I think Mary would have been happier if it stayed that way. If she'd just gone with him and left the other disciples to live the rest of their lives thinking it was all over, that Death had won, she would have had a much easier time. She wouldn't have gotten kicked out of the group and remembered only as a prostitute, which she wasn't, people just think she was for some reason. If she had kept it to herself I bet the story would have gone differently. I bet people would remember her in a different way.

Anyways. I don't know why I thought of that. I just wish I never made any noise.

IV.

I'd like to say it happened overnight. It would have been easier that way, a turned page, a clear before and after. But it happened slow, then all at once, like walking into a cold river. We were up to our necks in it before the freezing took us over, and by then it was too late.

It took her three days to recover fully, and in that time she stayed in bed, sitting upright and eyes alert even when there was nobody in the room. Angie got an oxygen tank from the HomeCare office for Beulah to use, but her vitals returned to normal so quickly that she didn't use it, and aside from a lingering cough there was almost no evidence of the fever that had stopped her breathing mere hours ago. Half the time, though, when I sat with her I had the impression that she wasn't even there, her attention fixed to the far corner of the guestroom, and I felt as if I was alone with a stranger. The solemn eyes I remembered were different somehow, more distant.

The house, already small, seemed to shrink. Angie was always busy, taking Beulah's blood pressure twice a day and constantly monitoring her heart rate. August spent a good deal more time in the house as well, setting up camp at the foot of Beulah's bed, the low rumble of his voice audible through the walls at all hours. A miracle, after all, that my sister was healed so suddenly, and August as usual wanted to get in on it. There was still no sign of a Mr. Olsen, and the truck in the driveway sat unused next to August's, but I didn't ask.

I spent a lot more time with Zoe in those three days, the two of us relegated to dishes and laundry and cooking while Angie checked on Beulah between shifts at the doctor's office. I became well-acquainted with the minutiae of the Olsen kitchen, the lavender-scented dish soap and the way the dishwasher chirped twice when its cycle had been interrupted.

It was clear to me that Zoe was annoyed with our presence in her house. She didn't say much to me, other than the occasional directive of which rack of the dishwasher to put the tupperware in, but I still managed to learn more about her just by sleeping in her room every night. For instance, I knew that Zoe had been prescribed benzodiazepines for insomnia and collected sea glass because there was a pill bottle full of each in her bedside drawer. She read a lot of books where the author's name took up most of the cover in a blood-red gothic font, novels about girls who lived in crumbling mansions with fathers who were obsessed with them. She smoked Camels when Angie wasn't in the house and kept the pack in a pair of gym socks underneath her mattress, along with a sheet of birth control pills that I recognized from August's youth group homilies, untouched since last Tuesday.

On the night after Beulah's recovery, when a car pulled up outside the house with its lights off and Zoe bounded down the stairs, a conspicuously clinking backpack on her arm and her eyes

lined with sparkly black paint, I was hardly surprised. She saw me in the hallway before she opened the front door and paused, grinning conspiratorially.

"You can handle things here, right?" she asked, but she was gone before I answered, running down the front lawn towards the waiting car. I watched from the front window, the car's dome light illuminating the louche and giggling bodies of other lean-faced girls in bright makeup, and when they pulled away the street seemed darker and emptier than it had been before the car arrived.

I wondered how long they would let us stay, now that Beulah was improving—it was obvious that August was getting on Angie's nerves, and I was just another mouth to feed, but nobody said anything. Each night when I went back into Zoe's room and she headed to the couch I half expected her to kick me out but she never did, only offering me a chipped "goodnight." We had never stayed in one town as long as Orchard, and it felt like we were getting away with something every day we didn't leave.

August didn't mention anything about moving on, like I assumed he would now that Beulah was no longer an active problem. We had more shows to do, after all, and I heard him outside in the yard on his cell phone, making calls to various parishes and retreat centers where we were scheduled in the upcoming weeks.

"We still expect to be there," he said, flecks of ash gathering in his beard. "We've experienced something of a miracle here, totally unexpected, and I want to investigate before we move on."

He stayed in her room until the early hours of the morning, his low rumble of a voice pulsing through the house. I guess he was trying to understand how my sister could have recovered so quickly—so *miraculously*, as he said. Angie suggested that it was an infection that

had passed, a dramatic reaction to bad food or heat exhaustion. The smoke perhaps, clogging Beulah's lungs and sapping her strength, only in need of a few days out of the air to clear her system. August, of course, wasn't interested in those theories.

"Your sister has been chosen," he told me, as confident as a weather report. Chosen for what, he didn't say.

In all of this it was impossible to get Beulah alone. I monitored her progress through what I heard from Angie and August, competing reports of rapidly improving health and a newfound habit for spontaneous prayer. When I did glimpse her it was as an onlooker, not a sister. The only time we were able to talk was on the second day, when Angie asked me to give Beulah a bath, and while I ran the water my sister perched on the toilet and gnawed her fingernails and it almost felt like it had before.

"I'm not a baby," she said. She was still pale, her face pinched and shadowed, and when she breathed her collarbones flared like knives. But her voice had some of its old testiness, which I took as a good sign. "I can take a shower, you know."

"I know you can," I said, stirring the cloudy water with my hand. "But Mrs. Olsen wanted me to help you. She doesn't want you to slip and hit your head."

"I like her," Beulah said, and I lowered her into the water, her cold hand gripping mine. The Olsen's bathtub was bigger than the one I used to bathe her in back in Puyallup, but when Beulah lay back her her knees still bunched up around her chest. There were pale plum bruises stretched across her shins that I had not seen before.

"Yeah?" I said. "I like her too." We hadn't had a chance to talk in what felt like weeks, even though it had only been a few interminably long days. Beulah slid under the water, her hair billowing around her face.

"She's smart," Beulah said when she surfaced. "I didn't know people could be that smart."

"Plenty of people are smart," I said. "I'm smart." I handed her the bar of soap and she moved it across her torso in meditative circles, eyes drifting to focus somewhere over my shoulder.

"Yeah, but she knows about medicine and stuff," Beulah said. "I thought only doctors knew about medicine."

"Well, she's a nurse," I said, and then, "You know, Mom was almost a nurse."

Beulah slipped under the water again and brushed the soap suds from her knees. "She was?"

"Yeah," I said. "She was going to go to school for it."

"Oh," Beulah said. "Why didn't she?"

I lathered shampoo in my hands and scratched my fingers across her scalp.

"She had me," I said.

"I can do it myself," Beulah reached up and smacked my hands away from her hair. "How come she had you instead?"

"I don't know," I said. "But she knew a lot about medicine." I didn't know if this was true, actually, and based on my experience my mother's medical knowledge extended mostly to the dosage of Robitussin to give me when I was sick. But Beulah didn't know the difference, and it didn't matter now anyways.

Beulah scrubbed her fingers back and forth against her head, the *shk-shk* of hands in hair the only sound in the room for a while. She looked lost in thought, her eyes unfocused and trained somewhere on the far bathroom wall.

“What do you and Uncle August talk about?” I asked finally. Something like guilt flitted across Beulah’s face.

“I don’t know,” she said, and shrugged. “He wants to know where I went when I died. If I saw anything. Things like that.”

I took the soap from her. “And where did you go?”

Beulah lay back in the water again, only her nose and mouth above the surface. With her eyes closed and hair billowing, I couldn’t help but be reminded of the morning when I found her hovering over the bed. We hadn’t talked about it since, and as far as I know Beulah wasn’t even aware it happened.

“I don’t know how to describe it,” she said, her voice strange and echoey against the porcelain walls of the bathtub. “It was bright. Warm and…clean.” She surfaced again and wiped the water from her eyes. “I heard someone say my name and then another voice, a woman said, ‘Go home,’ and then I was awake and I didn’t feel bad anymore.”

Ice in my lungs again. “Do you know who it was?”

Beulah shook her head. If it was our mother she had heard, she wouldn’t have recognized the voice anyway.

I helped Beulah out of the water and handed her a towel. She shivered, the dingy water running off her little body in rivulets, and with her hair slicked close against her head and her owl eyes wide in her face she was a miserable little creature, gaunt and bony-kneed.

She caught me staring and chewed her lip. “Can you hear it?” she said finally.

“Hear what?”

“The buzzing.”

"What buzzing?" I frowned, straining to hear anything other than the whir of the bathroom fan. "You mean the fan?"

"No, it's…" Beulah trailed off, pulling the towel to her face and pressing into it. "It's like insects," she said, her voice muffled. "Like buzzing. I keep hearing it." Her big eyes peered up at me over the towel. "Don't you?"

She was asking for help then and I didn't know it. That might have been my last opportunity, the two of us in the bathroom together with the fan cranking away above us, but if it was I was too distracted to understand.

"I keep hearing it," she said again, and I looked out the frosted window and adjusted the towel and put braids in my sister's wet hair, but I didn't say anything. I didn't tell her what to do, how it was normal or not normal. I thought it was a result of the fever, some symptom of staying so long on death's door. It wasn't unheard of in our line of work, voices and messages and whisperings only the intended recipient could hear. And I didn't know. How could I have known? I knew so little of the world as it was, even this little sliver of our universe.

"I'm sure it's nothing," I said, squeezing the bathwater out of her hair. I'll never forgive myself for that.

—

I should say that these kinds of things—hearing voices, prophecies, all that—weren't unheard of in our line of work. The type of faith that August subscribed to, feral and all-consuming, bred such incidents with some regularity: tongues seized by a foreign speaker, bodies writhing with Spirit-charged ecstasy, messages and visions from beyond the Earth. We saw it occasionally during performances, someone so taken with August's speech about rededication or the baptizing fire of the Spirit or whatever that they'll keel over, legs twitching

like they'd been electrocuted. August could do it too, he claimed, but did not. It was all a cheap trick for cheap preachers, he claimed; his display of strength, on the other hand, was physical and therefore inarguable. "Besides," he said, "If God wanted everyone to be so impressed by what He was saying, He'd speak English."

So it was not completely shocking that something like this might happen to Beulah, that she might be struck with the violent kind of afflictive infatuation. To think she was hearing the voice of God when she lost consciousness, to attribute her recovery to some Divine status. That the buzzing of a hungry body could be read as angels singing. I soothed myself with this knowledge as the days passed and we made no move to go on the road, as the hours August spent in Beulah's room lengthened.

That said.

I would be dishonest if I said this sort of thing had never happened before. There had been moments, even before we left Puyallup and went with August. Moments that had glossed with time that I had all but forgotten until now, moments that I had never mentioned to anyone, because I thought I would never need to. Because it wasn't completely unheard of, was it, that I might wake up in the middle of the night to find my sister standing in the corner of the room, eyes open and unfocused, talking to herself? It was a long time ago, back when Beulah's hair was just a halo of honey curls and her cheeks were still fat, just a kid's response to a dream, I thought. I brushed it off the same way I brushed off all the times she coughed up a pebble at the dinner table, slick and sparkling with spit, and went on eating or drawing or whatever it was she had been doing without a second thought.

Or the time when I was ten and Beulah was four and a Red-Shafted Flicker crashed into the living room window, leaving a single red feather and an eyelash-thin crack behind. We went

outside to see if the bird was hurt—sure enough, it lay limp and lifeless on the ground outside the window, dead on impact. I had always liked Flickers. They were Mom's favorite bird, the only one she ever pointed out by name when they perched on the feeder in front of the kitchen window.

"Bummer," I said, but before the word was all the way out of my mouth Beulah had darted over and scooped up the Flicker, cupping the body in both hands. She lifted it to her ear, as if listening for a heartbeat.

"Put it down," I said, "It's probably got bugs." The bird pulsed to life in her hands, wings unfurling, and it darted into the air so fast that I couldn't be sure it had ever been dead. Beulah turned to look at me, backlit by the weak midwinter sun, mouth agape as if she wanted me to explain what had just happened. But I didn't. I couldn't. Likely the bird had never been dead, just stunned, but the way she described it, that day and long after, prickled me with doubt.

"Like worms," she said then, her pudgy fingers wiggling. "All cold, and then—a bunch of worms under the skin." She smiled across the table at me. At least her run-in with birds had a happy ending, unlike the time Dad found a pale-blue robin's egg on the porch, delicate and intact, and gave it to me for safekeeping.

"When the egg hatches, you can be its mama," he told me, placing the egg in the center of my sweaty palm. It was so light that if I closed my eyes it was as if there was nothing there at all. For hours I carried it with me, imagining the eventual crack, the pale downy head emerging, bulbous unseeing eyes of a newborn searching for a caregiver. I'd feed it worms like its robin mother would, mashed up against my back teeth. I collected twigs and pine boughs for its nest, which I imagined I could keep on the pillow next to mine so I could keep an eye on it at night. But then, inevitably, I tripped coming up the porch steps and when it shattered in my hand there

was no baby inside, just yellow stinking pitch that ran down my arm and scorched my nostrils for days on end. I screamed as loud as my eight-year-old lungs would allow, staring at the empty fragments of shell on my hands, convinced that I had killed the hatchling. It was more than likely that there had never been a baby at all, hence why the mother robin had abandoned it, but this did nothing to console me. I sulked around the house red-eyed and miserable for days, and for a long time the sound of birds made my stomach turn.

But Beulah always avoided death somehow. Things always came back to life around her.

In any case, I told myself that all those strange events—the sleepwalking, the singing, the mouthfuls of pebbles on the kitchen table—were just the sorts of things that happened to people like us, and it was no great sign of divine selection or punishment. It was what I told myself, and I made myself believe it.

—

The fourth night, when we made no moves to leave and Angie still hadn't asked us to, Beulah asked me when we were going.

"I'm bored," she whined. There were bright red spots on the high points of her cheeks. "When are we gonna go?"

"I don't know," I said. "Whenever August thinks it's time." That morning he had finally retrieved our stuff from the motel. I figured it would be soon, but all of August's talk of Beulah's recovery—he had started referring to it as "The Resurrection of Orchard,"—made me think he was gearing up for another local performance.

Beulah made a face. Since we now had all our clothes she was wearing her own pajamas again, our mother's high school track t-shirt and pink flannel pants with frogs all over them that I'd bought her from Value Village a few months back.

“Besides,” I said, “Angie and Zoe have been really nice to let us stay here. Don’t be ungrateful.”

“I’m not ungrateful,” Beulah said. “I’m *bored.”*

“If you’re bored, read a book,” I said, and turned out the lights. The next morning I came in to find her watching the wall, lips moving rapidly. Her hands, fingers newly flayed after days in confinement, were cupped in her lap over the sheets.

“What are you looking at?” I asked. Angie had sent me armed with toast and orange juice, determined for Beulah to eat something solid.

"The little girl," she said pleasantly, and of course when I looked there was nothing there.

"There's no little girl, Bee," I said, smoothing a hand across her forehead out of habit. “You were having a dream.” Despite the heat of the room and the closed windows, her forehead was as cool and dry as marble. And I did think it was a dream, a combination of hunger and exhaustion, so I handed her a piece of toast.

“Eat this,” I said. “Angie made it for you.”

“I’m not hungry,” Beulah said, but she chewed it anyways, her eyes never leaving the wall. I watched her finish both pieces, and when she was done I saw her nod gravely to the wall, as if whoever she was watching had just told her something important.

“Knock it off,” I said, and then, “How are you feeling?”

Beulah finally tore her eyes away from the wall and looked at me.

“I feel much better,” she said, and then coughed so hard she made herself gag, hunks of just-chewed bread coming up on the white quilt.

—

That night, Beulah came and sat at the dinner table with the rest of us. After throwing up in the morning, she'd been able to keep a third piece of toast down, and throughout the day she managed to finish a cup of rice and some applesauce, all of which Angie took to be signs of rapid improvement. August led us in prayer before we ate, a long and rambly improvised speech about how thankful we were to have Beulah in "our number" again.

"We know, Lord, that if one of your sheep goes astray, you will leave everything to bring it back, and now our herd is complete once again," he said, a spark of that old stage voice coming through for the first time in days. I raised my head to look around the table—everyone's heads were bowed and eyes closed, except for Zoe, who locked eyes with me and grinned. I felt laughter brimming behind my lips, so I ducked my head again. Beulah's hand in mine was still ice-cold.

"Amen," August said finally, and we dropped our hands and started to eat. It was quiet for a few moments, everyone bent over their plates. Angie had made some sort of chicken casserole with noodles and cheese, and it was the best thing I ever tasted. I shoveled half the plate in my mouth before I realized that I was probably eating too fast; across from me, Zoe watched me eat with something like amusement on her face, and I sat back in my chair. With August in the house more often, I was trying my best to prove that we weren't all feral Jesus people, though my table manners did leave something to be desired. I was used to eating in gulps on the road, and the fact that I could have regular seconds or even thirds was still something I was getting used to.

Beulah picked at a bowl of chicken broth, bringing her spoon to her lips before returning it to the bowl, uneaten. She licked her lips and turned to Angie.

"Mrs. Olsen?" Beulah asked.

“Yes, honey?”

“Rachel says she misses you.”

Angie dropped her fork to the table with a clatter, her face going comically pale. Zoe shot Beulah a look across the table, eyes bright.

“What the fuck?” Zoe said, and Angie must have been really upset because she didn’t say anything to Zoe about swearing.

Beulah’s face changed, obvious worry clouding her features. She hadn’t expected the reaction to be like this.

“Rachel?” she said, less sure this time. “In the guest room? She said she used to sleep there. She said she misses you?”

“Who told you that?” Zoe was looking at her mother now, who still hadn’t spoken, her mouth a tight white line. I thought of the picture in the hallway, the girl younger than Zoe with the sun-soaked curls. The ice in my lungs returned.

“Rachel did,” Beulah said, almost a whisper. “I’m sorry, I don’t—”

“Bee, stop,” I said. Angie still hadn’t moved and all the air in the room had turned to concrete.

“I’m sorry,” Beulah said. Angie shook her head, slow and then faster, and pushed back from the table.

“Excuse me,” she said, and vanished into the hallway. I heard a muffled sob. Zoe looked from Beulah to me and bit her lip.

“What the hell was that?” I said to Beulah.

“Esther,” August said, “Language.”

I ignored him. “Bee, what was that?” I said again. Beulah’s lower lip began to tremble.

"I'm sorry," she said, a wobble emerging in her voice. "Rachel told me to—she said you would be happy to hear that—"

"Who's Rachel, Bee?" I asked. Zoe cleared her throat, and when I looked across the table at her, her eyes were glassy.

"My sister," Zoe said, her voice tight in her throat. "She, uh…she died a couple years ago. She had a really rare type of blood cancer," she shifted her gaze to Beulah and wiped her nose on her sleeve. "Who told you that?"

Beulah blinked. "Rachel did," she said simply. "She said she used to sleep in the room I'm in right now. And she wanted to say that she misses you."

Zoe pursed her lips and frowned, looking down at her plate. August was on his feet.

"A miracle," he said. "It's a miracle."

"I didn't mean to make her upset," Beulah said to me, her voice lowered. "Rachel said she would want to know that—"

"It's okay," I said. Her eyes were owl-wide, pupils tiny. "Don't worry about it."

"It's a message from heaven," August said. "I told you, you've been chosen."

"Sounds more like a ghost to me," Zoe said, not looking at Beulah.

"I'm sorry," Beulah said again.

"Maybe it's time for you to go lie down," I said. The sun was still beating through the haze outside.

"I'm not sleepy," Beulah said, but she went anyway. I stayed in the kitchen with Zoe, the two of us collecting the cooling half-eaten plates.

"I'm sorry about that," I said as Zoe started scraping the plates into the garbage. She shook her head.

“No, it’s fine,” she said, but she still didn’t look at me. “It’s just not what I was expecting to hear, you know?”

“Yeah, I get it,” I said, and I guess I did get it, mostly. I handed her another plate to scrape, casserole landing with a dim wet thud in the garbage. We worked silently for a while, the only noise in the kitchen the fruitless ticking of the broken carriage clock and the squeal and scrape of forks against plates.

Zoe broke the quiet first. “She wasn’t sick for long,” she said. “We found it too late, and by then she only had a few months to live. So she didn’t have to suffer too much.”

“Oh,” I said. What else was I supposed to say? “Sorry,” I added.

“She was the good sister,” Zoe went on, dropping utensils into the dishwasher with a clatter. “It’s such a cliche, but it’s true. The good dying young, you know?” She looked at me, her eyes red-rimmed. “My mom doesn’t talk about it. Like, at all. And after Rachel died my dad left. He said it was just for a little while, to ‘clear his head,’” she punctuated these last words with air quotes, dark-polished nails flicking up and down, “but it’s been a year, so…” she trailed off. I stared at her, trying to think of what to say next. If this was a Revelation, one of August’s testimonies, he would probably put his hands on her shoulders, hold her to his chest, or else hold her hands and look deeply into her eyes in order to communicate God’s healing presence.

“My dad’s dead,” is what I ended up saying. Zoe was speechless for a moment, watching me like a cat who had just spoken English, then laughed.

“Oh my God, it’s not funny,” she said. “Just the way you said it,” she stood up straight, pulling a morose face, mimicking me. “‘My Dad’s dead,’” she collapsed into giggles again. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to laugh or not, so I just watched her.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” I said, but she swatted my shoulder with her dishtowel and smiled.

“Don’t worry about it,” Zoe said. “I like a morbid sense of humor. It was the perfect thing to say to snap me out of this—” she gestured around the kitchen, “—weird vibe or whatever.”

“I’m glad,” I said, and I was. Zoe had a nice smile, lopsided and earnest.

“Anyways,” Zoe slammed the dishwasher shut. “Thanks for helping with the dishes. Don’t worry about my mom. I think it’s just the first time someone’s brought it up in a while. She’s gotta get used to it eventually.” She glanced down at her feet. The toes of her socks were beginning to wear down and I could see the tips of her toes poking through, her toenails the same dark bruise color as her fingers.

“Okay,” I said, and Zoe swatted my shoulder again and smiled at me, a tight and perfunctory little movement of her mouth, but it felt reassuring. Some barrier had been dissolved between us, but I didn’t know why or how. Zoe seemed to know, the way she seemed to know a lot of things that were foreign to me, gliding through interactions with near-strangers better than I could talk to most people I knew, not that there were a lot of them. All that, and she had actually lost her sister.

After Zoe went upstairs to her room I stayed in the kitchen for a while, listening to the low churn of the dishwasher. I made a mental note to find out what constituted a morbid sense of humor.