

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

2012

Natural Disasters

Brittany Beth Barr

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Barr, Brittany Beth, "Natural Disasters" (2012). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 695.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/695>

This Professional Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

NATURAL DISASTERS

By

BRITTANY BETH BARR

Bachelor of Arts, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, 2010

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In English, Creative Writing

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT
May 2012

Approved by:

Sandy Ross, Associate Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Deirdre McNamer, Chair
English

Debra Magpie Earling
English

Hippolito Rafael Chacón
Art History

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis committee, Deirdre McNamer, Debra Magpie Earling, and Hippolito Raphael Chacón, for their thoughtful and thorough responses to my thesis work. Without their support, I would not have reached my highest potential in this manuscript. Dee especially has served as an incredibly intelligent, encouraging mentor and teacher.

I would be remiss to not acknowledge the family and friends who have served as my unflappable support system over the years. To Mom and Dad, who have indulged and encouraged my dreams since I could talk (scratch that—since I could blink); to Ryan, who has lived with, helped ease, and loved me in spite of my frequent thesis-related stress, tears, and frustrations, and whose patience and level-headedness are the perfect ying to my overemotional yang; to Megan and Brandon, my favorite couple, who love unconditionally and remind me what's important in life; to the FP, my original soul mates, oldest friends, and first writing partners; to Amanda, whose kind heart and generosity give me goals to aspire to, and whose friendship I cherish dearly; to Anna, who is a constant source of joy and hilarity, my kindred spirit and forever friend; to my MFA friends and peers (too numerous to name) that I've written, read, karaoked, and drank with, whose talents are considerable and envy-inducing, who I genuinely feel deserve all the success in the world.

Table of Contents

Mattress.....	1
Buoyed.....	14
Adrift.....	32
Riverside.....	49
Natural Disasters.....	53
Hurricane Room.....	67

Mattress

The summer Liz and her boyfriend were set to lose their virginity, Liz started babysitting for Marianne. Liz worked in the church nursery and Marianne's daughter Evie was her favorite kid there. Liz had just turned sixteen and she was saving up for a car—her parents vowed to match her total come September, and watching Evie on the side would bump her up from a 1999 Taurus to a 2003 Accord. Plus, Liz was looking forward to spending time at Marianne and Evie's house. She'd lazed away the first three weeks of summer break watching pirated movies with Rick in her parents' basement. She was getting sick of the Swedish subtitles.

Marianne wasn't like the other single mothers in their congregation. Most of them were in a support group that met Wednesday nights to (Liz imagined) analyze how and why God would orchestrate their husbands' deaths or desertions. Marianne didn't even know who Evie's father was, or at least that was what the women had liked to whisper when she'd first joined the flock. That, and *Keep your husbands close*. And yet Marianne showed no shame in it. She declined an invitation to the support group and answered honestly when people asked "What happened to your husband?" Never been married, she'd say. Whether her honesty stemmed from a genuine belief that she'd done no wrong or ignorance of the single-mindedness of most church-goers, Liz didn't know, but she was leaning toward the genuine belief, and that made her like Marianne all the more.

Even better, in the eight months since she'd started attending church Marianne had managed to ascend to the most visible and coveted spot in the women's ranks: praise band leader. Before Marianne, Liz had hated the musical portions of services—the contemporary Christian songs backed by CD tracks turned worship into something boastful and flashy, she thought. Something ugly. The previous praise leader had treated the role like her big break and coerced the pastor into buying the singers wireless microphones. Her voice was alright, but too bright and with forced vibrato. When Marianne had taken over, she'd retired the microphones and the CDs and just sang a capella. She knew how to use dynamics, how to lull the crowd with hushed notes, how to swell and surge at the most important words, and she sang without the physical affectations that Liz had come to associate with manufactured sincerity: the rising arms and closing eyes and skyward hands. Liz and her mom had been *this close* to attending another church—her mom had even broached the subject with her father and they'd fought rather vehemently about it—but ultimately Liz was glad they hadn't, because Marianne rectified many of the things about the place that had rubbed her the wrong way.

Her mom liked Marianne, too. On the third Sunday of every month, Liz and her mom volunteered on the set-up/tear-down team for overflow services. Their church had attracted so many more attendees in the past five years that they had to set up a makeshift altar and nave in the adjacent gymnasium. Liz was used to seeing the gym filled with sleeping bags during youth group lock-ins, but now instead of projecting PG movies onto the screen, the church showed a live broadcast of the services happening in real-time. It seemed vaguely cultish to her. She wasn't sure

why they didn't have an associate pastor and smaller praise choir lead the overflow services simultaneously—she guessed the higher-ups thought it was important that everyone heard God's word in the same way. The praise band was always around for set-up—they arrived at 6 AM to do sound checks—but until Marianne, none of the singers or musicians had ever helped arrange the rows of chairs or unfurl the multicolored banners flanking the screen.

“She's down to earth, that woman.” Liz's mom said. “Not like those other church ladies. “ They were in the gymnasium breakfasting on glazed doughnuts and surveying their work. “You know, if she and I were friends, I'd tell her screw 'em. Screw 'em all.”

“*Mom,*” Liz said. “We're at church.” She wasn't really scandalized, though, mostly just surprised.

* * *

Liz watched Evie from 9-3 Monday through Thursday and the occasional weeknight. She borrowed one of her parents' cars to make the drive, usually her dad's because his was older and he joked that it would be okay with him if she had a minor accident and they had to replace it. Or sometimes Rick would pick her up and they'd

get breakfast first at Do Drop Inn, a café slash antique store slash bed and breakfast ran by their retired third grade teacher, and they'd joke about how their first time should be there.

Marianne and Evie lived just off Magellan in a Mission-style neighborhood full of streets all named after explorers and conquistadors—Balboa Boulevard, Vespucci Avenue, Cortes Court. Their house was a deep salmon, the color of the inside of an eyelid. Rust red tiles clad the roof and on the arch above the front door there was a cutout in the stucco, a shape Liz had never seen. After her second week she looked it up and found it was called a quatrefoil: four hearts that converged, each one rotated at 90° so that the points penetrated the curves. The first time she'd noticed the shape she hadn't seen the hearts, but as soon as she knew they were there, they were all she could see—how each curve was a shared seam, a part of two hearts at once.

By her third week Liz concluded that Evie was the strangest six-year-old she'd ever babysat. Her favorite movie was a Weather Channel special about famous natural disasters, and she liked to watch it at least twice a day. She asked Liz to make the goofiest meals—chicken nuggets and scrambled eggs, squash soup, a can of kidney beans—but balked at grilled cheese or pizza. They spent hours each day playing “Treasure Hunters,” scouring the house for items Evie could add to a cache of odds and ends squirreled under her bed. Evie went crazy over certain finds—a pair of swimming goggles with one lens missing, a punctured miniature basketball, an issue of *Better Homes & Gardens* from October 2004—but dismissed some trinkets Liz brought her, like a rhinestone necklace she'd donned at several middle

school dances. One time Liz had to steal back one of Marianne's bras that Evie had declared part of her bounty: a neon pink and purple spotted thing that reminded Liz of the leopard print Lisa Frank folders she'd toted around in elementary school. She made a mental note to bring over one of the folders as a replacement.

Evie was pretty self-sufficient, Liz found. She enjoyed it when Liz went hunting with her, but occasionally she'd ask her to sit one out. "I enjoy my solitude," she'd say gravely, and Liz would do her best to stifle laughter at her earnestness. It was a phrase she'd probably parroted from Marianne. So Liz would let Evie sweep the living room while she nestled on the couch, checking her email or playing Tetris or texting Rick and her mother.

Liz's mom had just gotten a smart phone and her new favorite hobby was texting Liz videos of herself or sometimes even the cat. She would provide the cat's narration in a tremulous voice—*Hi, Lizzy, we're just looking through your baby book! Gosh, you were adorable! Or Mom is thinking of getting her hair cut. Which style should she pick?*, then pan to the computer screen to share the options, shoving the cat's paw against the mouse as if it were the one scrolling between the pictures. "Early Empty-Nester's syndrome," Rick said gravely when she'd shown him the first of the videos.

This was one of Evie's self-sufficient days. Marianne was working late that night and Liz was watching Evie until 10. So far Evie had rejected Liz's suggestion that they walk to a nearby park and instead settled herself before the couch with sheaths of paper and crayons. Liz's phone chirped and a picture message from her mom filled up the screen: apparently a hummingbird had fluttered by the window

and her mom had snapped a photo, but all Liz could see was a blur of color, like Evie had swabbed her phone with finger paint. *Wish You Were Here!!!* her mother postscriped. She forwarded the text to Rick, captioned *God, my mother's weird.*

Evie stood up suddenly and lifted a finished drawing for Liz's approval. "Do you like it?"

She'd sketched a house next to a curving black cloud. Three figures clad in triangular dresses smiled at its approach. "It's lovely," Liz said.

"It's me, you, mommy, and a tornado. It's about to hit our house! We're stormwatchers!"

"That's great. Hey, Evie, do you want to look for treasure? Or do a puzzle?"

"No," Evie said. "I'm not done with the picture yet. I'm having fun!"

"Alright," Liz said. Evie settled back on the carpet and Liz turned to her phone. *Is your dad still going out of town?* she texted Rick. They had planned to take advantage of his dad's hunting trip that weekend. She felt a little strange plotting the loss of her virginity while babysitting, so she left it at that.

I'm picking you up, right? he asked.

Yeah, she said.

You know, I have an appointment with your dad tomorrow. I hope he doesn't notice the change in me, Rick joked.

Liz's dad was Rick's optometrist. That's how they'd met. Her father had sort of set them up. "Do you know Rick Sanchez? He's a good kid," her father had said. Liz started to take notice of him at school after that, and the next year they were in 8th grade English together, and then they'd gone to Courtwarming, and it sort of

snowballed from there. Rick seemed equally as enamored with her parents as they with him. His mother had left when he was five, and his father was a serious man. He worked in construction. Dinners at Rick's place consisted of Hamburger Helper and comfortable silence. Liz preferred that to her house, where her mother would ply them with questions about school, and did Rick know where he planned to apply to college, and how was his father doing. Rick didn't seem to find her tiring like Liz did.

Evie tugged at Liz's shirt. "I changed my mind," she said. "I'm done coloring. I want to put my picture with my mommy's treasure."

"Your mommy has treasure too?"

"Yeah," Evie said. "She always keeps my pictures there."

"Okay," Liz said. "Lead on!"

Evie took her to Marianne's bedroom. "Can you help me? She keeps it under that," she said, resting her palm on Marianne's mattress.

"Oh," Liz said. "Alrighty." She had expected a jewelry box or cedar chest, perhaps, but it made sense that Marianne would keep her treasure under the mattress since Evie stashed her own under her bed.

She paused. "You don't want to wait to show her once she gets home?"

"Uh uh," Evie said. "It will be a surprise!"

Liz hefted up the mattress and Evie stashed the drawing there. Marianne's treasure was mostly comprised of Evie's artwork, some folded scraps of paper Liz assumed were notes or letters, and photographs in varying degrees of wear. She was about to lower the mattress when one in particular caught her eye. There was

Marianne with Liz's father, a photograph tucked in the same spot she'd secreted her diary as a child. Liz grabbed the picture and studied it.

"What is that?" Evie asked.

"It's nothing," Liz said. "Hey, why don't we play hide and seek?"

"But we just played that yesterday!"

"Yeah, and remember how you beat me? I bet you can't win again..." Liz teased. Evie zipped out of the room.

It was one of those photo booth pictures, not a strip with four images, but the type with a cartoon border frame. They'd selected one with cherubs and roses and hot pink hearts, so it looked like a valentine had vomited around their faces. They were kissing. On the back Marianne had written *Two Years* in the same measured hand she used to write out the "babysitter's list"—who to call in case of emergency, a list of Evie's allergies and medications, where to find the spare key.

Liz's arm was getting tired from supporting the weight of the mattress. She replaced the picture and lowered the mattress and sat down on it.

5 minutes later she heard Evie stomping around the house calling her name. She made her way into the bedroom and shouted "What are you doing? If you can't find me you're supposed to say Olly Olly Oxen Free!"

"I guess you didn't hear me," Liz said. "You must have been in such a good hiding spot that I didn't even come near you."

Evie beamed. "Ha! You couldn't find me!"

"You're right," Liz said. "Winner winner chicken dinner."

"I don't *want* chicken for dinner," Evie said.

“It’s just an expression.”

It occurred to Liz then that most people who’d found proof of their father’s infidelity would not continue playing and giggling with the daughter of their father’s mistress. Most would not sit on the mattress upon which their father had possibly slept with said mistress. Most would feel sad or angry or betrayed or some combustible combination of the above.

All she felt was fascination, a morbid curiosity.

She supposed she should leave. She found the neighbor, Ms. Hartley’s, phone number and asked her to come over. She was feeling ill, she said. She called Marianne at her work and echoed the same thing.

Rick picked her up. His father’s apartment was on the edge of town that bordered the airport. Some nights when Liz lay awake talking to him she could hear the throaty hum of 747s as they rose or descended. Rick fished a couple of beers out of the fridge and they sat on the balcony, watching planes sear toward them in the night.

“Are you going to tell her?”

She’d told Rick about the receipt and photo in the car. Liz took her first gulp of beer and gagged on it. It tasted vaguely like bread and ear wax. “I don’t think so,” she said. “Why? You think I should?”

He shrugged. “I dunno. I guess I’d want to know.”

“Right. Well.” She glanced at him. “I’m having an affair,” she deadpanned.

He didn’t laugh. “Liz,” he said.

She looked overhead. There was a plane. From far away she couldn't yet make out its white body, only a golden ball of light, probably the landing beacon that shone from the plane's vast belly.

Liz watched Rick place a hand on her knee, but she couldn't feel its weight. Her leg had fallen asleep. "You can talk to me," he said.

Suddenly she was aware of how immobile she felt. Even the plane, so far away, seemed stationary; for the longest time the light just hung there, and she couldn't tell if it was coming or going or hovering or not even a plane at all. She felt the vast gulf of air and night between them.

"I guess I'm afraid," she said.

"Afraid of what she'll say?"

"Afraid of that happening to me." Her other leg was starting to numb. She knew she should get up, try to return the feeling to her limbs, but she felt like her feet were too weighty, like all the feeling from the rest of her legs had gathered in her soles.

"It won't," he said. "I love you, Liz. I wouldn't do that to you."

It was the first time he'd said that. They kissed and Liz clenched her fingernails into her thigh until the feeling returned to her legs. The plane was above them now, and its dull roar washed over her.

What she had really meant was *I am afraid I will become like him.*

* * *

When Liz got home her mom was waiting for her at the top of the stairs, blocking entrance to the hallway that led to her room. Her father was shadowed on the landing behind her. If Liz hadn't been expecting them there, she would've probably screamed—as they were, bathed only in light filtering through the windows to the back yard, they made a sinister tableau. Liz couldn't read their faces. She flicked on a lamp. "I'm sorry I'm late," she said. "Marianne got stuck in traffic."

"Two hours late," her mom corrected.

"You should've called," her father said.

"I'm really sorry."

"Marianne called here to check on you," her father said. "She wanted to see if you were feeling better."

Liz wondered if she'd called the home phone or his cell. Whether her mother had picked up and they'd exchanged pleasantries and she'd extended Marianne an invitation for dinner. Would her father have listened in on the other line?

"Okay, yeah, I didn't feel well," Liz said. "I still don't really. I think I need to lie down." She started up the stairs, making to dodge her mother.

"Why didn't you come home?" her father pressed.

She was almost eye-level with him now. "Rick's place was closer. I just needed to rest. Please, can't we talk about this in the morning?"

"I found these," her mother said, brandishing a pair of panties, "in your father's car. Care to explain?"

Liz looked at them. They weren't hers, but they were familiar: silky with pink and purple splotches and black lace trim. Marianne's, twin to the bra Evie had

stolen. She could see the same recognition in her father's face. Just recognition, really—not panic. He looked frustratingly calm, in fact, as if his wife handling his mistress's G-string was a routine development. Liz imagined him snatching away the underwear and grounding her for the summer. She imagined him tearing up, willing her into a false confession.

Then she looked at her mother and saw desperation there.

“Tell me how your underwear ended up in the car.”

Liz remembered the first time her father had examined her—how funny she'd thought he looked in his lab coat, how small and uncomfortable she'd felt sitting the hard examination chair. He called it her Eye Throne and told her she needed to sit very still and then look at some letters for him. She would peer through the mask of lenses and tell him which ones made the letters look better—*A or B? 1 or 2?* Sometimes she honestly couldn't recognize the difference between the first and the second, but she would lie and choose one anyway, hoping she was right. He'd fiddle with the machine to make minute adjustments, blurring the edges of the T and then striking them into sharper clarity, always asking *Is this better? Is this better?*

It was her mother asking now.

Liz took a step down. “They're mine.” she said. “I'm sorry.”

Her mother tossed them at her. “I washed them for you,” she said, sidling past Liz's father. He held Liz's gaze for a moment before following his wife to bed.

* * *

Later that summer Liz's mother joined the Praise Choir, and every Sunday she stood on aluminum risers singing backup for Marianne. When she'd first mentioned auditioning, her father had laughed, and she'd leveled him with a glare.

"You *are* kidding, aren't you?" He asked. "We both couldn't sing our way out of a paper bag."

"It's not about being *good*," her mother said.

"Yeah, dad," Liz said. "It's about the heart."

That was around the time Liz stopped attending church. Her mother had to go early for practice, so she and Liz stopped doing set-up and Liz rode with her father. Most times they arrived too late and had to sit in overflow services, watching the sermon on screen. Liz would excuse herself to the restroom and then walk the three blocks to the 7-11 to meet Rick. She'd get a red ICEE and he blue and he'd park in an alley and they'd do some hand stuff. They'd slurp their ICEEs and kiss until their tongues were purple. She'd watch the clock and pull him away when services were nearly over, and he'd drop her off so she could meet up with her mom and dad, exclaim how well the choir had sounded and how thought-provoking the week's message had been. Sometimes the three of them went to brunch and ordered three

different types of pancakes and swapped plates until they'd all had a taste. Her father never said anything about her absence.

Buoyed

In the morning Lynn braved the dock to check her pike traps. It was a ritual she used to share with her daughter. Sarah at four and five had liked to unlatch the soaked steel cages and watch the fish flap against the chicken wire. *They look like they're dancing*, she'd say, oblivious to the end game: that these fish were the flesh she'd eat off her plate that night after her father removed the guts and gristle. She simply liked the thrill of scooping the slithery animals in her hands and scrubbing their scales, of seeing the special markings that distinguished each catch from the next.

"They're like your freckles," Lynn would tell her, echoing what her own grandfather had said when she was a child fishing with him from the same dock. "No two fish look the same."

Together Lynn and Sarah and—before the divorce—Sarah's father, Tom, would separate the keepers from the rest, then release the undersized fish back into the lake's shallows. Tom tossed them blindly, trying to elicit the biggest splash and Sarah's biggest screech, but Lynn mimicked Sarah's quiet, reverent motions—they cupped their hands to the water's lips, submerged the fish and watched them scuttle out until the green swallowed them from sight.

They hadn't done that in years. In the month since Sarah had moved back in with her, Lynn sometimes thought of waking her before school so they could start

again. But she never did. Sarah hadn't neared the water since the accident, and Lynn thought it best not to press her.

The dock was heaving as it contended with waves made by a distant speed boat. A little early in the season for boating, Lynn thought—sure, the weather had warmed a bit over the past few weeks, but it had been an unusually unyielding winter. For most of January the lake had lain dormant. It had only been a month since the thaw, when fissures cleaved the coat of ice so chunks broke free and ground against the dock. Her first year back at the cabin those sounds had scared her when it shook her from sleep, but she grew to love it. It meant the place was finally coming back to life. Now the breeze was beginning to make it feel like April, but Lynn knew the water would still be tepid at best.

She hefted the first trap up and her suspicions were confirmed: the water she shook off was cool, and the first pike's flesh was as well. She'd netted three total. The first was robust, and judging from a gash on its flank, it had tried to force itself out of the cage. Lynn felt a snatch of sympathy for it, but she knew the traps were better for catching pike than using a rod. Once reeled in the fish fought when you grasped them, and their resistance could work a hook further into their flesh. She knew if her grandfather could see her now, he'd call it cheating, using the traps, but Lynn had a quota to meet for the market, and would freeze the rest for the summer when more guests flooded the cabin and request her fried fish, the biggest draw of her bed and breakfast.

She emptied the five remaining traps. At the bottom of the last she found small golden-orange sacs clumped to the wire. Eggs. It was spawning season: the

males would lie in wait at the mating grounds until the females came, the largest ones first. Once the eggs hatched the young sought shelter amidst reeds and other water plants, hiding from the adult pike that wouldn't hesitate to eat them. It seemed one of her prey had been spawning, set to release her eggs, but had swam into the trap instead. Or perhaps some frenzied male had fertilized her during their imprisonment. Lynn knew should scrape away the residue, probably—no way that sticky membrane would extricate itself—but instead she gently plunged the trap in and out of the water. Let them steep. Let things lie. Maybe they'd fall away and find their place at the bottom of the lake.

* * *

After the accident, Tom had sent Sarah to live full-time with her mother at the bed and breakfast. Lynn felt ill-equipped to handle her. She hadn't lived with a teenage girl for an extended period since she herself had been fourteen, her sister eighteen. All she remembered were insignificant squalls: don't borrow my shirt, don't come in my room, you borrowed my shirt and stained it, you read my diary, I know it.

They said the Hatfield girl might die. She was in a coma. Sarah had been suspended for trespassing on school property. Half the swim team was suspended, too—just for a week, though, unlike Sarah’s indefinite sentence.

Tom hadn’t called her until the next day. Lynn thought it was some breach of properly-divorced parents’ etiquette. If your kid’s in an accident, you let the other parent know right away. She kept herself from saying those things as he told her. “Sarah’s okay. Shaken up, physically okay.”

“Why was she at school last night?” Lynn let the question out before she’d scrutinized it, then worried it was something obvious: a meet, probably. Something she should have remembered, should have called to wish her luck for but hadn’t. But no, today was Sunday, and they didn’t hold meets on Saturday, did they?

“It was a ritual, some team thing. They kidnapped the new swimmers, took them to climb the tower.”

Lynn remembered the water tower perched on the edge of the football field. They’d built it when they’d built the high school, back when the town was still expanding, when it still felt small enough for her to consider it home.

“Jenny Hatfield—she fell. She’s in the hospital.”

They’d all been drinking. Jenny and Sarah, co-captains, dressed in black, scaling the tower, showing the new girls how it was done. It had rained earlier that night, and a cold spell had crystallized it. The footholds were slick. When Lynn thought of the accident over the next few weeks the sleet was the detail she kept returning to. *If only it had been dry.*

Tom and Lynn enrolled Sarah at the nearest high school, still almost thirty minutes away from Lynn's cabin. It was the third week of March by the time Sarah had fully moved in and enrolled, and Lynn knew it was one of the most nightmarish scenarios a high school senior could face: plunked in a new school four hours away from all her friends. There wasn't even a swim team—not that Tom and Lynn would've let her join it, but still. It was half the size of Sarah's old school; not many people lived full-time at the lake. Lynn remembered the first time Sarah had realized that her great-grandfather actually lived there; she'd been awed, probably because she'd only visited in the summers, had never witnessed a winter there.

"Where did you think Papa lived?" Lynn had asked.

"Just away," Sarah said.

Lynn had reminded Sarah of that moment her first week at the bed and breakfast. She wasn't sure what she'd expected—Sarah to smile or laugh or explain what she'd been thinking at age seven, perhaps. Sarah just shrugged. "I don't remember that."

That became her mantra of sorts. Lynn showed her the patch of wall in the den that Sarah had graffitied with Sharpie as a child. The markings were still faintly visible under the white paint, like veins beneath translucent skin. She didn't remember. One weekend they cleaned the deck together and while swatting down a crumbling wasps' nest Lynn recalled the first time Sarah had been stung by a bee. Tom had made them all snow-cones and a bee landed right on top of Sarah's, and when she tipped the cup toward her the thing had stung her lip. "Like botox gone *very* badly!" Lynn joked. Sarah didn't remember. Lynn was starting to wonder if

she'd made it all up herself. She was starting to wonder if this could be that same girl. She wished just once Sarah would indulge her, smile along and lie. The cabin was closed for winter. There were no guests to distract Lynn, nothing to buffer them.

After three weeks Sarah had begged Lynn to let her friend Anna come stay the weekend. Anna was the only girl from the team that Sarah still talked to. The rest, Tom said, had turned away from her.

Lynn hadn't said yes just so she could spy on Sarah, but that's what had happened: the girls shut themselves away in Sarah's bedroom, and while she was trading out stale linens with freshly-laundered ones, Lynn had inadvertently discovered that she could hear Anna speaking clearly from the guest room right above Sarah's. Their voices carried up through the air ducts. Lynn ended up on her knees with an ear pressed against the vent.

"How's she doing?" Sarah asked.

"Not good," Anna said.

"Shit. I fucked up."

"It's not your fault."

"I fucked up. I fucked up," Sarah chorused.

The week after the sleepover Lynn discovered a bottle of wine had gone missing from the pantry. She checked Sarah's room when she was at school but found nothing. She called the guidance counselor to ask if he'd noticed anything strange about Sarah's behavior lately.

“Sarah’s doing well,” he said. “Better than I expected, given what she’s going through. I promise I’ll call if I notice a change.”

He had just met her, though. Who was he to gauge if she was doing well?

But that was the thing. Someone could just as easily claim that of Lynn—Tom, or Sarah herself. And her daughter was different now. With time and distance Lynn could see how incremental changes in Sarah had taken hold and changed her, like small sedimental shifts that gradually change the course of a river.

Lynn wondered how she might have altered the course. Would her daughter be who she was if Lynn hadn’t have left town? Would the accident have happened at all?

One morning as she checked her traps Lynn found the half-drunk wine tucked behind a pillar on the dock. She brought it inside and set it on the counter where Sarah was sure to see it, but they never spoke of it.

* * *

Lynn cleaned her catches in the lower garage. It had once been her grandfather’s work room, and as a child she’d sat with him there and watched him winnow slats of wood into fishing rods. Now they decorated the guest rooms upstairs.

The phone rang. It jolted her and the knife slipped, its tip slitting the pad of her thumb. She pressed the cut finger to her jeans and grabbed the phone.

“Hello, Ms. Stanley? This is David Howe, from the school.” Sarah’s guidance counselor.

“Call me Lynn,” she said. She’d changed her name back after the divorce, but hearing her maiden one was sometimes just as bad as hearing Tom’s.

“Alright. Lynn. Well, Sarah’s been involved in an incident.”

An incident. The phrase was so bureaucratic and painfully vague. It reminded Lynn of how Tom insisted on referring to Jenny’s fall as “the accident,” as if a distanced term like that made things less difficult in any way. “Is she okay?”

“Yes, yes, nothing physical. A verbal altercation between Sarah and another student. We’re sending them both home. We could keep her here for the duration of the school day, but I think it’d be best if you came to pick her up.”

“Of course,” Lynn said. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

The school was thirty minutes from their cabin. By the time Lynn arrived it was nearly lunch hour. She checked in at the main office, and she could see Sarah skulking in the waiting area beyond the receptionist’s desk.

Mr. Howe emerged from his office and intercepted Lynn before she could collect Sarah. He was carrying a limp ham sandwich, and a little mayonnaise spurted onto Lynn’s arm as he steered her into his office. “I’d like to chat first, if you have a spare moment.” He gestured Lynn toward a chair, then eased into his own, set down his lunch, and dabbed at his chin with a napkin. A scab of dried mustard had already settled in the corner of his mouth.

“Thank you again for coming in, Lynn,” he said. “It’s quite important for Sarah to feel support from home in a time like this.”

It felt like a strange gesture of gratitude to Lynn, as if the option to *not* come had truly been a viable one. Like thanking a person for breathing.

“What I’m concerned about, though, is whether Sarah feels she’s truly been heard. In terms of what happened during the accident. Forgive me, but I think she really needs to discuss that night with you, the sooner the better.”

Lynn supposed a remark like this should smart like a slap, but somehow it didn’t. She and Sarah hadn’t talked about that night. Lynn had replayed the details Tom gave her and decided she didn’t need to make Sarah repeat the things she’d told the school, the police, her father, over and over and over.

But perhaps that was just an excuse. She’d never been good at confrontation. She didn’t have the temperament, not like Tom, who could remain level-headed in the face of almost anything, who knew just what people wanted to hear and had always been good at giving them it. That unflappable quality had attracted her to him once, before she came to see it as a pretense.

“Thank you,” she told Mr. Howe. “I appreciate your input. I’ll leave you to your lunch.” She could feel his eyes following her out into the waiting area.

* * *

Lynn and Tom had divorced when Sarah was twelve. The whole scenario was so amicable that Lynn almost regretted it now. Instead of going to court she and Tom had worked out a 50/50 joint custody agreement. This was before Sarah joined the swim team and started spending all her weekends at meets and practices, before Lynn started to feel crowded out.

So when she inherited the cabin during Sarah's sophomore year it seemed natural to leave town: woman, peripheral, strikes it out on her own, seeks self-actualization in the wild. Not that her neck of the Ozarks was *wild*, really, but still, it fit the paradigm. It was better that Sarah stay with Tom during the school year, Lynn insisted. Uprooting her from school would jeopardize the scholarships she was sure to garner. Sarah would stay with Lynn during the summers, make a little money teaching swim lessons at the bed and breakfast, Tom agreed. So amicable.

Tom had taught Sarah to swim at that lake. She was four before they let her in the water, arms laden with floaties, but in no time, it seemed, Sarah and Tom were racing from the edge of the dock to the buoys that marked entrance to the main channel as Lynn watched from shore. They'd rest together there, treading water. "Come in! Time for lunch!" Lynn would shout. But they stayed, and she ate her sandwich alone.

Sarah had since tried to coax her mother into the lake, but Lynn had a fear of the deep water. When she was a child, her grandfather had always thrown the year's

Christmas trees off the dock—the fish liked to make homes there, he said. Made for some good catches. Lynn had snagged her foot on one of the trees when she was seven, and since then she couldn't convince herself to go back in. She didn't like that feeling of not knowing what floated unseen below her. She had underplayed the gravity of the situation in her retellings, but the truth was she'd been convinced she would drown. She still remembered the frantic rush, the ache of her begging lungs as she yanked at her leg, floundering uselessly, her skin made corpse-pale by the dark green water. *I've turned ghost*, she'd thought.

* * *

"I'm starving," was all Sarah said once they'd reached the car.

"I have some fresh catches at home."

"Ugh. I'm sick of fish. I can practically smell it now. Can't we grab something on the way?"

"Alright," Lynn said. Sarah was right—the car smelled was stale and fishy. She rolled down the windows even though it was a bit chilly. There weren't many options in town, so she pulled into the Dairy Queen drive-through. Sarah ordered chicken fingers and fries. Lynn got a hot fudge sundae. The sweet of her ice cream,

mixed with the stink of the fish and the salty scent of Sarah's chicken, made Lynn gag a little. They ate as Lynn drove home.

"Someone found out," Sarah said. She swirled one of her tenders in the thick peppered gravy. "Someone read about the accident, and it was everywhere by second period. The way they were looking at me. Like they thought I'd pushed her. Like I wanted it to happen."

"Oh, sweetheart," Lynn breathed, and the word felt strange and heavy on her tongue.

"Some girl made a comment to me in math. Asked me how I could get up in the morning. I don't even remember what I said to her. I wanted to hit her. I would've. I'm glad the teacher separated us when she did."

There was a hardness to her voice that Lynn hadn't heard before. It started to rain and Sarah reached over to flick on the windshield wipers, but kept her window down.

"It's not true, though," Lynn said. "What they're saying isn't true."

Sarah lay her cheek against the door frame. Drops of rain landed on her temples and trembled there. "I don't even know. I don't remember much. We were so drunk."

"But...even so," Lynn said. "Even then. You wouldn't do that to Jenny."

"I wouldn't," Sarah echoed.

Lynn thought how convenient it would be to really forget. According to Tom, Sarah had blown a .04 on her BAC, well under the legal limit, but she was a small girl. Perhaps it was possible for her to black out after a few beers.

But then, how could she have climbed the tower? How would she not have fallen?

Lynn tried to imagine the accident as if Sarah hadn't been involved at all. She thought of hearing about it fleetingly in the news, taking in the facts without having anything color them. If she's heard the same rumors, what would she think?

Or if she had stayed with Sarah. If she wasn't floundering now, trying to salvage the time they'd lost. Would she feel the same compulsion to believe unflinchingly? *She's my daughter. She's my daughter.* It was her job to believe her daughter no matter what.

Would she still hold so strongly to that refrain?

She thought of Tom. Lynn remembered every detail he'd told her about the accident, had turned them over in her head until she could picture the scene as if she'd been there. To hear, now, that the scenario was fabricated by someone—left her unnerved, fundamentally undermined.

"Does your father know about this?"

"No," Sarah said. "I tried to tell him, but right when he saw me at the police station he said I needed to get my story straight."

Lynn could hear him saying that as if she had been there herself. It was just what he'd do. He'd enabled the lies until they'd taken root.

Lynn didn't know what to do with her hands. At first she took one off the wheel and placed it on Sarah's back. Then she thought she should hug her, but she was driving. She pulled to the shoulder and unbuckled. Sarah was still slumped over, head half-out the window. Lynn arranged her arms around her, but Sarah didn't

move, and Lynn couldn't quite wedge her right arm behind Sarah's back, so she curled it around her own waist and settled for a one-armed embrace. It was uncomfortable, stretching over her car's middle console. She'd placed her empty sundae bowl in the cup holder, and she could feel the fudge remains gumming onto her shirt. She could see Sarah in the side mirror just staring.

* * *

Lynn woke at midnight after two hours of agitated sleep. She made herself some chamomile tea with milk and honey and sat on the porch. The traces of warmth from earlier in the day had vanished along with the moon. It had gone into hiding behind patchwork clouds. "The moon will blink tonight," her grandfather used to say on evenings like that one. A blinking moon was best for fishing, he told her, because the fish were fooled into thinking the moon had gone out. They would swim towards the surface, unsure of why no light flitted on the waves, and suddenly the moon's eyelid would retract and the clouds move: then silver light bathed fisherman and fish alike as silver hooks sank into the fishes' flesh, slivering their guts or gills.

She had finished her tea and was about to shuffle back inside when she saw a flashlight rolling on the dock, and then, barely discernible, Sarah out there beyond the buoys, a dark shape on the water.

From the dock, Lynn called for her, and nothing. She aimed the flashlight like a flare, flicked the bulb off and on—*come in, come in*. No movement on the lake.

Lynn left the light on and wedged it under a bar on the dock, the spot where her grandfather had fastened his fishing boat. She tried twice to jump from the front of the dock but in the last seconds couldn't force herself, so instead she unlatched the metal ladder on the back of the dock and lowered herself into the water. She could feel the buildup of cobwebs and grit on the first rung, the slick of the waves licking against the second, then the sting of total immersion as she found the last foothold. She almost slipped altogether then, she but braced herself against the metal, steadied her body before dropping fully underwater. She hadn't swum in so long that she'd forgotten the strangeness of her suspended limbs, and for a moment she just hovered there, chattering, wishing she'd taken off her socks. Already they felt waterlogged, weighting her down.

All she could remember was a clumsy breast stroke, the scoop and swell. She swam a little crookedly and each breath in felt colder than the ones before. She kept mark with the buoy—a quarter, halfway, nearly there.

Sarah was on her back, her hair a feathery halo fanned in the water. Her voice was guttural, shuddery. "Oh, God, mom, you didn't have to get in. I was going to swim back in a minute."

"I couldn't hear you," Lynn said. "You wouldn't answer me."

“I can’t believe you actually got in,” Sarah said. “I owe dad twenty bucks. We bet you’d never come back in the water.” She flipped onto her stomach and sent a ripple of water at Lynn. She sputtered as some went up her nose. Her arms felt disconnected from her as they hung in the water. She felt a vastness beneath her.

“Why are you out here? It’s freezing. You could kill yourself. We need to go in now.”

“I just needed to swim,” Sarah told her. “I haven’t gone swimming in forever.”

“Next month it’ll be warmer.”

“But it wasn’t the same,” Sarah said. “I’m afraid it will never feel the same.”

“May will be warmer,” Lynn repeated. “It’ll be warmer, and you’ll teach me how to swim. We’ll have guests, and maybe some of them will have kids, and you can give them lessons, too.”

“I’m tired of talking about the weather,” Sarah said.

“I know.”

They needed to go in. Lynn was already numbing. Her feet were starting to feel like two swollen hams. But there was a strange comfort in the bobbing of the water, the way her body nodded along with the cadence of the waves. She took a breath and then dipped her head below the water, counted to three and resurfaced. And again. And again.

A cloud shifted and she could finally see Sarah’s face, half-submerged. The part that was under was inky and indistinct, and the part above made spectral by the blinking moon. Lynn sensed a gathering in the water. She imagined fish being drawn insatiably upward by the light. She almost thought she could feel them

teeming just below the surface. All she could see, though, were her own skittering limbs made ghost again.

“Did she die?” Sarah asked.

“No,” Lynn said. “Not yet.”

She couldn't remember if she'd ever told Sarah about the blinking moon. She could explain the story now, but Lynn was afraid she'd damage it in the retelling. So she bobbed in the water, listening to the irregular sway of the dock and the thrum of her daughter's breath somewhere beside her.

Adrift

Lane was so used to watching her father on water that she thought it funny how he walked on land: a little bowlegged, teetery, timid, like a virgin drunkard surprised to first lose jurisdiction over his limbs. He could stand his own on the angriest waters, but ashore some of that strength diminished, and somehow it made her feel ashamed for him. No one had taught him to know land, she thought.

They were going to his younger brother's funeral in Asheville, and it was the first time she'd seen him off his house boat the year since he'd moved out there. Lane knew he must have left it on his own to buy groceries and go to the Laundromat and get his hair cut, but since she rarely saw him ashore, in her mind he was always moored to the boat.

But there he was on the dock, juggling a duffel and his suit bag, motioning Lane closer to him. It felt a little illicit to her, driving over a sidewalk, but her father lived next to the ramp used to lower new vessels to the water, so cars crossing the pavement were both allowable and inevitable. Lane wondered what the new boats sounded like in their descent, before they juddered alive and were sent off to berth. Did the concrete ever scrape their bellies and wrestle her father from sleep? Or could they slip in softly, mask their bulk in the water, buoyant and lithe? She lived a mile away from the train yard and at night the coupling cars clashed like rampaging steel-shod rhinos. Most night she couldn't sleep and she blamed it on the things colliding nearby, even when she knew she laid awake for other reasons.

When she reached him and put the car in park she made to get out, but he halted her. “Old man’s got this one,” he said.

She watched him heft his bag in the trunk. Last time she’d visited she’d still been married to Brian. It was the day after Thanksgiving, not last year but the one before, and they’d driven the nearly four hours from her mother’s in Greensboro to her dad’s apartment to help him move into the house boat. Brian had insisted that her father sit out all the heavy lifting and rest on board. So the two of them unburdened her Civic and the U-Haul, balancing brimming boxes of dishware and suitcases stuffed with shoes, slacks, and flannel shirts.

Even though their contents were safeguarded by layers of newspaper and bubble wrap, Lane had still felt a rush of anxiety when she’d carried the boxes housing her father’s sailing paraphernalia: a scale model of the U.S.S. Constitution, a shadowbox of nautical knots, the capiz-shell box with his Coast Guard medals nestled inside. She’d mishandled the Constitution model when she was seven, an occasion when she’d gone against her father’s orders and treated it as a toy, and its mast still showed the scar of her disobedience, a faint white fissure where the wood had fractured. Her mother had reattached the tip with super glue and a promise not to tell her father, though Lane suspected over the years he must have noticed the mark when he coated the ship with polish. He’d never asked about it, though.

For the first leg of the trip they were mostly silent. Her father fiddled with the radio, but there weren’t many signals to pick up once they were an hour out of Wilmington, and her CD player had a disc lodged in it—Brian’s, the soundtrack to *Jurassic Park*, actually. He had a thing for John Williams—so Lane and her father

settled into the quiet, breaking only on occasion to engage in small talk. He asked about her mother, like always, and she told him that she was doing well. In reality she'd had a tiny argument with her mother when they'd spoken three days prior. Lane had called to tell her about Uncle Clint's funeral and hinted that her mother should come, and when hinting didn't seem to do the trick, she'd flat-out asked her to go.

"I don't think that's the best idea."

"I thought things were okay between you and Dad."

"Things are civil, yes, but that doesn't mean they're comfortable. I'm not sure Richard would want me there."

I want you there, Lane wanted to say, but she realized how childish she'd sound. She hadn't been particularly close to her father's brother, so it wasn't Clint's death that had her dreading the trip to Asheville.

Two hours in Lane stopped at a Flying J. She had more than half a tank but she filled up regardless, and she was hungry so she went into the adjoining diner and ordered them two breakfast sandwiches and a pair of coffees to go. The woman working the cash register had a blunt, wiry bob that looked too severe with her buttery yellow blouse and frilled smock. Lane tried to win her over with a smile and some joke about a fussy baby in the corner. It had cried the whole time that Lane sat at the counter watching the cook fry her eggs, and eventually she had turned around and pulled grotesque faces at the baby, trying to make it laugh, but she'd caught the eye of the mother instead. Then they'd turned the baby toward the table so Lane was out of its line of vision.

Brian had always been embarrassed when she'd done things like that at grocery stores or movie theaters or restaurants. "You're being intrusive," he'd say. "It's creepy. And rude."

"I'm just trying to spread some cheer."

"Let the parents take care of it."

Once he'd made them leave in the middle of dinner when a family with particularly unhappy quintuplets (all teething, Lane suspected) were seated at a neighboring table. "They have a lot on their hands!" she'd protested, but after the server was thrice caught in the crossfire of her game of Peek-a-Boo, Lane admitted that maybe she had a problem.

Brian would definitely side with the sour cashier, now, even though the diner wasn't busy and she had no real reason to blow Lane off. Lane had seen the place bustling on other occasions, at its busiest in that 2-4 AM limbo between night and day when travelers decided either to settle down for shut-eye in the parking lot or stop for caffeine and rally. She'd always been the forge on type while Brian wanted to hunker down, which usually meant she'd spend the majority of their trips in the driver's seat with him sleeping beside her, the sound of his music spilling out from his headphones. Once she'd overestimated the strength of her espresso and for a split second fell asleep on a stretch of lonely highway. She'd skittered onto the shoulder until the rumble strip shook her awake, and Brian, too. She lied and told him a stray dog or maybe a raccoon had leapt across the road, knowing otherwise she wouldn't hear the end of it from him—so many times he'd told her how dangerous it was, how they should just rest somewhere for the night, but she'd

insisted they press on. Her mother always said she was marked by restlessness, and over the years Lane had realized that people often confused that with carelessness.

Her father wasn't at the car when she got back. She set their take-out box inside and doubled back to the café. The woman from the register was wiping down the counter, and when Lane came in, heralded by tinkling bells attached to the door, the woman looked disgruntled, as if worried Lane were about to bombard her with more stories of sad babies she'd tried and failed to amuse.

Instead Lane asked, "Have you seen my father? He's in his 70s, just a bit taller than me, wearing jeans and—"

What kind of shirt? She couldn't really remember. Her mother had told her to memorize him in case he wandered off. "We're both getting to be that age," she'd said, and Lane had dismissed her as being too worrisome.

"Well, jeans and a shirt."

The woman's face softened a little. *Got the pity vote*, Lane thought.

"I haven't seen him," the woman said. "You might check the bathrooms?"

"Yes, thank you," Lane said, and the woman waved apologetically, the dishrag drooping pathetically against her elbow. The restrooms were in a hallway adjoining the mini mart and café, and its walls were a desperate orange, the color of a hunting vest. Her father was there talking to a kid who looked about seventeen.

"Dad," Lane called. "Ready to go?"

"Lanie," he said. "Come here. You won't believe who I've run into."

She strode over to them. The kid was wearing a South Park t-shirt and charcoal corduroy pants. The skunky-sweet scent of marijuana emanated from him.

“You two know each other?”

“Know each other?” the kid said. “Dick here’s my wingman. We’re regulars at the Steak n Shake. But why you been holding back, Dick? Who’s this young lady you’ve been hiding?”

Her father barked out a laugh. “Milo, this is my daughter Lane. Lane, this is my little brother, Milo.” He and the kid looked at her as if waiting for some vaudevillian reaction. “From Big Brothers Big Sisters,” her dad added.

“Guess that makes me your uncle,” Milo said.

She wondered how many Big Brothers were her father’s age, and how many of them had full-grown children of their own.

“How great to meet you,” she replied, extending a hand to Milo. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

“You’re lying,” Milo said, and he didn’t take her hand. “I bet he hasn’t mentioned me to you.”

He was right, but his frankness unnerved Lane. Didn’t he know the basic tenets of small talk? It was like improv: always agree. He seemed hell-bent on derailing her.

She must have failed to keep some distaste from flashing across her face, because Milo clapped an arm around her shoulder and squeezed. “Relax. Just a joke.”

“Right,” Lane said. “Well. Your brother and I need to head out.”

“Where’s the party?” Milo asked.

"It's a funeral," Lane said. That sure shut him up.

"Lanie," her father said. "D'you think Milo could tag along?"

Lane felt her cheeks heat. "I'm sure he doesn't want to go to a funeral, Dad. He's probably got other plans."

"Not really," Milo said. "My friend Mitch wanted to check out this record store in Charlotte, but it's not really my scene."

"See?" her father said. "We've got room." He grinned at Milo and then at Lane. "And Milo can drive for a spell, if you're tired."

"I think I'll be alright," Lane said.

"Well, Dick's not getting any younger," Milo said. "Also, shotgun!"

* * *

In the two hours it took to get to Asheville, Milo did little to disprove Lane's first impression of him. In spite of (or maybe *because of*) her protests, he made it his personal mission to resurrect her CD player. He'd spent nearly 45-minutes trying to pry the disc out with a plastic knife and a pen cap, applied together like chopsticks, but he only managed to cram it in further. Now the player had a pebbly death rattle that it choked out whenever they hit a bump.

Lane's father slept through most of this, so once she shook him awake in the parking lot of the church and he asked how the trip had been, and she smiled and said fine.

"I'm glad the two of you got to spend some time together. I've been wanting to introduce you," he said. She offered her arm to help him out of the car, but he waved it away. "I can get out myself."

"Alright, alright," she said. "How long have you two known each other, anyway?" She opened the trunk made to grab her father's suit bag and her own garment bag, but Milo swooped in and grabbed them.

"How long has it been? A year?" he asked Lane's father.

"Give or take."

They'd met right around the time of her divorce, Lane guessed. That would explain why her father had never mentioned Milo, how a year had passed and she'd been blessedly unaware of his existence. If her father had told her, she would've had to confront what made him reach out to Milo in the first place, and she knew it was likely her own distance.

Lane and her father changed inside before the funeral. Family members were gathered in the narthex mingling until the start of the services. When she emerged from the restroom she saw Milo chatting with her cousin Sandra, and she hurried over to them.

"He's teaching me to sail," Milo was saying.

"That's wonderful," Sandra said. "He tried to teach Lane and me one summer, remember, Lane? But you kept getting seasick."

They had spent hours on the boat, Lane memorizing terms to parrot back to her father to prove her worth: forward, starboard, aft, port, bow, quarter, abreast, aloft. Per her father's orders, she'd slicked her fair-skinned face and shoulders with sunscreen and still somehow managed to burn. The heat and the restless water combined forces and Lane felt the vomit pooling in her gut and battling upward. She'd taken Dramamine and laid down when they found anchorage and listened to her father showing Sandra how to lower and raise the mainsail. Lane dreaded the time they'd have to continue adrift in passage to the dock. She'd gone boating with her father after that, but most trips were truncated.

"How's Riley handling things?" Lane asked.

"Not well," Sandra said. "She keeps asking for Papa. She didn't understand that he wouldn't be home when we got in town earlier this week." Sandra gestured to her husband in the corner, holding her daughter.

Lane and Sandra had been married within months of each other, and within the year Sandra had given birth to Riley. Lane hadn't expected to be too far behind, but then Brian lost his job and he kept saying they should wait until he'd found another. And once he did they needed to wait and save up money. And once they had they needed to buy a bigger house. There were always reasons.

"Yes, she just turned three in April," Sandra said.

"I know it never helps when people say things like this," Milo said. "But my dad died when I was five, and I guess I was very upset at the time. My mom says I wouldn't eat or drink for a week and they had to take me to the hospital and give me fluids. But now I can barely remember him. I mean, I think about it and it makes me

sad, but it's the kind of sad you get from hearing about people dying in the news. Like I'm sad because I know I should be."

He looked completely earnest, and somehow Lane hated him for that.

"You're right," Lane said. "It never helps to say shit like that."

Sandra looked affronted, and Lane couldn't tell what had brought it on—Milo's comment or her own.

"Right. Well," he said, backing away. Lane's father emerged from the men's room, empty suit bag draped over his arms, and Milo said, "I think I'll just go with him to drop that in the car."

Sandra gazed after him. "He seems like a sweet kid."

"Yeah," Lane said. "My father likes him."

Sandra leaned in to her. "Listen. I've been wanting to tell you this in person. We found out just after Dad died." She rubbed her belly. "Lane, I'm pregnant!"

She felt her face flush and she let out an involuntary yelp. She cupped a hand to her mouth. "Sandy. That's amazing." Her voice was muffled, distant beneath her fingers. She felt a little ill.

"We haven't told my mom yet. We're waiting until things settle down a bit."

"Yes," Lane said. She dropped her hand. She felt exceedingly aware of how she placed it on her own leg. Her fingers chattered along her thigh. *Be still. Be still.* She and Sandra, both only children, had always joked about coordinating their pregnancies, timing things right so their kids could be best friends as they had been in childhood. "Yes, that's great. It's perfect. I'm so glad for you." Her mouth worked its way into a smile.

The services were about to begin. Sandra hugged Lane and joined her mother and husband, entering the nave to stand by the coffin. Lane looked for her father and Milo, but they weren't milling about.

She found them passing a joint in her car. She could hear them before she saw them—her father's staccato tenor of a laugh, sharp and shuddering like shots from a BB gun. She hadn't heard him laugh like that in years. When she rapped on the window he jerked and dropped the still-burning joint. It singed a hole on her dashboard and the chemical smell of burnt plastic blended with the sweet of marijuana smoke when he rolled down the window, coughing.

"The funeral's about to start," she told him. "You need to get inside."

Somehow this made her father laugh even harder.

Milo picked up the joint, snuffed it out on his pants, and stuffed it in his pocket. A few embers quivered on his knee, fleetingly orange in the afterglow.

"You're not coming into the church with that," Lane said. "In fact, maybe you shouldn't come in at all."

"Lane, stop," her father said.

"No, Dad. I won't. I'm sick of spending time with your rent-a-kid. He's been completely inappropriate all day."

"I can't go in," her father said. "I think—I think I wet myself!" He and Milo disappeared into bursts of laughter.

"You're not serious," she said.

"I'm afraid I am."

She drove them to Wal-Mart. They would miss the funeral, but she had the address of the cemetery and if they hurried they would be there for the interment. Her father went into the restroom to change, and Lane and Milo went to the men's clothing section to find him new black trousers.

"I bet you think this is funny, huh?" she asked Milo as they searched the rack for her father's size.

"It is kind of," Milo said. "Maybe if you lightened up you'd get that."

"Look, kid. I know you think you know my father, but you don't. A couple of sailing trips doesn't mean you know him."

"This coming from someone who hasn't visited him in over a year."

"I've had my own things to deal with," Lane said, and she realized how pathetic that sounded. She moved to another rack, and Milo trailed her. "My point is, you just can't treat him like he's your buddy. He's getting older and he's stubborn as hell so he won't ask anyone for help. Not me, let alone you."

"He's not that old."

"He turns 78 in seven months."

"Holy shit," Milo said. "78? He told me he was 62."

"Yeah, well. He lied," Lane said, pulling a pair of trousers from the rack. They were more midnight blue than black, but they'd have to do given the selection.

They moved to the diaper aisle. Lane thought it was funny how the adult and infant diapers were stocked side-by-side, as if people needed another reminder that they usually go out the way they came in—bald and helpless.

There was a mother and a child in the middle of the aisle, the mom talking to someone on her cell phone, the baby wailing away in its stroller. A boy, Lane guessed—its navy blue and white striped onesie screamed BOY. Milo grabbed the smallest pack of Depends and waved it in Lane’s face. “This all we need?”

Lane was wagging her eyebrows at the baby. It looked at her and ceased for a moment, perplexed, before hiccupping slightly and crying out again.

She stuck her fingers at the corners of her lips and pulled, then flittered her tongue out and made bug-eyes. The baby stopped crying.

“Are you sure *you’re* not high?” Milo asked. “Or am I just really high? Is this happening?”

“Shut up,” Lane hissed. It really came out “Shut uhhhh” because her stretched lips couldn’t manufacture the P.

The mother was oblivious to all this. She selected a pack of diapers and turned the stroller to walk out of the aisle, still nattering away on her phone. The baby’s wailing resumed.

“We’re good to go then, right?” Milo said. “I mean, your dad’s pantsless in the bathroom. We should probably pay for this shit.”

Lane ignored him and inched past the woman until she could see the baby again. This time she pushed up the end of her nose and twisted her lips like she’d tasted something foul.

“What the hell,” Milo said, and he did it too.

The baby stopped crying and started squealing just as the mother started walking toward the checkout lanes. Lane and Milo walked in front of her, still contorting for the baby.

“What are you doing?” The woman was off her phone now. She stopped pushing the stroller and glared at Lane and Milo.

“Just trying to keep him from crying,” Lane said. As if on cue, the boy started up again, and Milo exaggerated his face until the cries subsided.

“I don’t need your help with that,” the woman said. “Excuse me.”

Milo stayed planted in her way. “No need to be rude about it. We were just cheering the little guy up.” He stuck his hands on his head like antlers and waved them. “Weren’t we, buddy?”

“Don’t be strange,” the woman said.

Lane was watching the baby. She stooped down to his eye level and sucked her puckered lips in and mimed a fish. The baby squealed.

“You’re nothing special,” the mother said. She walked over next to Lane and did nothing but smile and say “Baby, my baby.”

And the baby started laughing. It was such a large sound from such a tiny thing, the sort of laugh that starts low in the belly and then gathers speed and sound until it breaks like the tide on a sea wall, a rich echoing crack. Lane tried to catch his eye again, and Milo too, dancing behind her, but the baby was transfixed on his mother.

They checked out and Milo took their purchases into Lane’s father so he could change. They sped to the cemetery and arrived just in time to watch the burial,

though they had to stand in the back. Lane watched Sandra and Riley sitting in the first row, the girl squirming and shuddering, and Lane felt a new sort of emptiness echoing in her.

* * *

The next year Lane's father moved into a retirement home. He'd lost the boat come hurricane season when high winds cut the cable right through, severing the ship from its moorings. It was set adrift and likely sank, the Coast Guard said, though they never dredged up its sodden carcass as proof. Lane had driven the three hours to her father's when evacuation orders came. She almost hadn't. She didn't like to think about that.

He was closer now, only two hours away. She hated that he was too far inland to see the ocean. She visited him once a week and she brought him tokens from the sea—a vial of sand, some driftwood she drilled holes into and nestled tea light candles in, an aquarium with five different kinds of fish. She'd brought a new one each week until she was satisfied with the kaleidoscope of colors collected in the tank: those luminescent blues and yellows and oranges that sprang sharply from the

water. She didn't do her research, though, and two of them became serial murderers, eating their way through the school.

"It's okay," he said. "It's the American way. Survival of the fittest."

She could see from the log book that Milo visited too. He cleaned the aquarium every other week.

Her father's neighbor had a daughter and granddaughter who visited every third Sunday. The man was in much worse shape than Lane's father. One time he'd spent the entire visit screaming that he didn't know his visitors, and from then on they had to keep his door open so the nurses could walk by and monitor him every once in a while. Lane could hear their conversations spilling into the hallway, and she'd walk by their room to watch them sometimes.

The granddaughter and her mother would encircle his bed and he would read them stories from the newspaper, the same few every time. His daughter brought in a new edition every visit, but he always returned to the first one.

"Will you look at that," he'd say. "'The city of Charlotte denies a good Samaritan. Charles Brown of Charlotte wants to go up in a plane and drop hundreds of dollars in one dollar bills over the city of Charlotte, North Carolina. But city officials say that Brown's plan, despite being bred of good intentions, would constitute littering.' Well, I'll be. Ain't that something. You'd think they'd find a way to let him do it."

"You'd think they'd find a way!" the child would echo. She was probably five, six, Lane guessed. She hadn't yet realized they were stuck in a time loop.

“Maybe they will. Maybe there’ll be a story about it next week,” his daughter would say.

“I sure hope so.”

One evening the man grew upset when he misplaced his paper. He started yelling and the nurses rushed in. The mother and daughter clustered in the hallway. The girl was wailing and hollering. Lane caught the mother’s eye.

“Would you mind,” the woman began, and then she seemed to think better of it, but Lane nodded at her. “Could you watch her for a minute? I need to help calm him down. He always calms down if I talk to him.”

Lane smiled. The girl wiped her face and took Lane’s hand, and a thread of snot glommed on to her palm.

Her father showed the girl his fish. She and Lane named the two of them. “Lizards and Ray,” the girl said. “No, Roy. Roy, that’s it!” Lane’s father retrieved his ship model from the highest shelf, and the three of them played pirates and mermaids, Lane’s favorite game of pretend.

Riverside

The police remove the remnants of the child's body from the river during their third date. She hasn't yet told John that she was married, then separated, and finally divorced, so how can she hope to explain why, when their waiter at the lovely restaurant overlooking the water tells them what the detectives have discovered, she begins to cry? How can she describe sudden heat that flays her gut?

It was her fault, her fault, but she had blamed it on her now-ex-husband. Why'd you have to work so late, she screamed. If you had come home on time, I would've made dinner for the three of us. I wouldn't have packed a picnic. We wouldn't have been there.

But they had been. And Sean was playing in the sandbox, digging his way to Antarctica, he'd told her. He'd learned about the continent earlier that day from a television program about penguins, and he wanted desperately to see them waddle their way across the icebergs. That's why he wouldn't leave when it got dark and she told him, Sean baby, it's time to go. Mommy's leaving. No, don't throw a tantrum. Crying won't help. Antarctica can wait. It's time to go, Sean.

They are loading the body, still shrouded in a tarp, onto a stretcher, into a van. She cranes her neck but still can't discern the size of the body, and there's John next to her, asking what's wrong, is she alright, shouldn't they leave, get out of the way?

When she was eight and her sister wouldn't stop tugging her hair in the car on the way to her grandmother's, their father had kicked them both out of the car and told them to walk, then circled the block to pick them back up. Both girls were in tears by the time he returned, but ponytails weren't pulled again.

Sean had moved from colicky baby to terrible twos and even at five wasn't past that stage. She'd read the parenting books and consulted her now-ex-mother-in-law who'd had six kids, and all had told her the most important thing to do was to put her foot down.

There is an officer warding people away from the scene—some reporters, some other restaurant-goers drawn there by the same force that always makes us slow down to look when there's an accident on the highway. The officer pushes away and John holds her back, apologizing for her, looking confused and disgusted all at once, and she knows their third date won't turn into a fourth.

The sky was darkening. The other mothers and children had piled into their minivans and made it home in time for bedtime stories, but there was Sean stooped in the sand, resolutely shoveling, ignoring her just as he did every time. Mommy's leaving, Sean.

She's pushed past the officer now, and John's yelling I'm leaving, you crazy bitch, and she doesn't blame him because she'd slapped him to make him relinquish her wrist. They're just shutting the door to the van when she reaches it.

She'd turned her back to him and walked away, counting aloud with each pace she took as if she was playing hide and seek, waiting to hear the Mommy please, mommy, wait for me, I'm coming mommy, I'm coming! She'd take his sandy

hand and lead him to the car and back home to daddy. But by the time she'd counted to 100, she still hadn't heard that time voice, and then she'd reached the car and turned around. And she couldn't see the sandbox from the parking lot, because it was getting late. The lights at the baseball fields were turned on, and little leaguers were doing their warm-ups, swinging bats and stealing third and snagging fly balls. A crowd of mothers and fathers was streaming towards the stands, ready to take their places and watch their boys.

I have to see the body, she tells them. Show me the body.

She couldn't see him from the car or in the crowd, and she began to feel her blood quicken.

What mother really leaves?

They may threaten or scold or reason, but what mother really leaves?

We haven't yet identified the remains, ma'am, the man at the door of the van tells her. The body's waterlogged and the face would be unrecognizable. We've got to do dental identification, it's a longer process.

And she was back at the sandbox. There was his pail, there was his shovel, there was the hole to Antarctica, but where was Sean?

It's my son, she tells him. I know it's my son. Let me see him.

And for years afterward she'd swear she'd heard him cry. She'd swear she saw the edge of a shirt disappearing into the trees that lined the biking path nearby. She'd think back and picture all those harmless looking bystanders who she now knew weren't harmless at all; the man on the bench reading yesterday's paper, the

old woman walking her Labrador retriever, the couple pushing their own daughter on the swing set. All were suspects.

But in reality there was no cry, no shirt, no suspects, no clues to be found, no sandy footsteps to trace. Every child that went missing was Sean. Every body that they found was Sean's. And when they'd report back in a few weeks and tell her I'm sorry, the remains we found were not your son's, she'd feel the pressure in her chest again, like she was drowning above water and there was no one there to pull her out, no one to dredge up her remains from the riverside, no one to clutch her sandy hands and take her home.

Natural Disasters

On the weekends, Grant and Shaw went underground. Shaw had this idea for a short film set in caves. He wanted to submit it to a festival, but Hannah knew they wouldn't even if they finished it. Shaw's vision for the film wasn't really in place, Grant said. As usual, there wasn't a plot.

"So it's a documentary?" Hannah had asked when they'd first started. She was leaning over Grant as he uploaded the day's footage so he could burn it to a disc for Shaw to edit. Hannah watched the playback on the camera's flip-out screen—the images were dark and rushed and shaky, like footage from one of those "found films" Hollywood touted as real life stories. Grant was better than that, Hannah knew, but he'd just shoot it like Shaw told him because that was the way it'd always been.

"Nah, not really. We just explore a little, and I shoot whatever. Shaw says it'll come together in editing." Grant had swiveled his chair and pulled Hannah to his lap. "You know how he is."

That *was* so Shaw: dick around and wait til the end to see what happened. Over the years he and Grant had started and shelved so many movies because his "vision" had never panned out. The tape carcasses lined the bottom level of Grant's desk, and in them Hannah could trace the timeline of their friendship—the first few on VHS, when they were eight and Grant was still using his dad's home video

camera; stacks of 8mms, after they'd broken the first camera and went in on one together with money from their thirteenth birthdays; rings of scratched DVDs from undergrad, projects from media classes and the side, too, when she'd first met Shaw at a bar and he'd asked if he and his buddy could film her for a short they were making, and she'd signed her name and number to the release form. She hadn't even seen Grant hunkered down behind the camera.

Other films were dead, too, littering his hard drive, since Shaw had bought a succession of digital camcorders for them to use, flip cams and waterproof ones and kinds they could strap to their heads and wear on roller coasters if they wanted. Grant was interning at his dad's law firm now, but Shaw was still out there making movies, if that's what you could call it.

Now they were five weeks into the cave project, and Hannah knew this would be the breaking point. At five weeks Grant would grow tired of the escapade, tell Shaw he was too busy at work to do this anymore, and Shaw would explode, tell Grant he'd lost his fire, and that he, Shaw, worked too, asshole, and Grant would say that working weekends editing human interest pieces at the last-place station wasn't exactly comparable to filing lawsuits and prepping affidavits for trial. Then Shaw would snatch away the cameras, sometimes dramatically delete the project file, and rage his way out of the apartment via the fire escape so that Grant and Hannah and their Croatian neighbors below would hear him stringing "Fuck fuck fuck youuuuu" all the way down to the street, his voice echoing metallic.

So when Shaw showed up a little past 2 AM that Friday, and Grant was prepping for a case in the "study," which was really a desk shoved in the corner of

the closet with the water heater that stuck out so the door couldn't close, Hannah braced herself for the inevitable big blowup. Grant had been pissy toward her all week, so she could only imagine what furor Shaw's abrupt arrival might prompt.

Shaw looked a little like a high Santa Claus. He always smoked before they went out to shoot (part of the reason he actually thought the footage was good, Hannah thought). It was cold out so his cheeks blossomed red and he was wearing his red hoody with white cuffs that had little fabric pills all over it. Hannah resisted the urge to pick them off his arms. She'd bought Shaw the hoody the first year they dated, spotted him at the mall and he'd never paid her back, but she doubted he really remembered that.

There was a girl with him, too, someone Hannah had never met—short, auburn hair teased into a pouf, breasts brimming. Very Shaw.

"Cheyenne, meet Hannah. She's Grant's old ball and chain."

They shook hands. "I've heard so much about you," Cheyenne said. Her voice was pinched and nasally.

"Likewise," Hannah said, and it wasn't a lie, because Grant *had* told her about Shaw's new girlfriend Cheyenne. Except the Cheyenne he'd told her about—"She's science-y," he'd said—didn't match up with this Cheyenne at all.

Shaw didn't wait for Hannah to invite them in; he sidestepped her and pointed down the hall. "Bathroom's second door on the right," he told Cheyenne. She left and then he started stripping in the middle of the living room.

"God! Shaw! Warning would be nice," Hannah said.

“Oh, whatever Hannah. Nothing you haven’t seen.” He was putting on all black, now: sweats, t-shirt, fleece, even a face mask. He looked like an idiot.

“What’re you doing here?” Hannah asked. “About to rob a bank?”

“Didn’t Grant tell you? The filming?”

“No,” Hannah said, “he didn’t, and I don’t think now is the best time for you and Shaylene—“

“It’s Cheyenne, actually,” Cheyenne said, emerging from the bathroom all in black, too. Her hair trailed out of her hat, a coppery ribbon stark against her shirt.

“Excuse me, Cheyenne. Sorry about that.” Hannah corrected. “But it’s a bit late for anyone to be coming over, just because Grant’s really bogged down with a case right now—maybe next weekend?”

“Next weekend won’t work, and Grant knows it,” Shaw said. “I’ve only got this baby until 5 AM.” He held a camera out for Hannah to see. Emblazoned on the side: Property of KZTV Channel 7. Just by looking at it Hannah could tell it was expensive.

“You steal that?”

Shaw shrugged.

She went to get Grant and found him asleep, drool puddled on his paperwork.

“Get up, Shaw’s here.”

Grant blinked awake. “I’m sorry. I forgot to tell you. We’re filming tonight, we have to.”

“I don’t care that you’re filming,” Hannah said, and went to the bedroom, Grant trailing her. “I care about that camera.”

Grant started rummaging in the closet, pulling out dark jeans, sneakers, a black t-shirt. “He’s just taking it for the night. It’s not like he’s going to hawk it or something.”

“Yeah, okay. Why the big rush, then? Couldn’t he just ask his boss if he could borrow it?”

“He did,” Grant said. “He’s only been working weekends a few months now, and he says they don’t know him well enough yet. As long as he gets it back in by 5, no one will notice.”

Hannah turned from him. She could hear the low chatter of Shaw and Cheyenne in the living room, and a car starting and dying outside—a second’s hum and then a hiccupping jolt as the engine juddered its last breath.

“Why don’t you come with us?” Grant said, and in two steps he was behind her, wedging his socked feet under hers, cupping her arms under his, walking her over to the closet. “Pick out your finest stealth attire.”

“Oh god. I nearly forgot. What’s with the black, anyway?”

Grant blanched a little and shifted her off of him. “Oh. I figured Shaw’d have told you. We’re going to the Lemp caves tonight.”

That explained it. Shaw had been obsessed with finding a way into those caves for years. They branched under an abandoned brewery, a whole network of caves perfect for lagering. They had their heyday before Prohibition. Now the cops had it cordoned off, and every few years or so the news would spotlight some new delight occurring there: some guys cooking crack, a couple of teenagers setting a fire

that burned too hot too long, a homeless man beaten to death. “You’re taking that *Cheyenne* to Lemp?”

“She’s broken in before,” Grant said. “I know she doesn’t look it, but Shaw says she’s scrappy.”

“You know what else she doesn’t look?” Hannah said. “*Science-y*.”

“She works at a bio lab.” Grant sat on the bed to knot up his sneakers, then stood, straightened out his shirt. “C’mon, baby. You should come. You never come any more. Remember when you used to be our sound girl? Hold the boom?”

The boom had been Shaw’s joke—one of those hollow pool noodles with the mic sandwiched in the foam. She still had it somewhere, furred in the crawl space maybe, or shoved in the storage off the balcony.

“It’ll be fun,” Grant insisted, “Old times.”

Of course she’d stopped coming. She’d stopped right after she broke up with Shaw, after she started working at the Food Bank and came home to find him still asleep at 5 PM, after she’d spent over \$500 on replacement equipment for him. He’d never officially moved in with her—his things had just seemed to gather at her apartment month after month until his lease ended, and he’d sure as hell never paid any rent—but the day he moved out he’d left a disc on her desk. It was a film of her, completely silent: clips he’d spliced together from countless projects, moments he’d stuck the camera in her face and she’d pushed it away or laughed or pulled faces at the lens, some moments she didn’t even know he’d been filming her, curled in his busted plaid armchair reading a book, or washing clothes in the bathtub when her washer busted. There was a tenderness in the way he’d shot these, something she’d

never seen in his other films, and she wished he'd never shown it to her. It made the ending harder. She'd wanted a clean break.

A part of her worried that she hadn't really wanted one, though. That she knew she *should*. That she'd started things with Grant because she knew she'd be one degree of separation from Shaw.

She almost hadn't recognized Grant when she'd ran into him at the gyros place her boss had recommended. She swore he was missing something. "Did you get contacts? A haircut?"

Finally she realized it was his camera. She was so used to seeing Grant behind it that she almost didn't know his face without it. In fact, as they ate she realized she hadn't ever really thought of Grant except in relation to Shaw—he was Shaw's friend, Shaw's classmate, Shaw's cameraman. It was strange to see him alone and know him independently, to realize that he had a parallel life outside of Shaw. But there was something comforting in that, too. Here was this man she'd known without ever really seeing, this once-peripheral figure who, it turned out, was dimensional and autonomous, who could talk to her about literature without first consulting Cliffs Notes. Who woke when it was still daylight. Grant had his own thoughts and interests, his own charms, but somehow with Shaw around Hannah had never seen that.

She never told Grant any of that, though. Sometimes she wondered if he'd thought the same things about her.

Half an hour later, Hannah found herself holding the flashlight while Shaw snipped the chain link fence encircling Lemp's perimeter. Once he'd curled the wire

sheeting up almost three feet, they slid through one at a time, Shaw swaddling the camera in his jacket to keep off the dirt.

Cheyenne led them to the building with access to the caves. It had been the tap room, she said, and a weathered wooden sign above the door echoed her, except the R was so faded it read “Tap oom.”

“Our own little Narnia,” Hannah said, and only Shaw laughed.

Inside, a few dusty barrels cornered and a one-legged stool leaning against the bar and a damp smell.

“God, I forgot how creepy it is,” Cheyenne said. “Last time I was here, I was hammered.” She motioned Shaw and Grant to the corner and together they shifted the barrels to reveal a trap door.

Shaw flung it open and scanned the entrance with the flashlight. Someone had scabbled through the rock and made a hatch to connect to the main tunnel. It looked like a twenty, maybe thirty foot descent. He tucked the camera under his arm and started down the ladder. “All clear,” he hollered up.

“Ladies first,” Grant said.

Hannah went next. The ladder was grimy and softened. Bits of fleshy wood rubbed her palms, would’ve caused splinters if they’d been less damp; instead some came off with her touch and spiraled down to Shaw, who fixed a yellow glow on the rungs so Hannah could see. Some planks bowed under her weight, but she reached the end of the ladder unscathed.

“It’s a bit far,” Shaw said, and put a hand up to steady her back. Hannah leaned away from the handholds, stretching her leg until she found her footing, and he withdrew his hand quickly.

Once they’d all made it down Cheyenne took the lead. “We want to head this way,” she said, cocking her head toward the right. “The addicts like to hang out in the west tunnels. Kidding!” she added, seeing a flitting look of panic cross Hannah’s face. “They’ve really cleaned this place up over the last few years.”

They set out eastward, Grant leveling the camera at whatever Shaw pointed to, Cheyenne and Hannah casting their flashlights around. They found some fresh graffiti, then some that someone had tried to remove and then, failing that, had painted right over.

“Contemporary cave paintings,” Shaw intoned. “Cooooool.”

Occasionally Hannah heard skittering and shrieking and she’d train her flashlight underfoot, catching rats hastening away from them.

“This is where we collect our test subjects for the lab,” Cheyenne joked.

Eventually, though, Hannah could tell that Shaw was growing frustrated at the lack of seedy fodder for his film. It was getting late—well, early, really—and all he really had to show for it were some tags and a rat’s nest.

That was until they found the bones—big bones, ivory, striated, dirt clods stuck on them like earthen tumors.

“Shit, that’s huge,” Shaw said. He held one up to Cheyenne’s legs, and it went up past her hip. “You think it’s like a dinosaur’s or something? You think we should report it?”

“Probably not, considering we’re trespassing,” Hannah said. She glanced back at the pile of bones. She was no expert, but she thought they might be human. “Can we please get out of here? This is creepy.”

“Let me see here,” Grant said, passing the camera off to Shaw and leaning down to examine the pile. “Yeah, it’s a deer’s,” he said. “My brother and I used to find their skeletons out by Brandt Creek.”

“No way,” Shaw said. “This thing is huge. Maybe if it were a mutant deer. And what would a deer skeleton be doing down here, anyway?”

“What would a *dinosaur* skeleton?” Hannah said.

Cheyenne had lost interest. “Grant’s right. It’s definitely a deer’s. I think tonight was a bust, Shaw.”

“C’mon, guys. We’ve only been down here,” he paused and checked his watch, “an hour. And I’ve only got this baby for the night,” he said, wagging the camera.

“Like I said, they’ve cleaned this place up over the past few years,” Cheyenne said. “It isn’t nearly as interesting as it was then.” Hannah took her word for it.

Shaw was overruled. The four of them turned back. He kept the camera, though, and he saddled it over his shoulder, recording the black gulf behind them.

“Wouldn’t it be insane if I play this back later and we *saw someone following us?!*” he asked.

“Don’t be a dick,” Hannah said. He was just trying to scare her, she knew.

They made their way back to the ladder. Grant went first, holding one flashlight in his mouth as he ascended. From the bottom Hannah couldn’t even see

the rungs, so it almost looked as though Grant was scaling the wall freely. He reached the top and fixed his light on the ladder so that they could see.

Cheyenne had just started up when the ladder split and the bottom half wrenched away from the cave wall. Shaw and Hannah scuttled backward as half of it clattered to the floor. Cheyenne clung on to the remaining ladder's sides. There was a grinding and a crack. "Shit, my ankle!" She fumbled against the rock and eventually managed to push herself up with her good foot.

"Hannah, Shaw, you okay down there?" Grant called down to them

"We're fine," Shaw said. "Cheyenne?"

"I don't know," she said, and Hannah could hear her voice had gone a little ragged.

"It's swelling pretty badly," Grant said. "We might need to go to the hospital."

"Chey, is there another way out of here?" Shaw asked, and Hannah could hear just a breath of panic in his voice.

"Looking at the ladder, you go left, maybe two miles," she said.

"We need to get you to the hospital," Grant said. "Can you two make it out okay?"

"We'll be fine," Hannah said. "I'll call you when we're out—maybe you'll be able to pick us up?"

"Maybe," Grant echoed. "Hopefully it won't take us too long." He heaved Cheyenne to her feet and started shuffling her outside. Hannah and Shaw just stood there, listening until the odd three-legged footsteps diminished.

"Guess we should get going, then," Hannah said.

Shaw checked his phone. “Either way I’m probably fucked. It’s almost 3.”

Hannah wanted to point out that it sort of served him right—that they wouldn’t even be there if it weren’t for Shaw, that he wouldn’t be fucked if he hadn’t stolen the camera, that he couldn’t just do whatever he wanted and expect people to accept it—but he looked so genuinely miserable that she couldn’t. They went left.

They walked a good twenty minutes in silence. Hannah tried to count striations in the cave floor, but lost track trying to keep pace with Shaw. He kept jiggling the flashlight impatiently, pooling it at their feet, then on the right wall, then dead ahead, as if he could make the exit materialize faster that way.

“I can see why you wanted to come here,” Hannah said eventually. “Why don’t you film a little while we’re walking?”

“Don’t pretend you care,” Shaw said.

“No, really,” Hannah said. “Take a few shots now, then you can come back some other time and finish up.”

“We both know we won’t be making the movie much longer,” Shaw said. “Grant’s starting to outgrow them, like you did.”

“That’s not true, Grant loves this,” Hannah said, but she could tell how half-assed that sounded. She knew Grant was tired of Shaw dragging him underground.

The other part wasn’t true, either, Hannah knew. She hadn’t outgrown this, she missed it: the traipsing around “on location,” holding the makeshift boom, watching Shaw’s face shift as he framed the best shot. She’d just grown tired of waiting for Shaw to finish something, to finally deem enough was enough.

At 4:15 they hit a wall. Shaw swung the flashlight in all directions and Hannah placed her palms on the rock, as if a shove could make it give way.

“Cheyenne said go left, didn’t she?” Shaw asked.

“She also said she was hammered when she was down here,” Hannah said. “Maybe we should’ve gone right.”

“No,” Shaw said. “It’s left. She said left.” He dropped the flashlight, and the impact must’ve knocked a battery out of place, because it flickered and died out. Hannah could just discern Shaw’s outline in the afterglow. He was pressing on the wall now, too. She sank down and began to feel around for the flashlight.

Hannah had always held on to the end of things. One New Years Eve she’d kept announcing each final act: “Last drink of the year!” or, closer to midnight, “Last kiss with Grant!” Shaw had mocked her sincerity openly, crowing “Last shit of 2010!” when he’d slipped away to the bathroom at 10 minutes to the ball drop.

Sometimes she held on to her detriment. She found while she was busy memorializing the conclusion, the final moments would escape her. There was a café she and Shaw used to frequent, and it featured a rotating weekly special the chef whipped up and would never offer again. She would always order it and with each bite tell herself *You’re almost done. Enjoy it, and Fourth to last bite. Make it count.* She echoed that mantra in her last weeks with Shaw. *This is the last night you’ll spend with him. Savor it,* she’d commanded herself. But trying to delay the end only seemed to hasten it.

She had thought it wouldn’t hurt when they broke it off. They had known they wouldn’t work out when they’d started.

“We’re fuck-ups. Ne’er-do-wells,” he’d joke. “When people ask what we’re good at, I say screwing up.”

“We’re natural disasters,” she’d reply, laughing.

But it didn’t feel like a joke to her. It felt cuttngly, hopelessly sad.

She could feel the end of Grant and Shaw now, too. She read the signs like a climatologist, felt the shifting pressures and drops in temperature and the changing winds between them. What they’d had was lost.

She felt a strange influx of grief and nostalgia and clairvoyance, of missing something she’d yet to fully lose.

Shaw was on his hands and knees now, searching for the flashlight. She could feel his breath hot on her hand as she fingered the ground. They moved at once and his head collided with her collar bone painfully.

“Shit,” he said. “I can’t find it.”

Her hand closed over the smooth plastic of the handle.

“Me either,” she said.

They settled side-by-side against the wall. Only an inch of their hands were touching, Hannah’s pinky against the edge of his palm. His watch beeped. 4:30.

Just five more minutes. Savor it.

Hurricane Room

Most times I think of my mother, I see her standing on the cusp of her storms, alone on those heady summer nights when a reckless wind would rush in and she would step outside to meet it. It was funny because even though their heavy rains and hard winds ripped up her garden every time, my mother still seemed to love the hurricanes. She'd stay out on the porch while the gales shook the screen door or stand on the lawn, face skyward and arms up as if she were a conductor cuing each clotted cloud. Looking at my mother, you'd think the storms were things deserving of reverence, but our neighbor Ms. Rawlinson told me stories from when she lived west and twisters had torn her roof off, then carried her mattress out too. The next day she found the mattress three miles away, impaled on a branch in the public park. She said the twister had a roar like a freight train bearing straight on you. "The worst when my daughter was newborn, of course. She was already colicky, but then the storms'd come and we'd both be up all night."

There was a hurricane a month after I was born, "but nothin' fun," according to my mother. It was just a little one.

I saw my first real storm when I was seven. We were inside watching the weather reports, and then the freight train sounded; the storm had spawned its own twisters and they were tearing up and down Hampton Roads. Daddy was in the basement lighting the candles. I could hear him yelling up to us, but couldn't make

out what he was saying over the storm and the television. Probably the same as the weather man, though: take cover.

But my mother grabbed my hand and we went outside. She tried to drag me past the porch but I wouldn't go. I could see the slender spout of a funnel cloud miles away. My mother was on the lawn, looking at it. "Isn't it beautiful, Melanie?"

I could see debris churning at its base, swirling up, then blowing outward, like a second skin peeling away. Cars? A house? A siren wailed in the west and the sounds collided painfully.

"Let's go inside," I said, but my mother was too far away to hear me, almost on the street now, like she meant to meet the storm halfway.

Then my father's hands were on me, hoisting me backward to the door. He ran to my mother, shook her. "Maureen, come inside now!" But she stayed and flung her arms up at the mottled sky. She reminded me of the crazy old ladies at worship who lifted their hands toward the ceiling and spoke nonsense while the pastor preached. Like she thought that the storm might sweep her up and away over the rooftops like Ms. Rawlinson's mattress—her ascension, her salvation.

My father sent me down to our hurricane room. I heard the twister and the siren and the television, still blaring, and then a scramble of their bodies, of doors slammed and feet dragged, and my mother shouting "Jesus, Nick! Let me stay out, let me stay!" Her howls mixed with the wind that bawled against our house while I cupped my hands against my ears and thought the noise would ever stop. But somehow she was quiet when they both crouched in our shelter room, which felt far too small to contain us. It was the last hurricane we'd weather together.

* * *

Twenty years later I was pregnant with my daughter and it was the start of another hurricane season. I was sorting through a pile of baby purchases when David got home.

I'd left my job the week before. It would be hard without two incomes, but I wanted to be home for the first few years at least.

"Gifts?" he asked, shifting the stroller so he could sit next to me on the sofa. He put his hand on my belly, a ritual he'd started weeks ago instead of a hello to me. We hadn't felt anything yet.

I shook my head. "I got a few things from the store today."

"A few?" Boxes were stacked on empty surfaces throughout the apartment. All these kits. Baby proof your oven, baby proof your medicine cabinet, baby proof your toilet. The damn babies wouldn't stop getting into things.

"I thought we were going to hold off on some of this," he said, lightly tracing the stripes on my T-shirt. "Wait until after the shower."

"I know, but it feels like there's so much to do in eight months, and I'm sitting at home all day, so why not now?"

“It seems like you’re worrying all day.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a lot to worry about.”

He picked up the toilet proofing kit. “Like the baby drowning in the pot?”

I swatted him. “Not funny. I was reading about it. All they need is an inch of water.”

He set the kit on the coffee table and turned to face me. “Melanie. We can do this.”

“I know we *can*, but I just feel like I don’t know how.”

“You *do*. You’re the most generous person I know. You’re smart. Our Gracie will come and you’ll see.”

I blanched at the name. “Not Gracie, remember?” He loved it. I couldn’t. Gracie was my mother’s favorite hurricane, her first.

“Alright,” he said, smiling. “But really. We’ve got this. We’ve got my parents and your dad and they’ll help us every bit of the way.”

Easy for him to say. His mother never left him.

I remembered when we’d called my father to tell him about the pregnancy. “And you’re sure?” he kept asking, as if we were pranking. We laughed, crowded around the phone’s mouth, answering his stream of questions—yes, we were sure, we’d gone to the doctor. No, we didn’t know the sex. Yes, we’d talked about names (although agreeing was different matter).

“Well, it’s a shame Maureen isn’t around to meet her grandchild,” he said, and my breath froze in me. I hadn’t heard my father say her name in years. And he’d said

it reverently, quietly, like she was dead—*shame she isn't around*, as if it wasn't a choice.

It was the same way with David. He'd dance around it, not wanting to mention my mother. Sometimes it was all I wanted to acknowledge when we forged conversations at our small holiday dinners or watched them name the storms on the weather reports. To them I guess it felt shut. They didn't have those moments to contend with, the strange few seconds when I'd learned I was pregnant and I wanted, just in that minute, to be able to call up my mother and tell her, to exchange pregnancy stories, to ask if she'd had bad morning sickness, and when I'd started moving, and how painful was it, should I use the drugs?

What if I feel what you felt?

What if I want to leave too?

* * *

A month before my mother left us, my father went on business to California for a conference on solar energy. His company worked on developing alternative energy sources, and he'd installed a few solar panels to businesses around the region. When I asked my father what his work did, he told me they were harvesters of light. I

imagined him scaling a ladder leading to infinity, leaning over and grabbing glorious snatches of sunlight—a harvest great enough to fill me up and still have leftovers for my mother.

She said the week would be ours, girls only, but for two days we went on as if my father had been there: my mother and I on the porch, she reading her magazines or romance novels, and me with a notepad, silently scribbling whatever images came to mind.

On the third night she put down her harlequin and picked up the sketch book lying in my lap. I'd been drawing her cherry tree as it would look come spring. "I didn't know you could draw so well," she said, tracing my lead strokes with her fingertips. "I suppose there's a lot we don't know about each other."

She stood up suddenly, and for a moment I thought she was going to resettle in her rocker with the heroine and her suitor. Instead she looked down at me and smiled. "Well, let's not waste time, then. Get up. We're going out."

She pulled up in front of a dark-windowed place called Kay's Tavern just outside Langley Air Force Base.

Inside, a dull fluorescent glow tinged the bar and dance floor in a rusty glow. My mother got a beer and we sat at a high-top table, my feet floundering above the parquet floors. Some planks were singed, like people had used them as ashtrays to stomp out their cigarettes. I was surprised to see I wasn't the youngest person there; a little boy, no more than five, was counting coins to use the jukebox, and in the corner a girl was nursing her baby and laughing with a man who pretended not to stare at her breasts. There were men in army uniforms playing pool, shelling

peanuts at the bar, and pulling women over to dance with them. Watching them made me feel uncomfortable, because everything was just *too*—the women were too old, their denim skirts hiked too high, their bodies too close to the men, whose uniforms bunched and bulged. The music changed from a dance song to classic rock, and some couples split apart; at the next table over a hefty woman with bleach-blonde curls warbled out the words.

“Anita?” My mother was leaning over me, talking to the woman, but she couldn’t be heard over the song. She winked at me, picked up her lemon, and took aim, tossing it right into Anita’s bouffant. I guess she couldn’t feel the wedge lodged in her nest of hair, but when it slipped down the back of her dress she gave a shout and looked behind her, finally locking eyes with my mother.

“Maureen!” she crowed, hopping out of her seat and pulling it to our table. She grabbed my hand before I could offer it. “And bless me, don’t even bother introducing us, this is Melanie!” she said, turning fully to me, eyes suddenly tearing up. “I know you don’t remember me at all, but I met you when you weren’t much older than that baby,” and she gestured to the child being breastfed in the corner. I wondered if my mother had ever done that here.

My mother wasn’t listening to Anita. She was watching a man in a cream suit-coat who was dancing with a woman in the lowest-cut dress I’d ever seen on a lady over fifty.

“He’s been asking about you,” Anita said.

As if on cue, the man broke away from the lady in red and walked to our table. Anita began giggling uncontrollably and my mother grabbed nervously at her

napkin. I fixed my eyes on the patent leather ballet flats I'd put on for our girls night. My mother had bought them to go with my new Easter dress.

"Jim," my mother said when the man stopped between us. His blue jeans skimmed the top of his dress shoes, which were marred by a finger-thick scuff on the left side. The leather there was matte and crumbling at the edges, and I could see a gap where the rubber soles separated from the flesh. I wondered why he still wore them when it was clear they'd soon fall apart.

"Maureen," he replied, but he drew out the oh so that her name was almost all *more*. His feet shifted toward me but I didn't look up. "This one ain't mine, is she?"

My mother laughed. "Not last time I checked." When he asked her to dance, she made a show of it, pretending she couldn't leave me alone at the table until Anita volunteered to keep me company. "You really don't mind, Anita?" she asked. She didn't ask if I minded being left with a stranger while she danced with a man who wasn't my father.

Anita sighed as she watched them. I felt like I should talk to her, but there was nothing to say.

"I'd dance with someone, but I'm engaged, see?" she told me, wagging her ring finger. "Danny. He's at basic training now."

Being married isn't stopping my mother from dancing. It was a slow song and Jim moved his hands up my mother's sides in a rhythm too fast for the music. My mother looked radiant, exultant. Her hair streamed behind her in red-lit ringlets,

and when the song switched to a fast one she lifted her hands and closed her eyes as if in rapture. She looked just like she was dancing in one of her storms.

To anyone else they'd look in love, like they had carved out a space where they were the only two creatures there. Jim thought he had captured her like bottled lightning. But I saw how she pulled away when he slipped his hand onto the small of her back; how her eyes scanned the room and sometimes fluttered with impatience, while his eyes were shut as if he were memorizing the weight of her body on his. Her moves were familiar, and years later I placed it: it was the same way she looked when my father held her.

Jim might've thought he was in love, but it wasn't with my mother—it was with a shadow of what she might have been. And he might've thought he would take my mother back with him that night to the base—and now I wonder how many times my mother had stayed there, how many Jims she'd shared a bed with—but after three slow songs, one of which an old man with cigar breath asked me to dance to, Jim went to the restroom and my mother left him stranded, grabbing her purse and me from the table.

The ride home was uncomfortable, worse than sitting at the table with Anita, who at least tried to talk to me. I guess my mother had said all she wanted to by bringing me there. Later I wondered what had made her do it—wouldn't it have been easier to just go on keeping Kay's a secret? But I guess it was like the things I wanted to tell Anita and Jim but couldn't—like the things I should've yelled at my mother if I had been brave enough.

* * *

Years later David and I stopped at a 7-Eleven on our way to visit his parents in Richmond. He filled us up while I got out to stretch my legs and grab a snack from the mini mart. I was six months pregnant and craving Funyuns.

She was at the counter buying a fountain drink. I knew her before she turned around because her hair looked just the same as it had then. I didn't think she would recognize me, but when she did turn and she saw me I thought she might drop her drink.

It was Anita. Her eyes moved from my face to my obviously pregnant belly, and she lit up. "Oh my Lord. You have grown." She glanced at my ring finger and smiled wider. "Married, too! Now, you probably don't remember me, been too long, but I'm a friend of your mama's."

"Anita," I said. "I know you." Of course I remembered. I'd preserved the details of that night, replayed them in my head, added commentary, tried to understand. There was so much else to say, but my throat felt dammed.

"I just visited her last week," she said. "She's not looking well. Didn't tell me you were expecting."

"Yeah, we—lost touch." A lady behind me asked "Are you in line?" and we sidestepped in unison so she could reach the register.

"It's a girl," I said.

"Got a name?"

“We think Carla. Like my daddy’s sister.” It felt strange to mention my father to Anita. It felt strange to talk about any of this, really, inside of a 7-Eleven, with its sticky floors and chipped orange counters and dollar hot dogs rotating inside their greasy incubator.

“Never had a little girl. Wish I had. Hey, d’you mind if I—?” and she gestured to my belly. As if on cue Carla shifted within me. I pictured her tiny hand pressed against my flesh. *I’m here, mama.*

“Go ahead,” I said. I was used to this—ladies would stop me in the supermarket, at the bus stop. Always older ones, wishing they could have back that feeling, I guess.

She shifted her soda and her purse and then spread her fingers there. They were a little wet from the cup’s condensation. Carla swam in me. “We think she’ll be a dancer,” I said.

After half a minute Anita retracted her hand. She’d left a damp palm print on my dress. “I think your mama would like it if you’d visit.”

Then she gave me the address—a home thirty minutes from my father’s house.

For the next week we spent in Richmond, I pictured what it would be like, seeing my mother again. I imagined age would’ve softened her features a bit. She’d always seemed brittle somehow, angular. Her hair would be long, I thought. She’d loop patterned scarves around it.

Then I thought about her touching my belly, how I’d feel pressure from both outside and within: my mother, my daughter, almost touching, closer than they’d

ever be again, separated by only my flesh. I'd let strangers feel it, but the thought of extending that intimacy to my mother felt foreign.

I hid the address, didn't tell David.

* * *

A year after she was born, I took Carla with me to Wilroy Cove, past the mile marker on the highway where my mother had turned off to take me to Kay's. It's a pocketed little bay, just far enough inland that you can't see the land cleaved at the mouth of the Atlantic. We went out on the dock, past moored sailboats and speedboats, and watched the crescent moon jaggedly etched on the water below us. The water was so dark I thought the moonlight should be swallowed whole.

That year I had loved her and then, like sinking rock, I'd lost it. Before the birth I felt that mythical mother's glow, an unexpected joy and acceptance of morning sickness and lost mobility. But later, when I picked her up or heard her cry, I felt a tightness swell and then contract in my chest contrary to my breathing, like a phantom lung. The doctor said it was postpartum depression and reassured me that it was common, but the pills he prescribed didn't stop the feeling.

David said it wasn't my fault—it was a gene, a disease. The only thing my mother gave me. When storms came he would hold the baby and I'd stand outside greeting the winds. I came indoors when houses started to pitch and moan in aching voices. Sometimes I resented how he accommodated me. I wanted him to tell me I was wrong, to shake me, to shake the restlessness out of me.

"Why do you love me?" I'd ask him.

"I can't help it," he'd say. "I don't want to help it."

There was a bench on the dock. I sat there with Carla, the two of us bobbing as the water shifted beneath us. In the darkness the bay was moving, breathing, just like Carla in my arms. She was there with me, real, a weight resting on my shoulder—more than a bundle of nerves and skin and bones, the flesh I'd started to see her as. Her tiny wrist pressed against my neck and I felt her pulse quiver beneath the gauzy skin. Her heart.

I tried to will my own to beat in time with hers—I wanted to go back to before the push push puuuuush and release of child and placenta, the meaty jellyfish that had connected us, back to that closeness only achieved in womb: I ate for her, I grew for her, when I swelled and felt her feet nestled against my navel I knew she would always be a little bit of me.

Around us boats began to grind and groan, upset by a wind or a wave off of the ocean. I winced and waited for Carla's cry—surely this would upset her, remind me of the nights just home from the hospital I'd spent awake trying to quiet her, worried she was colicky. But she only sank further into my breast until her head was cupped by my clavicle. I watched the moonlight slither on the water and I felt her

tiny intake and expulsion of breath—in out, in out, in out. I looked at the boats tied around us and I thought I could be bound like them; I could take this moment and it would tie me to Carla, to David: like I was my father, and my memories were the light I harvested.

Sometimes I wonder if my mother could've tethered herself with memories, too, like she and my father before I was even a thought that crossed their minds, when they were in love and the world didn't extend beyond high school and there was nowhere and nothing else to long for.

But she didn't. And when I visit my father I can still sense the ghost of her absence in his bedroom, in the hallway, in the dust that grays the mantle. In the foyer where a rivet from her trunk gouged pits on the hardwood floor the night she heaved it outside and into the taxicab that took her away. In the garden where the brittle yellowed husks of perennial plants, blossoms washed out by wind or water, still stand sentinel, almost as if they died awaiting her homecoming.