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# Kept Things

by Caroline Tuss

Produced under the guidance and mentorship of Profs. Erin Saldin and Robert Stubblefield

*Abstract*

The things that occupy our lives tell human stories. They often go beyond literal interpretation, leaving space for places, people, desires, dreams, and ideologies to be signified and examined. Personal history is a well-traveled source of inspiration, and it provides significant, meaningful symbols for the concepts I'm engaging with in my newest collection. My project, titled *Kept Things*, is a collection of three nonfiction pieces examining why and how things are kept, lost, and discarded, whether we have a choice in the matter or not. The significance of symbols to identity and memory acts as a through-line between each piece. The first of these pieces, "Opportunity", examines the ties to and experience of losing an ancestral house in Opportunity, Montana. Feelings of family instability and grief are central to the piece, and circle back around in the following pieces, the next of which is "Keeper". "Keeper" is a scene-based character and relationship study of my brother and I. I use his struggles with addiction as a focal point within the piece. The reader is given context to decide for themselves whether all relationships should be preserved and fostered, or if it is a better decision to let people go, even those closest to us. The final piece of this collection is "In the House of the Lord", which takes the metaphysical object of an interpersonal relationship and stretches it to a personal relationship with an entire faith system, mine being Catholicism. In delving back into religious experience (Catholic and otherwise) I seek to determine the real applicability of shaping our identity markers to our own design, and how we can shape ourselves through conscious manipulation of what we let affect our thinking and self-worth. These three pieces will work together to illustrate different manifestations of "kept things" and what that phrase can mean to every individual.

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*Opportunity*

Wrapped in my winter coat and a car blanket I felt like a dust bowl wife surveying with weary eyes a failed crop. It was theatrical. I stood in our back field, dead wildflowers and years-old horse shit the lay of the land. It was Thanksgiving weekend, and the November chill was strong. My ears burned with the cold. Our back field consisted of four acres littered with gopher holes and the mounds of silty dirt that they made. I was surrounded by dormant generations of blue flax, arrowleaf balsamroot, black-eyed susan, biscuitroot, plains prickly pear cacti. Against the back fence line, a crick was overwhelmed by wild rye. The trickle left our property lined on both sides by whip-thin aspens, leafless and stark. The Pintler Mountains in the distance looked over our family home of 92 years.

I spent twenty years loving this field, whether I was pretending to be a horse or playing Hunger Games with my little cousins by the crick, or when I went with Mom and sat next to her wheelchair in the summer darkness, watching the Milky Way slowly spin by. I had paced the field often in the years since, wandering out far enough to look back at the house, at the barn, to wonder at the bigness of the trees and the flatness of the land. I loved this expanse that my family called ours, but the truly interesting emotional labors were taking place back in the green and white prairie house at the end of the winding gravel driveway.

Inside the family milled around, Dad and Uncles Kenny and Rick, assorted children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The oldest adults were story-telling over picture albums and the kids were sneaking what they could get away with from the house. I grabbed two porcelain terriers from the kitchen that I had played with when I was little. My brother Dolan and cousin Austin argued in the extensive basement garage over the resale value of welding tools from the 50s. Our fathers had already agreed to sell the house to a man starting a position as a corrections officer at Deer Lodge. His family would be moving in by the end of the year, so we were on a time crunch to figure out what we would be doing with 92 years' worth of clutter, both trash and treasure. Dad had already warned me to tell him what I wanted; everything that went unclaimed would be taken en masse to the dump. I had spent much of the day taking pictures of every room, knowing that most of this I would never see again.

One picture was of the kitchen nook, framed by an arcing inset of the wall. A plastic tablecloth covered a folding table straight out the seventies and it likely had gone unmoved since

then. One window faced the side of the house that was sporadically dotted with hundred-year-old poplar trees in their season of fire colors. The other window faced out into the walled-in porch, where two wood lounge chairs were bleached from purple-red into a beige-y orange, just as the copy of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* that had sat on the table next to the chairs was sun-faded white on the cover. I loved to turn it over and see the vibrant red underneath, the intensity of the transformation. I took a picture of those chairs, that table, the blinds that cast slants of light against the eggshell walls. I snuck pictures of both bedrooms, currently occupied, their centered queen-sized beds offering just enough walking space to get to the exit door or the connecting bathroom. Mirrored dressers had pictures of my father's older sisters, the twins, when they were teenagers in the early 60s, and the oldest of the grandkids. The living room/dining room/den, a combination room that had a dead cabinet television sitting on the floor supporting the more modern box television with six channels and tin bunny ears. Every Thanksgiving it got reception enough to watch football and the parade, and that was enough for us. The orange shag carpet was a playmat for the littlest of the kids at the feet of adults lounged on the seven-foot-long sofa, with all the comfort of a burlap bag. It was still somehow my favorite place to sleep. Senior portraits of the five original kids filled the wall space between the two recliners that sat in front of the TV. One recliner was dedicated for Kenny, an unspoken rule for the family patriarch, the other free game for whoever got there first or whoever could make the best argument of need. Sometimes, if you were little enough, you would be manifestly hoisted out of it so some father or uncle could take residence. Such was the way of the recliner patriarchy. At the back of the room was an auxiliary one separated by glass-paned doors that never stood closed, instead propped up behind the edges of couches and armchairs. This was the room that the "whoops babies", Rick and my Dad (born twelve years apart,) were bunked in, with a window facing the front street and a door to the unused porch. That fake bedroom turned office turned extra sleeping space had a new futon, one more desperately needed sleeping surface when the whole clan rolled in.

The entire house was a cacophony of different time periods, but the rest of the acreage was consistent. There was the central rock patio supporting a concrete grill, painted blue decades ago and decorated with a straight-edged 'T' for Tuss. At the light post and long wood picnic table we found the epicenter of a barbeque every year, when kids and adults would scatter across the uneven ground between the house and the field in lawn chairs, playing cornhole and always ending the night with my father's rendition of "Rhinstone Cowboy" on a poorly-tuned child's

guitar. The barn itself was my favorite place in the way creepy places are generally the favorites of bored children. Uncleaned since the early days of Grandpa Walter owning the house and used for bike, lawnmower, and ancient boardgame storage, the entire dusty space was alien green, the windows covered by thin but lasting green plastic siding. Next to the barn the Aljo trailer had been grounded under an awning since my father was a kid. It was another very quaint and homey sleeping space with a table for wayward cousins to smoke weed at and shit-talk the rest of the family. The entire property was enmeshed with my family's history. An interest in genealogy that began in middle school helped me find the truth in the stories tossed around.

In 1929, Andrew Tuss bought five acres of land on the edge of a hamlet called Opportunity, just outside Anaconda, Montana. Having lost his mother at an early age after emigrating from Croatia and being abandoned by his father in Lewistown when he left to pursue the Yukon gold rush, Andrew was a man eager to give his children better cards than he'd been dealt. His son, my grandfather Walter, was already four when the Opportunity house was built.

Opportunity is hardly on maps, just a place for the runoff of Anaconda and Butte. In my childhood, it was a grid of quiet unlined streets where there was at least one dog at each house, and a horse or two in every other yard. Every family knew every other family, even the ones who hadn't lived in town for decades, like mine by my generation. For a long time it was insular, and few newcomers braved the condensed small-town culture. But over time the world got bigger, and by the mid-eighties the youngest of the Tuss children, my dad, had left and moved across the state like the rest of his siblings. My grandfather died not long after and with Nana left to wrangle a life for herself, she settled in to wait out the turn of the millennium, a home for visiting children and grandchildren, for wayward relations returning from years-long benders or midlife crises, for everyone to reconvene and remember the quilt of personality and fierce Irish loyalty we were all sewn into. She sold it to the boys just before her death in 2002. My father and uncles decided to pool their funds for taxes and upkeep into one account for the extant Crohunks, a local nickname for Croatian boys.

The Brohunks Account was a ramshackle arrangement administered solely by my mother after the other option for management, Kenny's wife Vicky, reared her head. My mother guaranteed that while she wasn't thrilled to be managing the finances of such a major asset, she sure as shit wasn't letting Vicky within ten feet of it. Every year during late summer my parents,

my brother and I would go up for a week, staying over at Mary Pat's mobile home down the street as every bedroom of the main house filled and spilled over. My cousins and I would cross the street and hop the fence into the Anaconda Country Club golf course and go hunt for balls in the river, filling bucket after bucket that would line the main wall of the basement, untouched and unused beyond the initial excitement of exploration and discovery. We would try to go swimming but inevitably someone would go headfirst into a tree or a rock and we would have to cart the crying child home. We would walk the seven blocks to Solan's Grocery, the only store in Opportunity, the kind where even in the 2000s a parent could send their child for cigarettes and as long as that child looked enough like the parent that they swore they were getting the smokes for, Solan and his storekeepers would let them run home with the smokes and a free piece of candy. Opportunity was not a town interested in the fears and preoccupations of bigger cities, and as long as one both left others to their business and had the obligatory small-town polite courtesy, no one was going to have any problems with anyone else. It was heaven for a little kid with dreams of earlier days, colored with freedom and a lack of accountability. The Opportunity house was the epicenter of all the best parts of being a Tuss.

Dad, Dolan and I were all sitting on the back porch of our home in Havre on a night in early September. The nights were getting darker sooner, and the prairie sunset was accompanied by light baubles strung along the railing. We were reveling in any remnant heat from the late end of summer, any meals we could have outside. Things were good, great even, no one snipping at anyone else, all of us laughing together about Dad and Dolan's girl troubles. We were happier than usual, so Dad of course chose this day, this conversation, and his third beer in to broach the subject.

"How would you two feel about us selling the Opportunity house?" The comfortable lull in the conversation died with little warning. Dolan and I made eye contact for a long second, both taking on the uncomfortable smile that comes with truths you hope are some poorly thought-out joke.

I led: "Is this actually on the table? Like a real thing that could happen?"

Dad was fiddling with his phone, rotating it around and around against his leg. He was a nervous fidgeter, a trait that Dolan and I had picked up. He finally answered me. "Rick and Kenny and I have been talking about it for a few months, since before Tussapalooza." A moment

of silence. He looked up, glancing at both of us. “We haven’t decided anything yet. I just wanted to know where you two were at with the idea.”

More silence. Dolan and I looked at each other and saw the same disbelief. There had to be some way to shut this down. Both of us were too deeply tied to the Oppor house to just let the old folks give it up.

I readjusted in my seat, crossing my arms tight. I had never been good at taking loss, but this was somehow worse. It had never occurred to me that we could lose the house. The concept made my chest tighten with a nauseous feeling that didn’t want to make room for.

“Is it a money thing? I can’t imagine any of you are so desperate for cash.” I said, a little more caustically than I meant to.

“I mean, it’s an asset that we’re always doing maintenance on. The wiring and plumbing are old enough that they’ll need to be replaced in the next few years.”

“There’s enough cousins that we could definitely pool some money together to keep things running if you’d like to try that before getting rid of one of the only emotional inheritances Dolan and I will get.”

“Do you two suddenly have reliable income that I don’t know about? Rick’s kids are all in Florida, so it doesn’t make sense for them to buy into a house they hardly ever visit, and Kenny already asked his, and none of them went for it. And regarding inheritance, taking our thirds of the house and splitting them between eleven people unevenly would be a nightmare. Two or three of you would have to buy out the rest for the arrangement to work at all. We wouldn’t have considered it if we didn’t have reason, guys.”

“Well those reasons aren’t good enough to justify this.” I protested.

“You and Rick and Kenny will all regret it if you sell the house. I know you all care about it, and if Tussapalooza and Thanksgiving come around and we don’t have the house anymore, a lot of people just won’t come.” Dolan added.

The ensuing silence rang with the residual force of our protestations. Of course Dad and the boys didn’t actually want to sell the house, that would be delusional. Their grandfather had built it. They had grown up there. Their father had grown up there. For Kenny, his five-year-old great-granddaughter was just beginning to enter the phase of her life where she could remember it. After seven generations of Tusses, we couldn’t just throw our family home away. Of course they wouldn’t. Unless they did.

Dad drank more of his Shock Top beer. Still on his third, at least. “I already told you, nothing is set in stone. It’s just a concept right now.”

I couldn’t stand the vacillations between taking this concept extremely seriously and refusing to face the realness of it. The twist in my chest had only gotten worse throughout the conversation, and now settled at the base of my throat like dry bile. It was such a foreign feeling that I didn’t even realize what it was until that moment. It was real, motivated, begging-to-be-expressed anger. Unusual for me and thusly all the more powerful. “Well it’s a shitty concept!”

Dolan wondered how 75-year-old Kenny could even imagine giving up the home. He was a stalwartly traditional kind, rooted in the past, had only realized that he couldn’t call black people ‘colored’ in 2018. Wouldn’t he hate the idea?

“Kenny was actually the one who first brought it up,” Dad retorted. “it’s always been such a nuisance to keep the house running when no one lives there. It’s also not cheap to maintain a vacation property.”

“If it’s a money problem, I’m sure a decent number of the cousins would help pitch in funds or organize the maintenance projects.” I protested, starting to feel a burning nervousness. Our arguments weren’t convincing him.

“No you wouldn’t, half of the cousins we hardly see. They live all over the country.” I felt a retroactive rage at these cousins, older than me and supposedly wiser, who never made a point to come see family at the house. This was their fault.

“Even when people do come, Kenny and Rick and I end up spending entire days just getting everything presentable, cleaning and mowing the lawn and cleaning the house and getting the water and electricity back up.” This was true. Often, the first few days of a vacation was leaving Dad and Rick to get things back up to level, pushing around a temperamental lawn mower or cleaning fallen leaves out of the grill vent.

I felt anger rising in me beyond what I ever feel. I am not an angry person. For me, anger never seems productive, or warranted. At that moment, I could have punched him. From the time we were able to comprehend it, my dad had made it clear to my brother and I that he didn’t believe in financial inheritance. He was going to leave all his money to charity. It made sense to me in part because I was so confident that we would get a different kind of inheritance. We would get his share of the house, of the other kinds of land my dad held, of all the heirlooms that had been with us for longer than anyone knew. I decided early on that familial inheritance was

everything. The Opportunity house was central to that ideology. I felt confident that someday I could buy out the shares of other cousins who didn't care as much, or who were too far away, and I would take care of that house religiously, keep it open for the family I had, the people that remained. Regardless of how ownership played out, everything would come to fruition where my own children would be able to vacation there, play in the same trailer where I learned how to read, run around in the field where I crashed a four-wheeler into the fence, build a tree fort where my cousin Peyton and I built our tree fort. That was all gone.

Dad first proposed the selling in September. By late October, the house was on the market. It had sold by Thanksgiving. I grieved the loss of that house in a way that wasn't dissimilar to how I grieved when my mom died. It was one of the entities that shaped how I thought about my future, about my family, and about the permanence of anything at all. At the realization of that impermanence, anger breached my interactions with my family and my father. At every discussion of what we would do for our last Thanksgiving at the house, I simmered. At questions on what we would do for summer's yearly reunion once the house was no longer ours, I made snarky comments about how we *had* a house that was perfectly fine before they went and messed it all up. I fully believed that without this central hub of activity and the reliable location to find people who care for you, our family would splinter apart, especially within the next few decades, when my dad and his generation died off. Everything was fucked, completely and intrinsically, without the house. Within the possessive rage of a child I felt on the back of my teeth and behind my eyes: *they took my home. They took my home. These men took my home and their home away, destroyed what was built and now our place is gone. They've killed our family.*

After my partner Kaelyn's graduation, she and Dad and Dolan and I departed for Billings to catch our next-day flight to Venice, Florida. We were visiting Rick and Jaeden, getting away from the stresses that came with Dad's run for the legislature and Kaelyn's graduation and impending move. The drive was all smiles and Sufjan Stevens and ABBA for Kae and I following Dad's F-150, until while looking at a notification on her phone, Kaelyn's face pulled together in the very specific way it did when she was trying to figure out how to disarm an emotional landmine. I pushed: "What is it?"

Her hand landed on my bicep. “It’s your Dad. He wants us to stop by the house.” A moment of my throat pulling tighter involuntarily and her hand squeezing. “If you don’t feel up to it, we don’t have to go.”

“He—“ my voice cracked. I cleared it. “I’ll do it. I don’t know how long I’ll be able to without totally breaking down, but I will.”

“You don’t have to...” her hand migrated from my arm to my hand, which immediately entwined with hers with the force of a lifeline. “...but I believe in you.”

“I’ll be fine.” I affirmed as our eyes met for just a second, both of us ignoring the pit in my chest.

The old roads were the same, same old houses with new generations of the same dogs and horses, new kids who stare at strange cars from their front yards. With proximity to the house my heart climbed higher and wedged deeper in my throat. Finally, we rolled to the side of the road in front of the fence. “Oh honey...”

Kaelyn realized what we were looking at before I did. Two industrial dumpsters sat on the stone patio, stuffed overfull with wall panels, furniture and décor, and the dust-coated remains of the orange shag carpet, rolled for convenient disposal. “Oh my god.” I groaned, heels of my palms pressed to my wet eyes until black turned white. Dad had already got out, was walking down the long driveway before cutting across the lawn to look in the door window on the porch. He turned, raising his hand as if to wave us out and over.

Both of Kaelyn’s hands were wrapped around my right. My tears welled up and over. “You don’t have to go look, sweetheart.” As true as that was, there was no way I was letting my emotions run me over. “I’ll be fine,” I whispered with a croak, separating us and opening my door, stepping out onto the slant of the road’s embankment. The chill in the air cooled my eyes a little. The walk to the house was longer than ever before. Dad intercepted us at the first of the cottonwood line.

“You should see the inside,” he offered as I made considerably less of an effort to conceal my crying than I normally would. I stared – maybe glared a little – at him. “they’re gutting the place. All the carpet, even the walls, they’re taking it all out. It must be costing them a fortune.” At this he finally looked at us, Kaelyn lockstep behind me and my face perhaps a little more full of despair than I meant, based on the way he ‘awed’, coming in as if to pull me

into a side hug. I stepped forward out of it, to the dumpsters, leaving Kaelyn to murmur something to him in vaguely apologetic tones.

For some reason, the shag carpet sitting there so unwanted was my undoing. My sniffles escalated into barely controlled sobs, fingers brushing through the 50-year-old fibers that weren't nearly as soft or comforting as my recollection. *I can't believe I'm such a mess over a carpet of all things.* The gravel announced footsteps behind me.

"They have a Ring camera." Dad, then. "It definitely caught me looking through the windows, so I texted the new owner to let him know it's just us." *Just us. Just the people who this home was built for.*

I turned my back on the dumpster, which just gave me a better glimpse of the destruction through the windows, as well as the RV on the lawn. "So are they just camping here? What's even the point of buying a house just to destroy it and be homeless?" Once again, I was resenting these strangers for their free will and wealth. Maintaining righteous anger was exhausting.

"The house needed to be brought up to code. The piping alone hasn't been updated since I was a kid. It was going to become a problem to someone at some point." A look back. I followed it. "It's a better idea to just deal with it now before they move in." I saw the white body of the security camera.

"Since when was Opportunity the kind of town where you need security cameras? Who do they think they have to worry about?" *Maybe it's always been us. Me. Old owners with a grudge. Maybe they should be worried.*

"We're lucky that we only had one break-in in all the years no one lived here. Everyone knew the place was empty. They're just being smart."

"They're already ruining it, Dad." I wanted him to hurt about this like I did. Why didn't he hurt? "They came and destroyed everything. Just like Dolan and I said they would."

"It's not ruined, Care." Kaelyn, appeared at some point in my one-sided stare-down with Dad. "The core of the house is still there. And all the memories."

*Don't be so saccharine, you didn't know it like I did, it wasn't yours,* I want to say to her, lash out nasty. As always, any impulse for hurting Kaelyn is an impulse based in insecurity, and a clear indication that my train of thought wasn't going anywhere good. I kept my mouth shut.

Dad, fidgeting with his phone as an out to this awkward conversation, put out an olive branch of recognition: "I'll text him and ask him to save you a square of the carpet...if you

would want that.” I imagined having a memento like that, something so material, part of the house, literally well-trod.

“I’d like that. A lot.” Dad smiled at me, somewhat sadly, and I could finally glimpse a hint of what I’d been looking for in him. Some part of him was hurting, just hurting different than I could understand. I kissed Kae on the top of the head and put my arm over her shoulders, walking as nonchalantly as I could, even while her own arm braced around my middle, holding my quaking self upright. All of this caught by the security camera – three strangers, suffering over a fourth stranger’s property.

Compartmentalization got me through the months until summer, and got me through the loneliness that followed Kaelyn’s move back to Havre to start her first post-college job. I worked and partied and played Red Dead Redemption 2 over and over and over again, preferring constant distraction to sleep or ruminating on what I didn’t have anymore and what couldn’t be the same. Thinking about Opportunity wasn’t hard to avoid, in truth. Even with spring gone and June in motion, there was no talk at all about Tussapalooza, where we would be, what we would do, if it was even going to happen. Perhaps Dolan had been right, and the most recent Tussapalooza was the last. I sunk into this idea and tucked it out of sight. That mostly worked until I received a text from my dad, simply containing the link to a VRBO listing. This place, some house on a mountainside facing Georgetown Lake, was our replacement venue. Beautiful views, but foreign and modern, a late July week in a stranger’s house. My previous experiences with Airbnb and VRBO had not inspired confidence in me that this would allow us to connect as a family and put away our conflicts, but I wearily realized that I had no real power over this. At most, I could not go and waste Dad’s money, his time, and hurt his feelings. Though the simmering anger at his and his brothers’ decision was not gone, I could feel it lessening with time like every other hurt. I would at least see Dad and the uncles, their children and clusters of the extendeds, and briefly Kaelyn, up for a weekend before heading back to Havre for her new big-kid job. I made a deliberate choice to ignore the angst and drive the two and a half hours from mountain valley to mountain valley.

I let myself in using the hidden key described in the rental’s welcome instructions. The house was quiet but clean, well-lived in but not unwelcoming. I had found out that everyone else had been delayed in their travel midway through the drive, so I was alone and first there. When I

was in elementary school, that last day walking home from the bus stop every school year was one of great distress. For reasons I had no concept of, I could not go inside the house. I was compelled to sit out on the wide concrete steps in front of the house, unwilling to feel so sealed off from the rest of the world. I would just sit and sob with all the hysterical distress of a child until I wore myself out. The same impulse a decade and change later drew me to camp out on the absurdly large porch facing a postcard view of the lake. I waited. I read the first few chapters of a book that I couldn't focus on as I waited for Kaelyn's silver Toyota Highlander to flash at me through the sparse evergreens lining the roadway. The wind imitated eerily well the sound of tires on dirt, and I was on edge for the next expected arrival to defang my loneliness. The endless summer warm eventually lulled me into a drowsy mindlessness, lying back in a deck recliner. I woke to my scalp tingling, eyes opening to see Kaelyn as she leaned over the back of my chair with fingers running through my hair, her other hand pressed to my sternum.

“You made it.”

Tussapalooza came to life with all the force of a leaky faucet, family trickling in by ones and twos. The event seemed only marginally successful until I realized that I was surrounded by twenty-five people, and that everyone was happy, drinking and merry-making and exploring the two houses that were part of our rental. The energy was especially high with Andy's granddaughter, my first cousin twice removed, running around with all the attention-seeking chaos of a five-year old with no other playmates. I and Jaeden, the only other cousin under twenty-five, became her playmates by default. Kaelyn had already left back to Havre, but I didn't feel alone. There wasn't any opportunity to feel alone with everyone there.

Later that night after everyone had gone back to their homes and hotels, I was sitting with a book in the living room, enjoying the ambient presence of Dad and Rick sitting together and gossiping about the drama of Rick's upcoming 50-year high school reunion. I realized how different this felt, a day with us all together, and we were actually *together* together. There were enough beds in this house for us to linger into the late evening, not leaving to head for hotels and other cousin's spare rooms. The upkeep for this house wasn't our problem, no yard to work or teetering hundred-year-old trees to worry over. Our family wasn't devastated, as much as I had feared it. We were fine. We evolved, just as my great-grandfather and his extended family had

after immigrating from Croatia, away from their home, everything they knew. Families echo themselves forever.

Months and months later during a trip that would have me drive past Anaconda, I couldn't help taking the turnoff for the highway into town. The smelter skyline was familiar as the freckles on the back of my hands, which were fidgeting on the steering wheel. Inside my mind spun the idea that this could be *very bad for my mental health*, but my nervousness rivalled my need to prove something to myself. I turned down familiar roads and passed the same houses that had sat unchanged for the twenty-two years I had been alive and blood-tied to this town. I felt real weird about that. This wasn't our place anymore. I knew that and knew there was some closure to find with missing the home I loved, even now.

I surprised myself with how at peace I was. This place I loved was transformed. The house was still green and the trees and structures were still there, but the yard was littered with children's toys, a trampoline, and at least three different eras of RV. I saw goats and a weary-looking horse penned in the backfield. The image was incongruous with my idea of the Oppor house, and I wasn't bothered. Our house was gone now, a flash of history that would eventually be forgotten outside of recollections like these. The house's new evolution reflected a family I didn't know. They were making it theirs'. I couldn't resent them for that.

I headed back to that highway connecting Anaconda and Opportunity to the rest of the world. I drove home, taking my memories with me. I didn't look back.

*Keeper*

On an early October morning, I wake to my dad's ringtone, and groggily hit the speaker icon, pulling the hair out of my mouth. The Sunday light through my apartment's bedroom windows is slanting, earlier in the sky than I'm normally awake for. Based on the call we had two nights ago, I already suspect the cause for calling. "Is there news on Dolan?"

"He finally came home."

I sit up, curiosity about what I've missed pulling the sleep from my mind. "What did he say? Is the car okay?"

Dad ignores my questioning. "We confronted him and talked about next steps for getting him into a sober living house." As a family, we've been trying to figure out the logistics of getting my brother into a halfway house for months. At the time of this call, he's only two weeks out of rehab, and this round obviously didn't do much for him.

"And Kris's car?"

My dad's girlfriend's voice rises from the background of his side of the line, across the room. "It was fine from what we could tell," *Other than the smell of weed*, I fill in mentally, thinking of how my car had reeked for days after he took it for joyriding and casino hopping earlier that summer. I feel bad for Kris, so new to our family and Dolan's issues. I'm up and out of bed, carrying the phone with me as I pull myself together for the week's prep day. I look over my to-do whiteboard, *start Dolan essay* topping the list. Under that, *capstone prep*. I think to myself: *He never leaves me wanting for writing material.*

Kris's voice, clearer now: "We couldn't get an answer from him on why he did it, but he seemed really down, more than usual."

"That's part of his self-sabotage cycle." The Dolan Rant, well-worn, leaks from me before I can stop myself. In the kitchen, I pull the yellowed leaves of the most recent pothos cutting more forcibly than I should. "It happens whenever someone good comes into his life. He violates their trust, he goes and gambles, or drinks, or uses, and then he comes back with his sad kicked puppy routine and talks about how horrible and evil he is and how his life is ruined. Whoever he screwed over has to comfort and validate him or they'll feel like the bad guy." There's a moment of silence on the line, and I place all the dead leaves on top of the fridge, one more thing to deal with later.

“It’s just...you and your dad told me about his history, how he’s been struggling lately, and I thought I knew what I was getting into...I didn’t think he would do something like this.”

Kris is new to the family dynamic. When she developed an open affection for Dolan so quickly, I had wondered if I had some moral responsibility to warn her, the same wonder I had with everyone that came close to Dolan. *He’s manipulative. He’s unstable. He’ll take advantage, take your inch and drag it a mile. Don’t trust him.* She had hired him to help set up her photography studio and new apartment in Havre, him recently unemployed and living with our dad again, her returning to her hometown for the first time in nearly a decade. While she and Dad were in Pittsburg for a work trip of his, Dolan had stolen nine bottles of liquor from our dad and broken into her house. From there he got into the garage, took her car, and fell off the face of the planet for three days. They came back to a missing car, missing liquor, and a missing 29-year-old. He always comes back in the end, tail between his legs, no action taken to prevent it happening again.

“It’s the only control he thinks he has over his life, driving people away before they decide to leave him.” I’ve moved to sit on the couch my partner Kaelyn and I found on the side of the road when we started our sophomore year, my back straight and feet pulled up, knees against my chest. Just over a year ago I had sat in the exact same place and sobbed in her arms after Dad called to tell me that Dolan was in jail again, arrested the day before with unauthorized use of a motor vehicle and a fourth DUI. Though I grieved his sobriety, I had hoped that maybe the threat of a felony could be his wake-up call.

“There’s more,” Dad’s voice fades back in. “Dolan’s actually in jail right now.”

I don’t know how I find it in myself to be surprised anymore, but I am. I’m leaning forward now, elbows on knees and the short edge of my phone pressing into my forehead when I respond. “When did they get him?”

“That’s the weird thing. He and I went to bed around the same time and I thought he stayed in, but I woke up to a call from the detention center that he had been picked up with a warrant.”

“What for?” I sigh, wondering if this is an old or new sin that he’s paying the consequence for.

“I don’t know.” He sighs deep. I don’t envy his proximity to everything that’s happened. “It might have been something he did while we were gone, it might be from him not meeting the

requirements of his probation.” A pause. “I don’t know. I know he’s been missing his check-ins at the courthouse.”

I pull my writing journal into my hands, find a pen on the floor and flip to the dog-eared page with my brother’s name and a date from late summer, after my therapist encouraged me to write about my brother and our complicated relationship in an effort to find peace towards it, with or without him. I take it all down, wondering if anything will come from this.

When I was twelve, our family friends the Healy's condo was all height, starting on a basement floor with one bedroom and the laundry room, carpeted stairs ascending to the main floor where one more bedroom sat and the kitchen and living room were separated by a breakfast island. The wide windows next to the dining table faced out over Whitefish's Big Mountain, tiny people in brightly colored ski jackets appearing to us as festive ants slaloming around. I spent a good chunk of the trip on the topmost floor, glued to the TV in the storage room that contained a dusty elliptical and one tiny window that illuminated me playing *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, a recent Christmas acquisition. The parents had let me bring the Wii on vacation, as I was entering the cloister phase of my adolescence and that storage room was my sanctuary away from the discomfort of being a pre-teen existing around others. Instead, I could do whatever I wanted while the moon crept past the window. One night, a melancholy came on that not even watching Link slaughter bokoblins could cure. All week (whenever I emerged from my cave) I had watched Dolan bother Mom and Dad for just a sip of the good stuff that was locked away in the Healy's impressive liquor cabinet. Dad didn't budge, citing Dolan's inability to control himself, but I noticed that Mom snuck him sips of her Cold Smoke when Dad's back was turned. If she hadn't, we both knew he would've just stolen some later. Mom took the path of least resistance. We all just wanted him to be a little more normal than he ever was.

From night one, I had been using the sleeping bag that Dad had found tucked away in the condo's garage. I'm still at that age when any sleeping situation that isn't a bed is something exciting and fun, even if it's sleeping in a thin sleeping bag on thinner carpet. I could keep proximity to my precious Wii. Any noise from upstairs didn't travel down to disturb the parents. I'm still up playing a game on my iPod Touch when I hear someone coming up the stairs, irregular and unsteady. Not Mom or Dad based on the footfalls, and it's already past one in the morning. Everyone else in the condo should have already gone to bed. I creep to the door and open it a crack, peering outside to see my brother coming up the steps to my floor, visibly drunk even in the extremely dim light coming from the windows on the wall of the landing. We hold eye contact awkwardly for a few seconds.

I break the quiet, whispering, "What are you doing?"

Dolan blinks blearily. His voice is low and sleepy sounding. "I thought you were asleep."

"I'm not. What are you doing?"

He ascends the final stairs to walk the two steps to my door and drops down, meeting me on my level, kneeling. “Came to say goodnight, love you.” Suddenly I’m scooped into a hug with my arms trapped at my sides. A flare of panic starts in me at being so close to and restricted by him. Within a beardy and disgusting kiss on the cheek, I smell vodka. He lets me go, moving to sit against the wall next to the door. I don’t like where his night seems to be heading.

“Where did you get alcohol? Did Mom let you have it?”

“Don’t tell them. They’ll just get mad at me.” After a second of silence, defensively, “I’ll be twenty-one soon anyway. Dad was able to drink when he was my age, it’s no big deal.” He won’t turn twenty-one for another four months, but I don’t say anything and just nod. He nods back and goes quiet. We sit in that silence for a long moment, me unsure whether I should go back into my room, unsure what he wants from me. He doesn’t make me stew in it for long. “How do you feel about Mom?” She got diagnosed with ALS last summer. We didn’t talk about anything deeper than the logistics of the help she needed. It was the unspoken rule.

“I’m...not really feeling anything about it, particularly. Sad, I guess. I wish she weren’t sick.”

“Me too.”

...

“It’s not fair.”

“I know.” I don’t know how to small-talk emotions.

“No, I mean it isn’t *fair*.” Dolan’s tone shifts, sorrow narrowing into righteous indignation. “She’s a *good person*. She cares about the people around her, even strangers who *aren’t* good people. She’s an environmentalist,” he gets caught on the ‘nm’ in environmentalist for a second, but bravely presses on. “she donates blood, she’s a *good person*,”

“I know,” I interrupted.

“Good people, people like *us*, things like this shouldn’t happen to us. We have the money for treatments and medicines and somehow, she gets a disease with no treatments? With no cure?” Dolan’s voice isn’t rising, but it *is* sharpening the way it does when he and Mom and Dad fight. I’m getting nervous, ants in my brain.

“You know Mom is the one who raised us, right?” He turns to look at me, and his gaze is so intense I have to look away, sitting to face the railing that separates the upper floor from open air.

“Yeah.”

“*She* was the one who made us the people we are. She’s the one who was there when we were little, the one who keeps track of the things I need to do for probation, the one who;s there when you get home from school.”

“Dad makes the money so we can do things like this,” I offer, ‘this’ being a week-long ski vacation in the most expensive resort town in Montana.

“Dad’s not nice to us.” He retorts, childish.

“He’s nice to me, he just doesn’t like *you*.” I know it as a truth, something that can’t be helped. Dad became the Bad Cop when Dolan’s alcoholism became a problem, and he plays it well.

My brother mumbles something to himself, staring into space.

“What?” I turn to face him.

On his face is such a petulant surrender to the reality of the situation that it catches me off guard, but not moreso than by what he repeats. “The wrong parent got sick.”

A moment is given to shock, then offense. “That’s a really shitty thing to say. Neither parent should be sick.” He just sits, unresponding. “You didn’t mean that.” A pissed-off affirmation of his intentions for both of us. “You know you don’t. You’re just drunk and angry.”

“You’re right.” His voice is quiet, beat down. “I just don’t know what we’ll do if she dies.” I don’t remind him that ALS has a 100% mortality rate. There is no ‘if’.

“It’s not going to be easy, but it’s not going to ruin our lives, Dolan. It’s better to just not think about it.”

He’s silent, and I’m deeply uncomfortable. We all have an unspoken agreement that we won’t linger on the elephant in the room, but I can see that the elephant is crushing my brother. When he starts to cry, I hug him. It’s the least I can do. I’m more okay than he is, after all. I’m good at ignoring elephants.

I'm fifteen when I lift Mom's right calf up onto my left shoulder, leaning against the side of her bed and leveraging her thigh back towards her torso, gently, feeling the strange resistance that comes with the top of her range of motion. "How's the pain?" I ask, watching her face pinch up a little with the expansion of her atrophied hamstrings. At this point, she relies entirely on her wheelchair to get around, and us doing her range of motion exercises is supposed to minimize the pain that comes with holding the same position for almost fifteen hours a day.

"Just hold it," she says with discomfort in her voice. I hold against that tension, counting to thirty in my head. Over that stretch, her face relaxes as her thigh unclenches, unused to dynamic movement beyond her morning and evening exercises. "That's good."

I angle my right hand around the sole of her foot, the left coming up to hold her under the knee joint. I lift her leg off my shoulder and guide it down to the sheets, crawling carefully over her to kneel on the bed, picking up her left leg and beginning the cycle again.

I test the waters on the out stretch of the seventh rep on that leg. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"How did you deal with your siblings' issues?" *Like Dolan's* is the unspoken context. I've heard stories for a long time about how some of Mom's six older siblings had dealt with addiction in their lives, and I've met Uncle Charles enough times to know that he's the kind of multi-decade stoner that puts Dolan to shame.

Mom is quiet for a second before she responds. "I had it different than you. The worst ones were already out of the house when they were at their worst. They had moved away by the time any one of them was particularly bad." I nod, and move to her feet, placing them in my lap before I start working on her ankles. I circle slow as she continues. "I also had your Aunt Pat to talk to about it. I got to choose who I spent my time with... You don't have that."

"You're telling me." I say, pressing the bottom of her foot parallel to me, with more force than normal.

Mom looks down at me sharply. "Gentler. That hurts."

"Sorry." I instead pull my hand down on the top of her foot, pointing her toes towards me. "It's just frustrating."

“I know it is. I’ve felt that. Your grandfather had issues with alcohol, too.” I know how he would wake up with my grandmother’s neck in his hands, caught in dreams of the war that got worse the more he drank. My entire family could be a case study in addictive predisposition.

“Hey,” Mom pulls my attention from her bright pink painted toenails to her face. “I know it’s hard to be around someone with Dolan’s issues. But can you promise me something?”

Apprehension. “Depends.”

“Don’t give up on him.”

“He’s given up on himself.”

She sighs. “That’s not true, he just struggles. He’s up against a lot of pressure to do better but not many people are willing to support him.” I’m back to the left leg, performing the same exercises on a loop. “That’s why he needs us. Why he’ll need you and your father when I’m gone.”

“He takes people down with him, Mom. We both know it.”

“You just have to walk that line. It’s up to you to not let yourself *be* taken down. Be bigger than his actions, but compassionate.”

We’re not doing range of motion anymore. I’m helping Mom to lean against her pillows and the headboard, and then sit cross-legged at her feet.

“I don’t know how to do that.” The footboard digs into my back, but when my throat starts to tighten up, I lean into it more.

“Someday it’ll just be the two of you. Let that help.”

Those words sink their claws in, and I let it help. The footboard feels like it could draw blood.

I'm sixteen and sitting on the living room couch as the coroner and funeral home worker file in and out of Mom and Dad's room, speaking to him in the hallway in low tones. Dolan is sitting at my left side, and we lean on each other so heavily that I can feel his hipbone pressing into mine. I don't move. He's one of two people in the world who experienced exactly what I did tonight, and I will cling to the emotional lifeline that provides until I can bear my own weight. Until I can be a person again. We're all we have, and I'm not letting him go.

I'm twenty-one, lounging on the couch at home with Kaelyn, Dad across the room in a recliner with his laptop. Kae is single-stitch crocheting a daffodil yellow thick yarn into a baby blanket for her newborn nephew. Dolan is on his feet, gesticulating and bullshitting.

"We're *Tusses*. Of course we deserve better! People like us should be running Havre."

I don't even bother to glance up from my phone. "Having affluence doesn't make us better than other people, Dolan, like Dad and I have *told you*, time and time *again*. Bad things can happen to anyone. Especially when they make horrible decisions with little to no regard for other people's wellbeing or safety." I *do* look up at him then, pointedly.

"It's not my fault that he had his keys on his dashboard and left his truck unlocked!"

I put down my phone at that, staring at him. He's standing in the open space between the kitchen and the living room of Dad's house. Dad's and Dolan's, right now.

"Dolan, it was entirely your fault that you thought it would be a good decision to *get in* a stranger's truck and *drive away with it!* There's no other situation that could be more your fault. And to get your fourth DUI for something so *stupid...*"

Dad, legs kicked up in his red leather recliner, looks up from his laptop, where he spends his time scrolling endlessly through Facebook. We might not have a Mom, but we at least have a Facebook Grandma. "You have to take accountability for your actions, Dolan. You're almost 30, you should know this by now."

Kaelyn and I share a meaningful glance, having had this conversation with each other regarding the man on trial less than 24 hours ago.

"Dolan, having a TBI can set people back in their emotional maturity. I really think you should look into a therapist who actually knows how to work with TBI patients." His counselor Lydia has been working with him for longer than I can even remember, but his lack of real progress has given me opinions on her usefulness.

Dad butts in. "But having a TBI or whatever you have going on doesn't excuse your actions. You're still responsible."

"I *know that!*" Dolan's exasperation is less contagious than it once was. Dad and Kae and I are well-versed in not getting tied in when he works himself up. "I *know* I'm responsible, but no one gives me the chance to rebuild myself!"

“How many times have you been fired and rehired at Char’s?” The breakfast club he works at is about as much of a dive as a restaurant can get in Havre, but they’ve been good to him.

“I mean people who aren’t making it worse!”

“How is Char’s making you worse?” Dad protests.

“Everyone there is an alcoholic or using heroin, Dad, it’s the food service industry.”

Kaelyn, herself working at the Dairy Queen in Missoula, huffs a laugh beside me. He’s not wrong.

“You should get back in with the Mormons, Dole. Maybe Jesus could clean you up.”

That was a brief and confusing phase of his life to see from the outside.

“I tried! They stopped inviting me.” Dolan mopes. “Though that might’ve been for the best, they’re all pro-life anyway.”

“Can’t win ‘em all.” Kaelyn jokes as Dolan heads out the back door to the porch, where we know he stashes smokes behind the beer fridge.

I'm twelve, and Dolan was driven home by his friends in the early morning after being assaulted by a man a party he had refused to leave. Mom told me what had happened before I saw him. She handed me the universal warning that small children get when out in public and someone with a deformity walks by: don't stare.

Dolan's a different person, coming back from the emergency room with Mom and Dad. He's the kind of brutalized that gives you sympathy pain. Eyes swollen almost completely shut, jaw and cheekbone misshapen, face so mottled with bruises and cuts that he's more injury than face. I only see him for a moment before he immediately goes back out the door, getting a change of clothes for the two-hour drive to Great Falls. He's been referred to an emergency consultation for facial reconstruction. I find out later that when the ER medics x-rayed his face, they realized his left cheekbone was a muddle of fragment and powder inside his face, and the matching browbone dented in. He's diagnosed with a concussion that goes untreated in the face of everything else that needs repair.

Dolan changes after this. He begins to fixate on every kind of morbid fantasy a person can have whenever he thinks about Jolen, his attacker. It's hard to blame him, but the intensity escalates the longer Jolen goes unarrested. When he's eventually caught while trying to rob a gas station, my brother's outbursts lessen, but when they do appear, his fury is still potent and lingering. It bleeds into other parts of his life. For the first time in our relationship, there are moments where I'm scared of him.

I'm thirteen, and our parents are out of town. Dolan is supposedly keeping watch over me for the weekend. The entire weekend has been us picking at each other, escalating into yelling matches that kept getting meaner and meaner. I've historically been able to escape it by going down to my room, but this time Dolan won't let me disengage, following me through the door and standing with his arms crossed across his chest. I sit on the edge of my bed, having abandoned my attempt to read. With him doing this, following me into the place I'm supposed to be able to get away from him and his issues, I feel like an animal backed into a corner, emotions raw and lashing.

"I don't like having you around. You and all your friends make me really uncomfortable."

"What have any of us ever done? We leave you alone; you're always the one coming out to bother us!"

"If I'm not keeping watch, you and your friends could destroy the house. You have before." The image of the crusty socks under my bed and the anonymous brown substance smeared in the screen door after the party right before Grandma died came to mind.

Dolan glared. "And you told me that it would be better if I left forever."

I couldn't look directly at him. The expression on his face was scaring me a little. Pure resentment. Mom had told me that the note I left in his room after we came home to the aftermath of that specific party earlier this year had really hurt him. In this moment, I felt justified for the way he had taken advantage of all of us. "All you ever do is hurt Mom and Dad. The things you do make it hard to love you very much." My eyes skimmed over his right shoulder, distracted by the bush outside my window waving in the long dresser mirror.

The next thing I knew, his right hand was around my mouth, thumb digging painfully into the teeth of my left cheek, his four fingers doing the same to the right side of my face. With a force that made my stomach clench, he twisted my face to his. "Look at people when you're talking to them! What's wrong with you??" His eyes were narrowed into slits, glaring at me with white-tight lips in a face flushed dark red with an anger I had never seen from him before. Even if I had seen it, it had never been directed at me. I did not want to look at him. I did not want to talk to him. I wanted in that moment to get as far away from Dolan as I could, an animal fear contorting my features as I tried not to cry. It would only make him madder.

Even with everything, there was no way he was madder than I was.

Through my squished lips: “Yur hurding me!”

Now disgust. “This doesn’t hurt, stop overreacting!” With a tightening of his hand that had the hinge of my jaw aching, he pushed my face away from him, shoving me backwards. I caught myself on my palms behind me, one instinctively raising to my jaw joint once I had my balance. I was leaning back, scooting away from his angry stance in front of me.

My vision swam without my permission, and I watched through unwelcome tears as Dolan scowled, arms crossing his chest. “Just leave me alone!”

“Look—”

“Get out!” My pitch had ascended to a furious, panicked scream. “Get out!”

“Will you shut the fuck up for one—”

“Get out get out get out!” I couldn’t feel my body. I knew I was shaking when I pulled my hands down from their sentry around my head, bowed to my chest, and they were quivering uncontrollably. This was supposed to be my space, my place to go to get away from him. No matter what I did, what Mom and Dad did, Dolan was uncontrollable, angry, drunk, or playing victim, unable to realize just how deeply he was not wanted.

“Sometimes I wish Jolen had killed you!” Summoning the ghost of the man who had beaten my brother into a TBI and facial reconstruction surgery was always a recipe for disaster, but I wanted to hurt him. If he wanted eye contact, he would get it. My mouth is an ugly, snarled thing as I heave for breath, tears escaping around my words. I put every ounce of my hatred for Dolan into my eyes, every time he hurt me, insulted me, violated my space, every horrible and shitty thing he had ever done to me, to Dad, to Mom, it was all cataloged in my brain, and every dislike piled onto every disgust onto every embarrassment onto every single moment I had ever grieved the brother he no longer was, and I *hated*. Dolan’s eyebrows pulled together, and I saw the quick inhale and exhale which meant he was about to start down his self-pity rabbit hole. I wasn’t going to let it happen. He didn’t deserve something so kind and negatable as self-hatred. I stood from the bed and stopped caring. “You are the worst thing that’s ever happened to me! Worse than Mom getting sick, worse than *everything*. I wish you were dead so I would never have to talk to you again, see you again, pretend I care about you again!” For a second, his anger fell away to the raw, shocked, awful pain underneath. I wanted to tear at him, flay him with my nails down to the beating heart underneath. I wanted proof that he was something more than a monster, only capable of destruction. I wanted to bite down and feel him bleed because of me. I

wanted some facsimile of control in my relationship with him. “When I told you we’d all be better off without you, I *meant* it.” I leaned into a nasty pleasure in the way he, in his vulnerable surprise and overwhelm, stepped back with a jutter and turned to face away from me. He was in profile. He looked like he was trying not to cry. With one final and physically painful “Leave me *alone*.” I stood from the bed and stalked across the room, into the hall and up the stairs, out the front door, not stopping for my shoes or a jacket. My mind was hollow and my vision was a tunnel with only the destination of *away* meaning anything. I took each of the wide concrete steps a leap at a time, and half jogged half walked away down the street towards 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

I hugged my arms in the chill early autumn air, bare feet numb from the adrenaline as much as the cold. I just wanted to get away. Away from Dolan, from the house where I couldn’t escape him, from the family that was collapsing around me. My tears were calming to gasping breaths for the most part, and I had made it three houses down when I realized what the sound behind me was. My right arm was grabbed in a vice and pulled, spinning me face to face with Dolan, a new and even more frightening kind of angry. I immediately tried to pull my arm from his grip, but he, at nineteen, was stronger than a twelve-year-old girl.

“Get back in the house right now.” His anger was worn down, colder, and I was piss-scared of him. I knew impulsive big words produced big reactions from the people you attacked them with.

“I said leave me alone!” I thrashed against him, hitting and punching and trying to find any power here, any way to get him off of me. With one punch that caught him in the side, he grabbed my other arm and pulled both in, incapacitating me and bringing me into his body uncomfortably close. I couldn’t pull away. He pulled our faces close together, his eyes as bloodshot as mine. His breath was sour, like a hangover and old mints.

“Do you want me to tell Mom that you tried to run away? That you freaked out in front of the neighbors when I went to get you?”

I glanced peripherally at the house next to us, ironically the same one he had driven his truck into earlier that year. It may just have been a draft that made the shutters swing and clatter against the window.

“*Fine*. Don’t touch me,” I snarled, yanking away from him and stalking back up the street to the house, scrubbing at my face to try and find a way to the itch that still lingered behind my eyes. He followed. We were stuck together until our parents got back, no matter how much we

wanted to kill each other. We won't talk about this fight for eight years. When we do, I won't know what to say.

I'm fifteen and sitting in the den watching TV mindlessly when Mom comes in, wheelchair *ker-chunking* over where the fitting for the sliding door used to be. "I need you to drive me to the jail."

I think of Dad's face, closed off as he told me earlier that day that Dolan had been picked up for one thing or another last night. I think of his reaction when I asked if we would post his bail, the way his brows bent in. "No. He made his bed, and he can lie in it." I had agreed, even as I looked across the kitchen to Mom's face and saw an argument brewing. Our parents don't fight in front of us, but I see more and more of the preamble when it's about Dolan.

I turn off the TV, tossing the remote to the coffee table. "We're not bailing him out, are we?"

Mom doesn't seem as tense as before, but I don't know if that was because she had won this battle or if we just weren't going to tell Dad until Dolan was in front of him again. "He has a show tonight and work tomorrow morning." He's in the show *Equivocation* at Montana Actor's Theatre, and holding work relatively steady work at a nicer pub uptown. "He has a responsibility to show up. He can pay us back later." We exit the house on the side ramp through my parents' bedroom, me walking behind Mom down to where the handicapped van sits against the sidewalk. I held the switch that slid the door open and folded down the ramp. The van was well-loved before us, and we had spent the last couple of years beating the crap out of it in our own special way. I side-eye how the ramp dips a little too much for comfort as Mom rolls up it into the open passenger side.

I listen to the buzz of the ramp folding back up and the door sliding shut, then swing around to hop in the driver's seat. I'm still using my permit, which the county let me get at 14 on a special exemption. As a family, we are learning that having a handicapped member certainly comes with advantages now and then. Getting to skip all the lines at Harry Potter World earlier this year, for instance. I close the door and turn the key, both of us vibrating a little too hard as the van shudders to life. "Isn't Dad going to be mad?"

"That's my problem, if he is." If Dolan was going to be back in the house, there was no way it would be hers alone.

The summer sun makes the skin exposed by my shorts stick to the leather seat. "He needs to face consequences for his actions, Mom." That's a classic Dad line.

“He’s still going to have to go to trial and have a misdemeanor on his record. That’s punishment enough.” I’m not sure what number misdemeanor we’re on at this point, but I know there’s enough to paint a colorful judicial portrait.

“It’s embarrassing.” I know last night’s arrest is already in the paper, like every time before. I remember the time a stranger came up to me in the hall freshman year of high school and asked if we were related after seeing his charges in the paper. I had said no.

“I know. It’s more embarrassing for him, though. You know that.” She’s using her right hand to curl and uncurl the fingers of the left, the appendage hit first and hardest by atrophy.

“At least when he gets embarrassed it’s his own fault. What did we ever do?”

“The eternal question.” Mom wearily replies, her checkbook in hand as we pull up to the Hill County Detention Center. I’ve never been there before today.

I help Mom out of the van and we head inside, past the white brick walls and musk of cleaning solution. Seeing the armored door leading inside and the thick window between us and the receptionist makes me realize just how serious this all is. My brother’s in jail for the umpteenth time. Now I’m a part of that story.

Mom rolls up to the window with practiced ease.

“I’m here to post bail for Dolan Tuss?”

The rest blurs as we’re made to wait, someone heading back into the belly of the building to get my older brother. An hour passes as they process Dolan’s paperwork, and Mom tells me when I start to get restless that I can go home and leave her there.

“What? How are you going to get home?”

“I’ll walk. I need to talk to your brother, anyway.”

“Are you sure?” All of this feels so wrong, this entire day so off my normal schedule that I don’t know the standard operating procedure anymore.

“Very.” She smiles at me, and I can’t help but appreciate the excuse to not see Dolan. We haven’t had a conversation that didn’t leave both of us feeling awful in months. I leave her there in that building, waiting for him, and head home. I don’t like it. I know it’s childish, but this feels like one more time where she chooses him over me. It’s no secret that he’s been her “special guy” since long before I was born. He was her only child until he was seven. I surprise myself by bursting into tears that I don’t understand as I return home alone.

I'm eight, and hear the title song from *The Simpsons* coming from the den on the other side of the house from my room, where I've only just finished putting on my footie pajamas. "Wait for me! Wait for me!" I'm looking over my stuffed animals, grabbing a black and white horse before running through the hallway into the kitchen, skidding my socks across the linoleum floor until I'm looking into the den. Dolan is crouching in front of the fireplace, trying to spark the logs as an episode starts on the tube TV that we've had since I was a baby. Dolan grabbed one of the DVD sleeves from the top of the TV cabinet, where I can't reach, and got it going like I asked him to. It's one of the first Treehouse of Horror episodes. We watch as many as we can every year before Halloween.

I set my horse on the armrest of the couch, positioned so it can watch the show as I go to kneel next to Dolan. He's building the fire slowly, tucking trash and newspapers in the gaps even though Mom gets mad at him for it. It smells like burning plastic, but only a little bit. I don't mind much. "Can I help?" I like working the accordion-thingy that you pump to make the fire bigger.

"I've got it." Dolan's very meticulous about his fires. He places another balled up piece of newspaper between blazing cardboard and unstarted wood, watching as the fire crosses the bridge and licks at the bark. Mom says that Dolan was always a firebug.

"I'm getting Oreos," I announce as I stand and head back into the kitchen.

"Grab the shortbread cookies too," he yells through the doorway, and I return with two cookie sleeves in one hand and the cat under my other arm, as he had the misfortune of walking past me on my way back.

"Rosie Toesie," Dolan coos and takes him from me, getting our snacks and animals (stuffed and real) and blankets situated on the worn white couch. Dolan turns off the overhead light so we are in the glow of the TV and the fire. I pull Rosie into my lap, but he keeps escaping to lay next to Dolan, so I sit closer to pet him, even if he won't love me most as I wish he would. Dolan trades me a Lorne Doone for my Oreo and I snuggle into him and the cat, knowing that when *The Simpsons* is on our battle for sibling supremacy goes on hold. I may have sprayed him with the hose as he left for his newspaper route, and he may have spit in my hair while kneeling on my arms and legs, but he's my big brother, and it's a Treehouse of Horror Night. At least for the next few hours, we'll let the armistice stand.

*In the House of the Lord*

When I was nine, I walked up the street to the Millers'. My neighbor friend Adrienne lived there, and I was the type to look in windows and hunt down playmates. There were no cars in the driveway, but I thought that maybe she was home alone. I went through the familiar garage side door and navigated the tripping step and walked into their kitchen. After a few seconds, I realized that I was alone in their house, definitely uninvited. The doors were all unlocked, a common thing in our neighborhood, yet something sunk in as I looked around, discomfited. I had taken a liberty that I knew others would disagree with. I was in the Miller's home and they did not know, and the discomfort within that fact was accompanied by a feral pleasure in the transgression.

This informed further incidents.

The decision-making process for breaking into my girlfriend's parent's house was not good. It was an equation in impulsive hedonism. I knew Kaelyn's bedroom window could be opened from the outside plus I knew it was possible to sneak into the yard with that entry point without being seen by neighbors plus she was out of town with her people at family bible camp plus I was lonely equaled *I could totally get in that window, borrow a blanket or sweatshirt or something comforting that's hers. I could be in and out SO fast. A blur of something that's definitely a crime but could be socially excused. Maybe the neighbors will recognize my plain and uncriminal face and find this suspicious activity ambiguously weird instead of extremely creepy.*

The two sisters that precede Kaelyn in the family line each had their own rebellions using this heirloom; sneaking out to meet boyfriends both secret and known, driving around Havre with friends in the smallest hours of the morning, even illicit moonlit Bible studies. Their rebellions couldn't stray too far from the Lord. I was an exception to the trend and the harbinger of a new era of difficult Wood children. I am the lesbian lover of a daughter within a conservative Christian family of ten. At the time of this misdemeanor, they did not know that she was gay or that we had been dating for a year and a half. They did, however, know that *I* was

gay, and thusly, Kaelyn's "very good friend" was not allowed to come over for birthdays, holidays, or family events like her sisters' boyfriends did. I felt a simmering injustice at the whole thing, even though the idea of facing that kind of awkward hostility made me wanna die.

I indelicately fell through the windowframe onto her bed and snagged her most oversized sweatshirt after shaking her blankets free of the dirt I had tracked in. It could have and should have ended there, escaping back out the window after a lonely moment of angst, but my curiosity got the best of me. I had wondered what the inside of this forbidden temple looked like for so long that I couldn't fight the urge.

The rest of the basement was like many I had seen: messy as all hell with the things that gather when your parents aren't clean freaks like mine. Eight children and two decades' worth of homeschooling materials stacked shelf after shelf after shelf until the far wall was filled with Abeka, Institute for Excellence in Writing, and Focus on the Family affiliated curriculums. One younger sister had a curtained-off sleeping space in a back nook, taped-up devotionals, art, and angsty poetry serving as wallpaper. Eight kids in a four-bedroom house led to situations like that. Kaelyn herself slept in a closet for two years. The irony is not lost on us.

Perilous steep carpeted stairs with an overhang that I smacked my head on led me cautiously over a babygate into the hallway connecting the living room and kitchen. Their living room walls could have been a display space for crosses, many different styles and sizes and makes represented as well as at least two white Jesuses flocked by awestruck multicultural children. There was one lonely crucifix above the piano in the far corner of the room that I clocked immediately. Kaelyn's mother had converted back to the Catholicism she was raised in some years back, with contentious reception. Her faith tradition was underrepresented compared to all the Assembly of God-friendly iconography, which are similar but notably different aesthetics to those who know. I know.

I was ten when my family visited Helena and, as all good Catholics do, we went to Sunday mass at the cathedral before we left town. Cathedrals have always been my favorite part of traveling. Inside St. Helena's, under the stories-tall ceiling of the sanctuary, I smelled the wood polish of the many pews where congregants were dispersed and gazed around at stained glass Stations of the Cross. Light caught and warped into something so warm across the tiled floors that my breath left me. Everything was grandiosity, so beautiful that I could hardly bear to

exist there, knowing that I was growing from a strange and intense child into something unknown: a queer person with a complicated relationship with the church. There is nothing more simultaneously Catholic and heretical. Our family of four was kneeling with hands clasped on the seat back in front of us, waiting our turn to stand and proceed down the communion line. I followed along with the unfamiliar songs in the hymnal. Even the songbooks were beautiful, embossed with what looked to my child brain like gold and pearl. The scale of the splendor overwhelmed, it drew me in, and with a whisper in the back of my head that maybe I was meant to sink as far into this feeling as I could, I began to cry. I was third-party to my own emotions as the first wave of tears came on and just as quickly settled down, but through the rest of Mass, the tear tracks never dried. Later in the car, Mom joked that the Spirit had moved me, but I wasn't sure that she wasn't right.

My childhood home always had an air of the anally well-maintained. Mom and Dad were both militant tidiers. Common spaces were to be left as they were found, personal items hidden away in bedrooms, behind closed doors. Our clutter lived in closets and cupboards, full of last-minute gifts, old bedsheets, and an excess of pint glasses. There were many donkey figurines around the house that were collected over my parents' careers with the Montana Democratic Party, and we owned only slightly fewer symbols of our religious background. To inventory: one wood print of the Virgin hanging by the kitchen sink, one crucifix propped against the glass of the adjacent window with its wood darkening over time from the repeated steam of scalding dishwater. Multiple saint cards littered in desk drawers here and there, collected over time and us not quite comfortable giving them up in the passive superstition that flourishes in Catholics. And of course, the Celtic cross that hangs above my parent's bed still, prolific as the Irish Prayer in homes like ours. Beyond that, we were a secular household, and intentionally so with my Mom's inclinations.

In conversations with my mother, she told me that she struggled with many if not most of the catechisms of the church. But she was raised Roman Catholic like her parents, and their parents, and their parents going back (as far as we know) to the 16th century. The same was true of my father. Accordingly, my brother and I were raised Catholic. We're cultural Catholics, the kind that show up for Christmas, Easter, weddings, and funerals, that are both loosely and adamantly identified with the faith, the kind that many raised both liberal and Catholic are. My

brother and I were raised to be skeptical and yet harbor appreciation for the faith's significance and iconography. The icons and rituals of Catholicism change very rarely and there's reassurance to be found in that. The priest's vestments are reliable as clockwork: white on the high holidays, green in Ordinary Time, purple during Advent and Lent, on and on year in and year out. There's comfort even in the brutally realistic images of a man tortured and crucified, as well He knows from the sleepy stare you give him during Christmas midnight mass. I, to a degree, always *knew* the doctrines, *felt* the church. I just wasn't a full subscriber. When I got to know Kaelyn and her family, I learned what full subscribers look like.

I wander the upstairs bedrooms of the Wood's house, peeking in at all the manifestations of identity within the younger siblings. The angst-ridden watercolors of the fourth-born girl, as well as the seventh child and first son's collection of theologically confusing Norse, Greek, and Egyptian mythology books. This floor was where progressively older children prepared for their elders to vacate, and for themselves to be promoted to Oldest Child of the House and achieve the biggest bedroom, with a built-in closet and everything. Naturally, only in retrospect did I regret looking into these children's spaces, feeling weirder and weirder with each step deeper into the house I went. My shame identified itself as a desperate thankfulness that no Woods were in town to find me doing this extremely creepy thing. But what was I supposed to do? I missed the Oldest Child of the House, which coaxed my weirdest self out of dormancy. Our love from the beginning was weird in its intensity, but good.

During the honeymoon phase, Kaelyn and I were down bad for each other, feeling the kind of lovesick that only comes with attachment approaching codependence: first love. Kaelyn going to Glacier Bible Camp in the Flathead and leaving us apart for an entire week in this long and lonely summer was deeply unpleasant for both of us. Neither of us had had serious relationships before this, nor fallen in love. A truly awful series of events during our first summer together had bonded us quick and close, and in time we found the healthy kind of love within what was textbook codependency. At the time of this narrative's trespassing, we weren't quite there yet. No small part of the struggles we had were the result of Kaelyn's significantly negative experience with organized religion. The Assemblies of God are a force to be reckoned with as a Pentecostal conglomeration. The Catholic Church in Havre, St. Jude Thaddeus, was never one that went with hellfire and brimstone. I grew up in it, and I think the approach our

priests and bishop took is part of why I can comfortably say my relationship with the church is intact, though complex. I never heard preaching on homosexuality, or politics, or biblical gender. At Assembly, Kaelyn did. A lot. The fear-mongering introduced in church was reinforced at home, more often than not. Demons were real there, and influential, and apparently the real cause of anxiety disorders in five-year-old girls who were taught that the Rapture was imminent and if they didn't fall in line, they could get left behind. Assembly is a hellfire and brimstone church. That is no small part of why Kaelyn left and followed her mom to St. Judes, the first among her siblings to unofficially convert. She's made it clear to me that she'll probably never be confirmed in, or identify with the tradition in the way I do. There's too many implications within religion for her. But that doesn't mean she doesn't indulge my dabbling in it.

St. Timothy's Memorial Chapel has not changed in 35 years. I've seen my parent's wedding pictures many times, and being there three decades later with nothing being different is surreal. There's nothing of a cathedral here. Nestled on a mountain plateau overlooking Georgetown Lake, St. Timothy's is a simple church made of dark wood with a tall stained-glass window greeting visitors as they approach from the winding and almost precarious Southern Cross Road. Kaelyn's with me, looking out the windowed walls that face where the mountain drops off to show the wide curves of the valley framing the lake. My family's down there at our vacation rental for the week. I couldn't resist the drive, the view, and introducing Kaelyn to it, seeing if it stirred the feelings in her that it did in me.

I didn't expect how attracted I would be to the idea of being married in a church, especially something with the grandiosity of a cathedral. It bothered me that we were barred from it as a lesbian couple, even with us being unlikely to pursue it. From a young age, there had always been an assumption in me that I would get the long walk in a white dress, the wedding bells and body of Christ within the genesis of a marriage. Kaelyn and I could imitate the aesthetics and some of the traditions, but we would never be officially recognized by the church that had been in my life centuries before I was born. The best thing in my life conflicted with the oldest thing. Where to find identity between two mutually exclusive truths...there's no answer to that.

On top of the sweatshirt grabbed earlier, I toss a blanket of Kaelyn's out the window ahead of me as I get ready to leave. Making my way back through the house, I couldn't help but wonder when (if ever) I would be in here again. Ideally, it would be under the full if begrudging invitation of her parents.

I pull myself up and wiggle out the window. My ribs are achy and I'm sweating in the afternoon sun, but in the long walk around the back of the house, I think of Kaelyn. She'll be home soon, and though certain complications stay, someday we'll be out, and able to be as we are in whoever we become, however we find identity within and apart from each other, within and apart from the things that are ours alone.